

History of Hymns: “O Come, O Come, Emmanuel”

O Come, O Come, Emmanuel

9th-Century Latin hymn

The United Methodist Hymnal, No. 211

*O come, O come, Emmanuel,
And ransom captive Israel,
That mourns in lonely exile here
Until the Son of God appear.
Rejoice! Rejoice!
Emmanuel shall come to thee, O Israel.*

This hymn, originally in Latin, takes us back over 1,200 years to monastic life in the 8th- or 9th-century. Seven days before Christmas Eve monasteries would sing the “O antiphons” in anticipation of Christmas Eve when the eighth antiphon, “O Virgo virginum” (“O Virgin of virgins”) would be sung before and after Mary’s canticle, the Magnificat (Luke 1:46b-55).

The Latin metrical form of the hymn was composed as early as the 12th century. John Mason Neale (1818-1866), the famous architect of the Oxford movement, discovered the Latin hymn in the appendix of an early 18th-century manuscript, “Psalterium Cationum Catholicorum,” with a refrain. Neale, a translator of early Greek and Latin hymns, included it in his influential collection, *Mediaeval Hymns and Sequences* (1851).

British hymnologist J.R. Watson provides a context for the antiphons included on the second page after the hymn in the *UM Hymnal*: “The antiphons, sometimes called the ‘O antiphons’ or ‘The Great O’s’, were designated to concentrate the mind on the coming Christmas, enriching the meaning of the Incarnation with a complex series of references from the Old and New Testaments.”

Each antiphon begins as follows:

O Sapientia (Wisdom)
O Adonai (Hebrew word for God)
O Radix Jesse (stem or root of Jesse)
O Clavis David (key of David)
O Oriens (dayspring)
O Rex genitium (King of the Gentiles)
O Emmanuel

Put together, the first letter of the second word of each antiphon spells SARCORE. If read backwards, the letters form a two-word acrostic, “Ero cras,” meaning “I will be present tomorrow.”

All of the Latin attributions to the coming Messiah are from the Old Testament except “Emmanuel,” which is found both in Isaiah 7:14 and Matthew 1:23. Matthew quotes Isaiah virtually verbatim—

“Behold, a virgin shall conceive, and bear a son, and shall call his name Emmanuel”—with the exception that Matthew adds the phrase: “which being interpreted is, God with us.”

The “O Emmanuel” antiphon was traditionally sung on the night before Christmas Eve, revealing the

Meaning of the liturgical riddle through the completion of the acrostic.

Neale translated the opening line as “Draw nigh, draw nigh, Emmanuel” for his volume of translations, *Mediaeval Hymns and Sequences*. It appeared in *The Hymnal Noted, Part 2* in 1854 with a tune supplied by Thomas Helmore entitled VENI EMMANUEL.

The heading in this hymnal stated: “From a French Missal in the National Library, Lisbon.” Scholars have not been able to locate the French missal, but Sister Thomas More (Dr. Mary Berry) located the tune in the Bibliotheque Nationale in Paris, identifying it as a 15th-century “Processional” for French Franciscan nuns.

The famous *Hymns Ancient and Modern* (1861) used Neale’s revised translation, which continues to be employed in many hymnals. The block chords of the original musical were eventually replaced with more freely flowing plainsong settings.

There are numerous textual variations in many hymnals, including even the order of the stanzas. Laurence Hall Stookey, recently retired worship professor at Wesley Seminary, retranslated portions of the hymn to reflect more accurately the original Latin.

Regular readers of this column will note that many hymns found in our hymnals transcend centuries, cultures, translations and many variations until we find them in the form that we sing. With this hymn, the essence of the original Latin text remains. By singing “O come, O come, Emmanuel” with the antiphons interspersed, Christians today may participate in a sacred Advent ritual at least 11 centuries old.

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<https://www.umcdiscipleship.org/resources/history-of-hymns-o-come-o-come-emmanuel>

What are the O Antiphons?

They are the seven antiphons of Advent from the Liturgy of the Hours used by the Catholic faithful for the Magnificat canticle at Vespers (evening prayers) for the seven days from December 17 to December 23 leading up to Christmas eve. They are also used as the Gospel acclamation verses on these days within the mass. They are also known as "The Greater Antiphons." In many places, an additional candle is lit each night on a special seven-branch candle stand. These antiphons were considered so important in medieval monasteries, that they were assigned to be intoned by the dignitaries of the monastery. The first antiphon was to be intoned by the abbot, the next day, the second was intoned by the Prior and so on down the line.

Since the Vatican II reform of the Catholic liturgy, these texts are used as the Alleluia verse before the Gospel at Mass beginning on December 17. The very popular hymn "O come, o come Emmanuel" makes use of these texts for its verses, and is sung in nearly every Catholic church during Advent. Roman Catholics should be very familiar with this hymn, but may not know it's connection to the divine office.

The texts and probably the music, date from around the time of Pope Gregory the Great, between the sixth and seventh centuries. The author chose seven titles for the coming Messiah which begin each antiphon here is the english translation with latin text:

O Sapientia (O wisdom) - December 17

English: *O Wisdom, coming forth from the mouth of the Most High, reaching from one end to the other, mightily and sweetly ordering all things: Come and teach us the way of prudence.*

Latin: *O Sapientia, quae ex ore Altissimi prodiisti, attingens a fine usque ad finem, fortiter suaviterque disponens omnia: veni ad docendum nos viam prudentiae.*

O Adonai (O Lord) - December 18

English: *O Adonai, and leader of the House of Israel, who appeared to Moses in the fire of the burning bush and gave him the law on Sinai: Come and redeem us with an outstretched arm.*

Latin: *O Adonai, et Dux domus Israel, qui Moysi in igne flammae rubi apparuisti, et ei in Sina legem dedisti: veni ad redimendum nos in brachio extento.*

O Radix Jesse (O Root of Jesse) - December 19

English: *O Root of Jesse, standing as a sign among the peoples; before you kings will shut their mouths, to you the nations will make their prayer: Come and deliver us, and delay no longer.*

Latin: *O Radix Jesse, qui stas in signum populorum, super quem continebunt reges os suum, quem Gentes deprecabuntur: veni ad liberandum nos, jam noli tardare.*

O Clavis David (O Key of David) - December 20

English: *O Key of David and sceptre of the House of Israel; you open and no one can shut; you shut and no one can open: Come and lead the prisoners from the prison house, those who dwell in darkness and*

the shadow of death.

Latin: *O Clavis David, et sceptrum domus Israel; qui aperis, et nemo claudit; claudis, et nemo aperit: veni, et educ vincitum de domo carceris, sedentem in tenebris, et umbra mortis.*

O Oriens (O Rising Sun) - December 21

English: *O Morning Star, splendour of light eternal and sun of righteousness: Come and enlighten those who dwell in darkness and the shadow of death.*

Latin: *O Oriens, splendor lucis aeternae, et sol justitiae: veni, et illumina sedentes in tenebris, et umbra mortis.*

O Rex Gentium (O King of the Nations) - December 22

English: *O King of the nations, and their desire, the cornerstone making both one: Come and save the human race, which you fashioned from clay.*

Latin: *O Rex Gentium, et desideratus earum, lapisque angularis, qui facis utraque unum: veni, et salva hominem, quem de limo formasti.*

O Emmanuel (O God Who is With Us) - December 23

English: *O Emmanuel, our king and our lawgiver, the hope of the nations and their Saviour: Come and save us, O Lord our God.*

Latin: *O Emmanuel, Rex et legifer noster, exspectatio Gentium, et Salvator earum: veni ad salvandum nos, Domine, Deus noster.*

The Text of the O Antiphons & the lyrics of O Come, O Come Emmanuel

The structure of these texts starts with an invocation to the Messiah with a title inspired by the Old Testament; then the title is expanded and developed; finally, the text concludes with an appeal for the Messiah to come and act on our behalf according to the title given to him at the beginning of the antiphon.

The first letter of these titles when read backwards (EROCRAS), spells the Latin words “**ero cras**” = “tomorrow I shall be here.” It seems that Mozart shared the same fondness for such word games as running things backwards!

The texts of the antiphons are a mosaic of scripture readings and biblical references that compress and express the Old Testament hope for the promised Messiah Isaiah had prophesied.

1. **O Sapientia** is drawn from Sirach, Chapter 24 and the Book of Wisdom, Chapters 6 to 9.
2. **O Adonai** from Exodus, Chapters 3, 15 and 24 and from Deuteronomy, Chapter 5.
3. **O Radix Jesse** from Isaiah, Chapter 11.
4. **O Clavis David** from Isaiah, Chapter 22, with a nod to the Book of Revelation, Chapter 3, verse 7 [“... who opens and no one closes; who closes and no one opens”].
5. **O Oriens** from Zechariah, Chapters 3:8 and 6:12, from Isaiah, Chapters 9:2 and 60:1-3, from the Book of Wisdom, Chapter 7:26, as well as from Luke 1:78 and Hebrews 1:3.

6. O Rex gentium from Jeremiah, Chapter 10:7, from Haggai 2:8, Isaiah 28:16, Genesis 2:7 and Ephesians 2:14.

7. O Emmanuel comes from the famous prophecy to Ahaz (Isaiah 7:14) as well as from Isaiah 33:22; Genesis 49:10; Zechariah 9:9 and John 20:28.

O Sapientia (Sirach, Ch. 24)

“I [wisdom] came forth from the mouth of the Most High ... Alone I compassed the vault of heaven and traversed the depths of the abyss.” (Wisdom, Ch. 8) “She reaches mightily from one end of the earth to the other, and she orders all things well.”

O Adonai (Exodus, Ch. 3:15)

“God also said to Moses, ‘Thus you shall say to the Israelites, ‘The Lord [YHWH], the God of your ancestors ... has sent me to you: This is my name forever, and this my title for all generations.’”

O Radix Jesse (Isaiah, Ch. 11)

“A shoot shall come out from the stump of Jesse, and a branch shall grow out of his roots.”

O Clavis David (Isaiah, Ch. 22:22)

“I shall place on his [Eliakim’s] shoulder the key of the house of David; he shall open, and no one shall shut; he shall shut, and no one shall open.”

O Oriens (Isaiah, Ch. 9:2)

“The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who lived in a land of deep darkness – on them light has shined.”

O Rex gentium (Jeremiah 10:7)

“Who would not fear you, O King of the nations?” (Isaiah, Ch. 28:16) “See, I am laying in Zion a foundation stone, a tested stone, a precious cornerstone, a sure foundation ...”

O Emmanuel (Isaiah 7:14)

“Look, the young woman (Greek septuagint has “a virgin”) is with child and shall bear a son, and shall name him Emmanuel.”

<https://www.ocp.org/en-us/blog/entry/o-come-o-come-emmanuel-lyrics-o-antiphons>

O Come O Come Immanuel

1 O come, O come, Immanuel,
and ransom captive Israel
that mourns in lonely exile here
until the Son of God appear.

Refrain:

Rejoice! Rejoice! Immanuel
shall come to you, O Israel.

2 O come, O Wisdom from on high,
who ordered all things mightily;
to us the path of knowledge show
and teach us in its ways to go. Refrain

3 O come, O come, great Lord of might,
who to your tribes on Sinai's height
in ancient times did give the law
in cloud and majesty and awe. Refrain

4 O come, O Branch of Jesse's stem,
unto your own and rescue them!
From depths of hell your people save,
and give them victory o'er the grave. Refrain

5 O come, O Key of David, come
and open wide our heavenly home.
Make safe for us the heavenward road
and bar the way to death's abode. Refrain

6 O come, O Bright and Morning Star,
and bring us comfort from afar!
Dispel the shadows of the night
and turn our darkness into light. Refrain

7 O come, O King of nations, bind
in one the hearts of all mankind.
Bid all our sad divisions cease
and be yourself our King of Peace. Refrain