

# Angels We Have Heard on High

"**Angels We Have Heard on High**" is a [Christmas carol](#) to the [hymn tune](#) "Gloria" from a traditional French song of unknown origin called ***Les Anges dans nos campagnes***, with [paraphrased](#) English lyrics by [James Chadwick](#). The song's subject is the [birth of Jesus Christ](#) as narrated in the [Gospel of Luke](#), specifically the scene in which shepherds outside [Bethlehem encounter a multitude of angels](#) singing and praising the newborn child.

## Tune[\[edit\]](#)

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"Angels We Have Heard on High" is generally sung to the [hymn tune](#) "Gloria", a traditional French carol as arranged by [Edward Shippen Barnes](#). Its most memorable feature is its chorus, *[Gloria in excelsis Deo](#)*, where the "o" of "Gloria" is fluidly sustained through 16 notes of a rising and falling [melismatic](#) melodic sequence.

In England, the words of [James Montgomery](#)'s "[Angels from the Realms of Glory](#)" are usually sung to this tune, with the "*Gloria in excelsis Deo*" refrain text replacing Montgomery's. It is from this usage that the tune sometimes is known as "Iris", the name of Montgomery's newspaper.<sup>[1]</sup>

## Lyrics[\[edit\]](#)

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The lyrics of "Angels We Have Heard on High" are inspired by, but not an exact translation of, the traditional French carol known as *Les Anges dans nos campagnes* (literally "the angels in our countryside"),<sup>[2]</sup> whose first known publication was in 1843.<sup>[3]</sup> "Angels We Have Heard On High" is the most-common English version, an 1862 [paraphrase](#) by [James Chadwick](#), the Roman Catholic [Bishop of Hexham and Newcastle](#), northeast England. Chadwick's lyrics are original in some sections, including the title, and loosely translated from the French in other sections. The carol quickly became popular in the [West Country](#), where it was described as "Cornish" by R.R. Chope, and featured in [Pickard-Cambridge](#)'s *Collection of Dorset Carols*.<sup>[4]</sup> It has since been translated into other languages,<sup>[5]</sup> and is widely sung and published. Modern hymnals usually include three verses.<sup>[6]</sup>

"*Gloria in excelsis Deo*", [Latin](#) for "Glory to God in the Highest", is the first line of the song of the angels in the Gospel of Luke.

## English [\[edit\]](#)

Angels we have heard on high  
Sweetly singing o'er the plains  
And the mountains in reply  
Echoing their joyous strains  
*Gloria in excelsis Deo!*  
*Gloria in excelsis Deo!*

Shepherds, why this jubilee?  
Why your joyous strains prolong?  
What the gladsome tidings be?  
Which inspire your heavenly songs?  
*Gloria in excelsis Deo!*  
*Gloria in excelsis Deo!*

Come to Bethlehem and see  
Him whose birth the angels sing;  
Come, adore on bended knee,  
Christ the Lord, the newborn King.  
*Gloria in excelsis Deo!*  
*Gloria in excelsis Deo!*

## French [\[edit\]](#)

Les anges dans nos campagnes  
Ont entonné l'hymne des cieux,  
Et l'écho de nos montagnes  
Redit ce chant mélodieux  
*Gloria in excelsis Deo!*  
*Gloria in excelsis Deo!*

Bergers, pour qui cette fête?  
Quel est l'objet de tous ces chants?  
Quel vainqueur, quelle conquête  
Mérite ces cris triomphants?  
*Gloria in excelsis Deo!*  
*Gloria in excelsis Deo!*

Ils annoncent la naissance  
Du libérateur d'Israël  
Et pleins de reconnaissance  
Chantent en ce jour solennel  
*Gloria in excelsis Deo!*  
*Gloria in excelsis Deo!*



THE HISTORY OF CHRISTMAS SYMBOLS

# ANGELS

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## Angels

The term *angel* literally means “messenger,” and it is in this prominent role that angels take part in the Christmas story. An angel appeared to Mary to announce the birth of Christ (Luke 1:26-38). An angel appeared to Joseph telling him that what was conceived in Mary was from the Holy Spirit (Matthew 1:20-21). And, an angel appeared to shepherds to announce the birth of Jesus after which “a great company of the heavenly host” appeared (Luke 2:8-14).

Understandably, images of angels have become a familiar symbol of Christmas. However, contrary to their depiction as gentle feminine creatures that top Christmas trees and hover over Nativity Scenes, the Bible reveals angels as persons of tremendous strength. Psalm 103:20 refers to angels as the “mighty ones” who do God’s bidding. On one occasion, as recorded in 2 Kings, a single angel killed 185,000 soldiers over night at the Lord’s command (2 Kings 19:35).

That may sound a bit terrifying, but the strength of God’s holy angels is actually great news for believers. After all, angels follow the commands of a God that loves and protects his people. Psalm 91 says:

“If you make the Most High your dwelling — even the Lord, who is my refuge — then no harm will befall you, no disaster will come near your tent. For he will command his angels concerning you to guard you in all your ways; they will lift you up in their hands, so that you will not strike your foot against a stone” (Psalm 91:9-12).

At the time of Christ, a belief in guardian angels was already prevalent among the Jews, so it came as no surprise to them when Jesus, speaking about children, said, “Their angels in heaven always see the face of my Father in heaven” (Matthew 18:10).

Several references throughout the Bible imply that angels have assignments not only to people, but to churches (Revelation 1:20), nations (Daniel 10:13;12:1) and even nature (Revelation 7:1). For example, Revelation speaks of “the angel in charge of the waters” (Revelation 16:5).

So what do angels really look like? In their natural state, angels are spiritual beings and do not have physical or material bodies. This doesn’t mean that they are without “form.” Humans simply don’t have the eyes to see their spiritual bodies. Thus, on several occasions, angels have assumed a physical body in order to communicate with men.

The Bible describes angels as dressing in white, gleaming like lightning, and wearing clean, shining linen with gold sashes around their chest (Daniel 10:5-6; John 20:12; Luke 24:4; Revelation 15:6). The only classes of angels clearly described as having wings are the Seraphim and the Cherubim who seem to guard or attend the throne of God (Isaiah 6:2; Exodus 25:20). Regardless, wings have become a standard feature in our depiction of angels – perhaps an artistic way to portray the speed at which angels can travel. In the same way halos are an artistic way to portray the “gleam” of angels.

Yet, of all the recorded angelic appearances in the Bible, the most fascinating may be the most ordinary — so ordinary that humans do not even realize they have been visited by an angel. The book of Hebrews says, “Do not forget to entertain strangers, for by so doing some people have entertained angels without knowing it” (Hebrews 13:2).

Surely, there are many facets of angelic beings that remain a mystery to humans, and believe it or not, there are some aspects of humanity, particularly God’s grace toward us, that appear to be a mystery to angels. Imagine discovering that the Creator of the Universe had chosen to become a man. Imagine knowing the true identity of Christ, the King of Kings, yet witnessing his most humble birth and his most ordinary Jewish upbringing. As Jesus grew into a man and began his ministry, imagine seeing men hurl insults at, and ultimately crucify, the Author of Life and Salvation.

Apparently, the work of Christ on earth was indeed a mystery to the angels. When speaking of grace and salvation, 1 Peter says, “Even angels long to look into these things” (1 Peter 1:12b). May our amazement surpass that of the angels, for we, unlike them, are the recipients of God’s grace and salvation!

## **Behind the Christmas Carol: Angels We Have Heard on High**

*Angels We Have Heard on High* commemorates the birth of Jesus Christ found in the Gospel of Luke. The song focuses on the shepherds encounter with the angels foretelling of the birth of the newborn child.

Reports say that in 129 A.D. Pope Telesphorus ordained that the “*Gloria*” be sung at the Christmas Eve midnight mass. The phrase became known as the “*Angels Hymn*” and considered one of the earliest known Christmas hymns.

The “*Gloria*” is believed to have inspired the chorus in *Angels We Have Heard on High*. The tune is believed to be inspired by an unknown tune that was arranged by Edward Shippen Barnes in the early 1900s.

French legend indicates that in medieval times on Christmas Eve, the shepherds would sing and call to one another from one hillside to another. “They would call “*Gloria in excelsis Deo*” which means “glory to God in the highest” in Latin. It was how they would spread their holiday message and cheer from points far away to one another. From hillside to valley, the shepherd’s song must have truly sounded like angels calling to one another in celebration of the birth of Christ for the Christians living in nearby regions.

Also, the song reflects the shepherd's joy that the time of the holiday season has arrived yet again."

*Angels We Have Heard on High* is of French origin and originally titled "*Les anges dans nos campagnes*". The original author of the song is unknown, but believed to be from Languedoc, France.

The carol was first published in the 1855 the *Nouveau Recueil de Cantiques* hymn book. In 1862, the Roman Catholic **Bishop of Hexham and Newcastle**, northeast England, James Chadwick translated the song into English. The English version was published that years in the *Crown of Jesus Music*.

Iain MacMilan translated the English translation into Scots Gaelic.

The version that has become popular worldwide was published later, in 1916, in the book *Carols Old and Carols New*. The Barnes arrangement is believed to first be published around 1937, probably in the *New Church Hymnal*.

Imagine being with the shepherds when the angels appeared to them on that amazing Christmas morning.

# THE 4 KNOWN ANGELS: GABRIEL, MICHAEL, RAPHAEL AND URIEL

Posted on [May 7, 2013 10:16 am](#) by [Paul Zalonski](#)

There is an icon of an angel in the daily Mass chapel at Our Lady of Pompeii Church (East Haven, CT) but it is so high that no one can really see the details of the icon, even trying to make out the Greek is difficult for young eyes. The pastor, Father John, promised a gift to the one who identifies the icon at Mass this morning which opened a door for inquiry. Piqued with wonder several, including yours truly, set out to determine the angel's identity. At first glance I thought it was the Archangel Raphael. But closer examination showed me that it was really Gabriel. In the meantime, I asked one of the Apostles of the Sacred Heart, a curious creature and holy woman, how many archangels are there.

An "angel" denotes a function, not a nature; they are messengers. The archangels are leaders of the other angels, hence they are called the princes of the angels. As you know Western Christians venerate three archangels: Gabriel, Michael and Raphael. But, few know that there is a fourth named archangel (plus three other un-named archangels), one who is little known and not liturgically commemorated in the Latin Liturgy, but the venerated by Christians of Eritrea (related to the Coptic Church), the Anglican Communion, and Judaism. His name, Uriel, meaning "God is my light."

Archangel Uriel's feast day is July 11.

Archangel Uriel, according to pious legend (and I am not being dismissive by using these words because legend isn't used as fiction), indicates that Uriel is known as the angel of wisdom as he illumines the heart and mind to know God's truth. He is "The Light or Fire of God." You might say he's the archangel of discernment. Perhaps this is the angel who assisted Saint Ignatius of Loyola in writing the principles of Discernment in his Spiritual Exercises! As this Orthodox prayer says,

*Oh holy Saint Uriel, come to our aid with your legion of angels! Intercede for us that our hearts may burn with the fire of God. Obtain for us the grace to use the sword of truth to fight against all that is not in conformity to the most adorable will of God in our lives.*

The apocryphal texts of the biblical tradition in question are the little known Book of Enoch and Esdras. What we learn is that Uriel is one of seven archangels who preside over the world; that Uriel reveals that rebellious and fallen angels will be judged by God and that Uriel warns the prophet Noah about the flood.

Moreover, in 2 Esdras, God sends Uriel to answer a series of questions that the prophet Ezra about recognizing the signs of good and evil at work in the world.

In Jewish tradition, it is the Archangel Uriel who sent to check the doors of homes throughout Egypt for lamb's blood according to prescription so that it can be discerned about the striking of the first-born children. Have you ever wonder who the angel at the Passover narrative was?

In some way my question to Sister was a trick question because in the Latin Church our liturgical anamnesis only admits the big and holy Three. But as I mentioned the Eritrean Christians and the Anglicans honor Uriel. Perhaps there is a Roman prayer text that has yet to be found! Yet, in another way, it was a serious question because there are some things of the biblical, liturgical and dogmatic tradition of the Church that has yet to be appreciated for its fullness of revealed and magisterial Truth. In the Christian Church, hence, there is a fourth archangel, one, who though only named in the Jewish and Christian apocryphal texts, ought to be acknowledged. The extra-biblical texts do give some insight into true belief in the life of the Divine Majesty; how else do we know about Jesus' grandparents, for example, if not by a text not in the canon of the bible? The Gospels of the apocryphal type tell us that it was Uriel who saved Saint John the Baptist from Herod's slaughter of the innocents and that he led John and his mother Elizabeth to Egypt.

Again according to pious legend, the Archangel Uriel appeared in Rome before a 16th century Sicilian monk and priest, Father Antonio del Duca, telling him to build a church in what is today known as the Termini (the location of the Roman bus and train station). Pope Pius VI who asked Michelangelo to design the church. It is called the Basilica of St. Mary of the Angels and the Martyrs ([Santa Maria degli Angeli e dei Martiri](#)); it's dedicated to the unknown and known angels and Christian martyrs. This is the titular church of Cardinal William Keeler, the emeritus archbishop of Baltimore.

Therefore, we have (the names denote service to God, a ministry):

Saint Michael – Who is like God

Saint Gabriel – God’s strength

Saint Raphael – God’s remedy

Saint Uriel – God’s my light.

But, there is a tradition that has between 7 and 12 archangels. The Jews have in the list in addition to Michael, Gabriel, Raphael, Uriel: Raguel, Remial and Saraqael. A Coptic tradition in addition the three mentioned, Suriel, Zadakiel, Raguel and Aniel. There are variations to the list.

The work of the archangels is:

- To lead the fight against Satan, and evil;
- To save each soul from Satan’s grip, and notably at death’s hour;
- To lead each person to his personal judgement before God;
- To guide the people of God, both Christians and Jews.

### **Prayer to Saint Michael, Gabriel and Raphael, Archangels**

Heavenly King, You have given us archangels to assist us during our pilgrimage on earth.

Saint Michael is our protector;

I ask him to come to my aid,  
fight for all my loved ones,  
and protect us from danger.

Saint Gabriel is a messenger of the Good News;

I ask him to help me clearly hear Your voice  
and to teach me the truth.

Saint Raphael is the healing angel;

I ask him to take my need for healing and that of everyone I know,  
lift it up to Your throne of grace and  
deliver us back to the gift of recovery.

Help us, O Lord, to realize more fully the reality of archangels and their desire to serve us. Holy angels, pray for us.

Amen.