Advent 2022: Christmas Carols

O Come, O come Immanuel

'O Come, O Come Emmanuel' was originally written in Latin with a title of 'Veni, Veni, Emmanuel' (documents featuring the title and words date back to 1710).

The English translation of the Christmas carol came about in 1851 when priest and scholar John Mason Neale's version featured in the pages of *The Hymnal Noted* – a key text in the history of hymns collected by hymnal documenter Thomas Helmore.

Neale also originated the words to 'Good King Wenceslas', making him officially one of history's most festive clergymen.

What is 'O Come, O Come, Emmanuel' about?

Quite unusually for a Christmas carol still commonly performed, there are all sorts of arcane words and expressions littered throughout. This is perhaps because the strong roots of the Latin text come from the 'O Antiphons' (so-called because each one begins with an 'O'), traditionally used during the last seven days of advent during the Roman Catholic Vespers service.

The distinctly biblical feel of the lyrics differ from the more overtly celebratory tone of most carols (there's no herald angels harking nor flocks being watched by night, for example), and the actual nativity narrative doesn't feature in any meaningful way.

The Emmanuel of the title refers to the Hebrew 'Immanuel' which appears in the Book of Isaiah in the Old Testament more as a sign of God's protection than an actual person, whereas in the Gospel of Matthew in the New Testament the name Emmanuel refers specifically to Jesus Christ.

Who wrote the music?

The haunting melody of 'O Come, O Come, Emmanuel' has its roots as far back as 15th Century France, with a sketchy-at-best history. It wasn't until the 1960s musicologist Mary Berry sourced the 15th century manuscript that bore the tune's building blocks, among many others used for processional chants for burials.

So the actual composer of the music for one of the world's most popular carols is enigmatically anonymous. It was, however, the combination of the tune with John Mason Neale's translation of the Latin text that began its life as a perennial festive favourite.

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 Sapentia (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.

Hark the herald angels sing!

Many of the carols we sing have a rich theological tradition, and "Hark! The Herald Angels Sing!" is no exception. It was written by Charles Wesley, who was an English Methodist leader and hymn writer. Wesley wrote over 6,000 hymns, more than any other male writer (Fanny Crosby wrote 8,000).

His goal in writing hymns was to teach the poor and illiterate sound doctrine. His brother, John Wesley, a famous theologian and founder of Methodism, said that Charles' hymnal was the best theological book in existence. Some have noted that Methodism was born in song and Charles was the chief songwriter.

Wesley, inspired by the sounds of London church bells while walking to church on Christmas Day, wrote the "Hark" poem about a year after his conversion to be read on Christmas Day. The poem first appeared in Hymns and Sacred Poems in 1739 with the opening line of "Hark, how the welkin (heaven) rings."

In 1753, George Whitefield, a student and eventual colleague of Wesley's, adapted the poem into the song we now know today. It was Whitefield who penned the phrase "newborn King."

The first stanza describes the good news of the Saviour's birth. God has sent the One who will reconcile the sinner back to Himself. Therefore, all the nations should rise and sing and proclaim the good news, which is Christ the King! The next stanza speaks to the mysticism of Christ's coming and the good news in it. The final stanza tells of the accomplishment of Christ and the power that it brings.

For well over two hundred years, "Hark! The Herald Angels Sing" has been a Gospel-saturated anthem pointing people to the Saviour. This famed carol is loaded with rich theology.

The opening lines of this favourite Christmas hymn echo Luke 2:14, "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace. . ." (KJV). Immediately, the hymn writer established a cosmic connection between the heavenly chorus and our hope for peace on earth. While many Christmas carols recount in one way or another the Christmas narrative, Wesley provides a dense theological interpretation of the Incarnation.

Wesley begins not with the prophets, the Annunciation to Mary, the journey to Bethlehem or the search for a room, but *in media res* – in the middle of the action. Rather than citing the final phrase of Luke 2:14 – "good will toward men" (KJV) – he offers his theological interpretation – "God and sinners reconciled." This is indeed a stronger theological statement. Note that lines 2, 3, and 4 of the opening stanza are placed in quotation marks, an indication that they are virtually citations from

Scripture. Wesley includes his theological interpretation of the last poetic line within the quoted material indicating the strength and authority of his perspective.

"God and sinners reconciled" was a natural interpretation since the hymn was written within a year of Charles Wesley's conversion. It first was published under the title "Hymn for Christmas Day" in *Hymns and Sacred Poems* (1739) in ten shorter stanzas, each stanza half the length of the stanzas we sing today. The hymn that we now sing is the result of many alterations by numerous individuals and hymnal editorial committees.

Changes in hymn texts are quite common. The average singer on Sunday morning would be amazed (or perhaps chagrined) to realize how few hymns before the twentieth century in our hymnals appear exactly in their original form. Perhaps the most notable change in this hymn was Wesley's first line. The original read, "Hark how all the welkin rings!" "Welkin" is an archaic English term referring to the sky or the firmament of the heavens, even the highest celestial sphere of the angels. This term certainly supported the common eighteenth-century notion of the three-tiered universe, where the top tier includes the celestial beings, the lowest tier the normal activities of humanity (birth, death, marriage, work, sickness) and the natural created order (rain, drought, natural disasters), and the middle tier where celestial beings influence the activities of beings and events on earth with their superhuman powers.

Gratefully, George Whitefield (1740-1770), a powerful preacher and friend to the Wesley brothers, made several changes to this hymn in his *Collection* (1753). He eschewed the original first line for the scriptural dialogue between heaven and earth. Wesley scholar and professor at Perkins School of Theology, Dr. Ted Campbell, comments on Whitefield's modification of the first line with his characteristic humour: "I have wondered if anybody but Charles knew what a welkin was supposed to be. Maybe John looked at the draft version and said, 'It's ever so lovely, Charles, but whatever on earth is a 'welkin'?' So, all the more reason to give thanks for the editorial work of George Whitefield."

The familiar first line we now sing sets up the opening stanza as an expansion of the song of the angels in Luke 2:14. Rather than exerting influence in the form of spirits, demons, or other beings said to inhabit the middle zone of the three-tiered universe, God, through the Incarnation, comes directly to earth in human form, the "Word made flesh . . . [dwelling] among us . . . full of grace and truth" (John 1:14, KJV). The change in the opening line is perhaps the most significant alteration of the many that have taken place in this hymn over the centuries.

The second most significant change from the original is the addition of the refrain, reiterating the first phrase of Luke 2:14. This came about for musical reasons. Almost exactly 100 years after the hymn's composition, Felix Mendelssohn (1809-1847) composed a cantata, *Festgesang* (1840), celebrating the 400th anniversary of the invention of moveable type by Johannes Gutenberg. A chorus from this cantata was adapted and paired with Wesley's text in *The Congregational Psalmist* (1858) by an English musician and singer under Mendelssohn, William H. Cummings (1831-1915). A famous and influential hymn collection, *Hymns Ancient and Modern* (1861), carried this arrangement and helped to standardize its form and promote its broader use. Pairing the tune MENDELSSOHN with Wesley's text caused two additional changes from the original. Two of Wesley's short stanzas were combined into one to fit the longer tune; a refrain, repeating the first two lines of stanza one, was added to accommodate the tune. There is no doubt that most of the alterations to Wesley's original text combined with Mendelssohn's rousing tune have helped to make this one of the most festive and popular of all Christmas hymns.

The final four stanzas of Wesley's original are usually omitted. This is understandable as they are theologically and biblically dense with allusion and, perhaps, not as poetic as the oft-quoted stanzas. Yet they give us insight into Wesley's theology of the Incarnation:

Come, Desire of nations, come,
Fix in us Thy humble home;
Rise, the woman's conqu'ring Seed,
Bruise in us the serpent's head.

Now display Thy saving power,
Ruined nature now restore;
Now in mystic union join
Thine to ours, and ours to Thine.

Adam's likeness, Lord, efface,
Stamp Thine image in its place:
Second Adam from above,
Reinstate us in Thy love.

Let us Thee, though lost, regain,
Thee, the Life, the inner man:
O, to all Thyself impart,
Formed in each believing heart.

The allusions to Scripture and various Wesleyan theological concepts are many. A few must suffice. "Desire of nations" is a reference drawn from Haggai 2:7: "And I will shake all nations, and the desire of all nations shall come . . .." Handel incorporated this passage into *Messiah* (1741) in a bass solo in the Christmas portion of the oratorio. John Mason Neale, translating the Latin hymn *Veni, veni Emanuel* in the middle nineteenth century, cited this reference into the final stanza of his hymn: "O come, Desire of nations, bind/in one the hearts of all mankind."

Wesley often used the words, "mystic union," a Moravian concept that he incorporated into Wesleyan theology in the second stanza cited above. In the third stanza above, we are reminded of *imago Dei* in the phrase, "Stamp Thine image in its place," taking on the image of God in place of that of sinful Adam, a reference to the Wesleyan concept of sanctification.

"Hark! the herald angels sing" highlights the virgin birth, the universal application of the coming of "th'incarnate Deity" to all nations, and that Christ, who was "pleased with us in flesh to dwell," gives humanity a "second birth." The "second" or "new birth" was essential to Wesleyan theology in light of a controversy with the Moravians. The importance of this was illustrated in John Wesley's sermon, "The Marks of the New Birth" that provides extensive scriptural basis for his view.
The final stanza in most hymnals paraphrases the beautiful biblical citation from Malachi 4:2: "But unto you that fear my name shall the Sun of righteousness arise with healing in his wings" (KJV). Each Christmas season we are invited by this venerable hymn to join the angels in swelling the cosmic chorus:

With th'angelic host proclaim,
"Christ is born in Bethlehem!"
Refrain: Hark! the herald angels sing,
"Glory to the new-born King!"

O come all you faithful

This favorite Christmas hymn appears to be the result of a collaboration of several people. What we sing is a 19th-century version of a hymn written in the 18th century.

The Latin text comes from the Roman Catholic tradition, found in an 18th-century manuscript in the College at Douai. The college was located in northern France beginning around 1561 and continuing until it was suppressed in 1793. The college was exiled to England at the time of the French Revolution (1789-99).

One possibility is that John Francis Wade (c.1711-1786) was an English musician at the college. Methodist hymnologist Fred Gealy notes: "Seven manuscripts containing the Latin hymn are known; they are dated 1743-61. All appear to have been written, signed, and dated by John Francis Wade, an Englishman who made his living by copying and selling plainchant and other music."

Research by Dom John Stéphan, author of *The Adeste Fidelis: A Study of Its Origin and Development* (1947), has determined that the first and original manuscript was dated in 1743, indicating that Wade composed both the Latin words and the music between 1740 and 1743.

The English language translation of stanzas one, two, three and six is the work of Frederick Oakeley (1802-1880), a translator of Latin hymns during the Oxford movement who worked closely with Cardinal John Henry Newman (1801-1890), a leader in the movement. Oakeley became a Roman Catholic and was known for his ministry to the poor at Westminster Abbey. Oakeley's stanzas, penned in 1841, first appeared in F.H. Murray's *Hymnal for Use in the English Church* (1852) under the title "Let us go even unto Bethlehem, and see this thing which is come to pass." (Luke 2:15)

Abbé Etienne Jean François Borderies (1764-1832), who was inspired upon hearing the hymn, translated three additional stanzas to fill out the Christmas story. Other versions and many alterations exist as well.

The invitation to "come, all ye faithful, . . . to Bethlehem" places the singer both among the shepherds who rushed to see the Christ child, and in the long procession of the "faithful" that have journeyed to Bethlehem in their hearts for over 2,000 years.

Of particular note is the second stanza that draws heavily upon the Nicene Creed:

True God, of true God,
Light from Light Eternal,
lo, he shuns not the Virgin's womb;
Son of the Father,
begotten, not created.

This paraphrases the text of the Creed very closely:

"We believe in one Lord, Jesus Christ,
the only Son of God,
eternally begotten of the Father,
God from God, Light from Light,
true God from true God,
begotten, not made,
of one Being with the Father;
through him all things were made."

Thus, singing stanza two establishes a link to the church that reaches back to 325 A.D., at the Council of Nicea, where the Creed originates.

In the third stanza, the "faithful" join their voices with the angels singing "Gloria in excelsis Deo" (Luke 2:14). The refrain then becomes a cosmic chorus uniting heaven and earth.
Stanza four invites us to model our response on that of the shepherds: "We too will thither / bend our joyful footsteps." An omitted stanza notes the appearance of the magi:

Lo! star-led chieftans,
Magi, Christ adoring,
offer him incense, gold, and myrrh;
we to the Christ child
bring our heart's oblations.

The fifth stanza takes a decidedly different tone, placing us not only at the manger scene as one of the humble who have come to see the Christ child, but actually in the manger! Note that there is no comma after "sinners," indicating that it is not just the "Child" in the manger, but we who join him there in humility, "awe and love":

Child, for us sinners
poor and in the manger,
Fain we embrace thee, with awe and love:
Who would not love thee,
loving us so dearly?

The rhetorical question leaves us almost unable to sing the refrain aloud.

The tune Adeste Fidelis by Wade has served this text well—though about as many variations have appeared for the tune over the years, as for the text. The refrain has a fugal feel with the staggered entry of voices until all four parts join in the imperative: "O come, let us adore him, Christ the Lord."

Joy to the world!
Did you know that "Joy to the World" was not written as a Christmas carol? In its original form, it had nothing to do with Christmas. It wasn't even written to be a song.

Isaac Watts was one of the great hymn writers in church history, and I guess nothing shows that better than the fact that he wrote one of his most famous hymns by accident. In 1719, Watts published a book of poems in which each poem was based on a psalm. But rather than just translate the original Old Testament texts, he adjusted them to refer more explicitly to the work of Jesus as it had been revealed in the New Testament.

One of those poems was an adaptation of Psalm 98. Watts interpreted this psalm as a celebration of Jesus's role as King of both his church and the whole world. More than a century later, the second half of this poem was slightly adapted and set to music to give us what has become one of the most famous of all Christmas carols:

Joy to the world, the Lord is come;
Let earth receive her King!
Let every heart prepare him room
And heaven and nature sing!
And heaven and nature sing!
And heaven . . . and heaven . . . and nature sing.

Joy to the earth, the Savior reigns!
Let men their songs employ
While fields and floods, rocks, hills, and plains,
Repeat the sounding joy! Repeat the sounding joy!
Repeat . . . repeat . . . the sounding joy!

No more let sins and sorrows grow,
Nor thorns infest the ground;
He comes to make his blessings flow
Far as the curse is found!
Far as the curse is found!
Far as . . . far as . . . the curse is found!

He rules the world with truth and grace
And makes the nations prove
The glories of his righteousness
And wonders of his love!
And wonders of his love!
And wonders . . . wonders . . . of his love!

"Joy to the world" is perhaps an unlikely popular Christmas hymn. First of all, it is based on a psalm, and, second, it celebrates Christ's second coming much more than the first. This favourite Christmas hymn is the result of a collaboration of at least three people and draws its initial inspiration not from the Christmas narrative in Luke 2, but from Psalm 98.

The first collaborator was the English poet and dissenting clergyman, Isaac Watts (1674-1748). He paraphrased the entire Psalm 98 in two parts, and it first appeared in his famous collection, *The Psalms of David, Imitated in the Language of the New Testament* (1719).

"Joy to the world" was taken from the second part of the paraphrase (Psalm 98:4-9), entitled "The Messiah's Coming and Kingdom." Watts, commenting on his paraphrase of the psalm, notes: "In these two hymns I have formed out of the 98th Psalm I have fully exprest what I esteem to be the first and chief Sense of the Holy Scriptures . . .." For Watts, the psalms were not to be viewed as biblical material in their own right, but had value only inasmuch as they pointed toward the New Testament.

A comparison between Watts's psalm paraphrase and the original verses in the King James translation of Psalm 98:4-9 demonstrates considerable freedom:
"Make a joyful noise unto the Lord, all the earth: make a loud noise, and rejoice, and sing praise. Sing unto the Lord with the harp; with the harp, and the voice of a psalm. With trumpets and sound of cornet make a joyful noise before the Lord, the King. Let the sea roar, and the fullness thereof; the world, and they that dwell therein. Let the floods clap their hands: let the hills be joyful together. Before the Lord; for he cometh to judge the earth: with righteousness shall he judge the world, and the people with equity." (KJV)

Curiously, stanza three is the exception. It is not based on Psalm 98 and is sometimes omitted:
No more let sins and sorrows grow,
Nor thorns infest the ground;
He comes to make his blessings flow
Far as the curse is found.

The "curse" is a reference to Genesis 3:17 when God says to Adam following the eating of the apple from the tree, "Thou shalt not eat of it: cursed is the ground for thy sake; in sorrow shalt thou eat of it all the days of thy life." (KJV) As a part of "five-point Calvinism," the "total depravity of man", the curse is a significant part of classic Reformed theology, Isaac Watts' theological perspective.

Though *The United Methodist Hymnal* (1989) retains the original text, the hymnal of the United Reformed Church in the UK, *Rejoice and Sing* (1991), altered the stanza as follows:
No more let thorns infest the ground,
or sins and sorrows grow;
wherever pain and death are found
he makes his blessings flow.

The second collaborator was an unwitting one, George Frederic Handel (1685-1759), the popular German-born composer residing in London. Though contemporaries in England, they did not collaborate on this hymn. Another pieced together portions of Handel's *Messiah* to make up the tune that we sing in North America. The opening bars for the chorus, "Lift up your heads," was adapted to the incipit "Joy to the world." An instrumental portion of the opening tenor recitative, "Comfort ye," provides a basis for the text "heaven and nature sing." Such borrowings were common, the aesthetic notion being that the music of great musicians had in itself an innate beauty. Even a crude pastiche of "great music" implied that the result would also be of high quality.

The third collaborator who assured that this tune and text would appear together in the United States was the Boston music educator, Lowell Mason (1792-1872). It was Mason, a musician with significant influence in his day, who published his own arrangement of Handel's melodic fragments in *Occasional Psalms and Hymn Tunes* (1836) and named the tune Antioch. While this is not the only tune to which Watts's text is sung, it is certainly the dominant one. Actually, this tune remains virtually unknown in Great Britain.

When sung to Antioch, the text is repeated in the second section, reflecting a particular early American treatment of the melody called a "fuging tune." A fuging tune was a compositional device initiated by American-born composer William Billings (1746-1800) where voice parts enter one after the other in rapid succession, usually repeating the same words.

The result of the fuging tune section is quite effective for the first stanza—"heaven and nature sing"—and the second stanza—"repeat the sounding joy"—and the fourth stanza, "wonders of his love" For the third stanza, with the text "far as the curse is found" echoing of Genesis 3:17-18 and Romans 5:20, the fuging compositional device seems a bit rollicking.

The result is a favourite Christmas hymn based on an Old Testament psalm, set to musical fragments composed in England, and pieced together across the Atlantic in the United States!