

Advent through the Ages: The O Antiphons

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As Christmas approaches, I always find myself connecting to the past, both my family's history and beyond that to the more distant history of the church through the ages. Perhaps I do that because the theme of Advent (the season of the church year that begins four Sundays before Christmas) is waiting for God to fulfill his promise to save his people. We think back to the centuries the people of Israel waited for the coming of the Messiah, and we look ahead to Jesus' return and remember the centuries the church has longed for his coming. And pondering those long centuries of waiting gives me a feeling of connection with the past and makes me want to join in with the history and practices of those who like me are looking ahead in hope for Jesus' return.

In this article, I'd like to introduce you to the O Antiphons, an Advent practice that goes back at least to the eighth century and possibly to the beginning of the sixth century or even earlier. An antiphon is a short response recited or sung during a church service after a Psalm or Cantic (i.e. a scriptural song not part of the Psalms). The O Antiphons were recited after the Magnificat (the Song of Mary, Luke 1:46-55) during the Vespers service (Evening Prayer) each evening from December 17 to December 23, the seven days preceding the Christmas Vigil held on Christmas Eve. One antiphon is recited each night. They are called the O Antiphons because each begins with "O," followed by a name for the Messiah drawn from the book of Isaiah, supplemented with other Scriptures.

The O Antiphons are an acrostic. If you take the first letter of each of the names of the Messiah in the antiphons in order and then read it backwards, it forms the Latin words *ero cras*, which means "tomorrow, I will be [there]." Since the last antiphon is recited on Christmas Eve, the acrostic is a clever and subtle way of signaling the end of Advent and the arrival of the One predicted by Isaiah and the other prophets and described in the antiphons.

The O Antiphons are also the basis for the hymn "O Come, O Come, Emanuel." The hymn was originally composed in Latin and was first published in the *Psalterium Canticum Catholicarum* (Cologne, 1710). Only five of the seven antiphons were in the first edition; additional verses were added and by 1878 all seven antiphons were included.

A Latin version of the hymn was translated into English in 1844 by John Mason Neale. Since the final two verses had not yet been written, most versions of the hymn only have four or perhaps five verses. Eventually, the two missing verses were translated into English as well. The melody we use for the hymn first appeared in the *Hymnal Noted* in 1851. Thomas Helmore, the compiler of the hymnal, claimed the melody came from "a French missal in the National Library, Lisbon," but if it did, no one has been able to find it since. This has led many to suspect that Helmore composed it himself in the style of a chant.

"O Come, O Come, Emanuel" has a tremendous amount of meaning to me personally, as it helped me get through the death of my beloved father-in-law just before Christmas twenty years ago. I wrote about that in the article, "[Death at Christmas](#)." I'd encourage you to read that piece, particularly if you are mourning the loss of a loved one this Christmas.

The following are the O Antiphons for each day in Latin and English, the corresponding verses of "O Come, O Come, Emanuel" in Latin and English (note that they are in a different order from how we

usually sing it), and some of the Scripture verses that the antiphons reference. I would encourage you to join with the church through the ages in using these in your personal worship on these days.

I recommend reading the Antiphon to understand what it is saying, then spend some time reading and meditating on the scriptural texts. Then pray the Antiphon in light of your reading of the Scriptures and end by singing the verse of the hymn.

Spending time with these scriptural texts is a powerful way to prepare you for Christmas and will give you a greater appreciation of just who it is that was born on that night in Bethlehem. And praying the antiphons and singing the hymn will help connect you with the people of God in all times and in all ages who have prayed and sung these very same words to the honor and glory of their Savior.

Dec. 18:

Isaiah 11:2-3; 28:29

Proverbs 8:1-36

John 1:1-5

1 Cor. 1:24

*O Sapientia, quae ex ore Altissimi prodisti,
attingens a fine usque ad finem fortiter,
suaviter disponensque omnia:*

veni ad docendum nos viam prudentiae.

O Wisdom, O holy Word of God,
you govern all creation with your strong yet tender care:
Come and show your people the way to salvation.

*Veni, O Sapientia, quae hic disponis omnia,
Veni, viam prudentiae ut doceas et gloriae.*

Gaude! Gaude! Emmanuel nascetur pro te Israel!

(2) O Come, Thou Wisdom, from on high,
and order all things far and nigh;
to us the path of knowledge show,
and teach us in her ways to go.
Rejoice! Rejoice! Emmanuel shall come to thee, O Israel!

Dec. 19:

Isaiah 33:22; 63:11-12

Exodus 3:2; 24:12

Micah 6:4

Acts 7:30-31

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

O Sacred Lord of ancient Israel,
who showed yourself to Moses in the burning bush,
who gave him the holy law on Sinai mountain:
Come, stretch out your mighty hand to set us free.

*Veni, Veni, Adonai, qui populo in Sinai
legem dedisti vertice in maiestate gloriae.
Gaude! Gaude! Emmanuel nascetur pro te Israel!*

(3) O Come, O Come, Thou Lord of might,
who to thy tribes on Sinai's height
in ancient times didst give the law,
in cloud, and majesty, and awe.
Rejoice! Rejoice! Emmanuel shall come to thee, O Israel!

Dec. 20:

Isaiah 11:1, 10; 52:15

Romans 15:12

*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 Root of Jesse,
you have been raised up as a sign for all peoples;
kings stand silent in your presence;
the nations bow down in worship before you.

*Veni, O lesse virgula, ex hostis tuos ungula,
de spectu tuos tartari educ et antro barathri.
Gaude! Gaude! Emmanuel nascetur pro te Israel!*

(4) O Come, Thou Rod of Jesse, free
thine own from Satan's tyranny.
From depth of Hell they people save
and give them vict'ry o'er the grave.
Rejoice! Rejoice! Emmanuel shall come to thee, O Israel!

Dec. 21:

Isaiah 9:1-2; 22:22

Matthew 4:16; 16:19

Luke 1:79

Revelation 3:7

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

O Key of David, O royal Power of Israel,
controlling at your will the gate of heaven:
Come, break down the prison walls of death
for those who dwell in darkness and the shadow of death;
and lead your captive people into freedom.

*Veni, Clavis Davidica, regna reclude caelica,
fac iter tutum superum, et claude vias inferum.
Gaude! Gaude! Emmanuel nascetur pro te Israel!*

(5) O Come, Thou Key of David, come,
and open wide our heav'nly home,
make safe the way that leads on high,
and close the path to misery.
Rejoice! Rejoice! Emmanuel shall come to thee, O Israel!

Dec. 22:

Isaiah 9:1-2; 58:8; 60:18-20

Malachi 4:2

Luke 1:78-79

John 8:12

Revelation 21:23-25; 22:16

O Oriens, splendor lucis aeternae,

et sol justitiae:

veni, et illumina sedentes in tenebris,

et umbra mortis.

O Radiant Dawn, splendor of eternal light, sun of justice:

Come, shine on those who dwell in darkness

and the shadow of death.

Veni, Veni O Oriens, solare nos adveniens,

noctis depelle nebulas, dirasque mortis tenebras.

Gaude! Gaude! Emmanuel nascetur pro te Israel!

(6) O Come, Thou Dayspring, come and cheer

our spirits by thine Advent here;

disperse the gloomy clouds of night

and death's dark shadows put to flight.

Rejoice! Rejoice! Emmanuel shall come to thee, O Israel!

Dec. 23:

Isaiah 2:4; 11:10

Daniel 7:14

Romans 15:12

Ephesians 2:14, 19-20

O Rex Gentium, et desideratus earum,

lapisque angularis, qui facis utraque unum:

veni, et salva hominem,

quem de limo formasti.

O King of all the nations, the only joy of every human heart;

O Keystone of the mighty arch of man:

Come and save the creature you fashioned from the dust.

Veni, Veni, Rex Gentium, Veni, Redemptor omnium,

ut salvas tuos famulos peccati sibi conscios.

Gaude! Gaude! Emmanuel nascetur pro te Israel!

(7) O Come, Desire of the nations, bind

in one the hearts of all mankind;

bid every strife and quarrel cease

and fill the world with heaven's peace.

Rejoice! Rejoice! Emmanuel shall come to thee, O Israel!

Dec. 24:

Isaiah 7:14

Matthew 1:23

O Emmanuel, Rex et legifer noster,

expectatio gentium, et Salvator earum:

veni ad salvandum nos,

Domine, Deus noster.

O Emmanuel, king and lawgiver,
desire of the nations, Savior of all people:
Come and set us free, Lord our God.

*Veni, Veni, Emmanuel captivum solve Israel,
qui gemit in exsilio, privatus Dei Filio.
Gaude! Gaude! Emmanuel nascetur pro te Israel!*

(1) 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!