

Christmas Carols and Their Meanings

Hark! the Herald Angels Sing

Charles Wesley's best-known song is probably "Hark! the Herald Angels Sing." It has been altered slightly by editors, but most of it remains just as Wesley intended when he wrote it over 250 years ago.

As we generally hear it today, the song begins with a triumphant proclamation of Jesus' birth, describes the fact that He is both God and man, and then praises Him for the salvation He was born to provide.

The first verse reads, in part,

**Hark! the herald angels sing, "Glory to the newborn King;
Peace on earth, and mercy mild, God and sinners reconciled."**

Talking about peace on earth is popular at Christmas time, and appropriately so, for Jesus did come to bring peace. Primarily, however, He came to bring us peace with God, which is what Wesley meant when he wrote, "God and sinners reconciled." We have all sinned against God; we have broken His commandments and thus made ourselves His enemies. When people become enemies, they cannot go back to being friends until their differences are set aside. Sometimes reconciliation involves the payment of reparations, and which is essentially what Jesus did when He died on the cross. He paid the price necessary to reconcile us to God. The price was really ours to pay, not God's, but Jesus was able to pay it because, though He was God, He became also a man, being born as a baby on that first Christmas day.

Charles Wesley described Jesus' birth in the second verse of this song. He wrote,

**Christ by highest heaven adored; Christ, the everlasting Lord!
Late in time behold Him come, offspring of the Virgin's womb.
Veiled in flesh the Godhead see; hail the incarnate Deity,
Pleased as man with men to dwell, Jesus our Emmanuel.**

Though He was the everlasting Lord, the second person of the Trinity (which is described in the song as "the Godhead"), fully equal in nature with God the Father and the Holy Spirit, Jesus became the "offspring of the Virgin's womb." He was "veiled in flesh," the "incarnate Deity." He was God, having become also a man. The name Emmanuel means "God with us," which is what Wesley was referring to when he wrote that Jesus was "pleased as man with men to dwell, Jesus our Emmanuel." He became a man, but in the process did not lose His deity. He was "God with us."

The idea that Jesus would lay aside His divine privileges for any reason is nothing short of incredible, but He did so in order to provide us with salvation. Wesley focused on this amazing occurrence in the third verse, where he wrote,

**Mild He lays His glory by, born that man no more may die,
Born to raise the sons of earth, born to give them second birth.**

Jesus laid aside His own rights, coming to this earth and dying for our sins, that those who trust in Him might have eternal life. He was born that we might be born again, and that is good reason to sing "glory to the newborn King."

O Holy Night

The carol "O Holy Night" by John Dwight begins by describing the night Jesus was born. It reads,

**O holy night! The stars are brightly shining.
It is the night of the dear Savior's birth.
Long lay the world in sin and error pining,
Till He appeared and the soul felt its worth.**

The coming of Jesus Christ should make us feel valuable, and it should make us feel loved. John 3:16 tells us that Jesus came because "God so loved the world." First Peter 1 reminds us that God has actually purchased us out of our slavery to sin, not with something perishable and comparatively worthless like silver and gold, "but with precious blood, as of a lamb unblemished and spotless, the blood of Christ" (vv. 18,19). The fact that Jesus gave Himself for us should cause our souls to feel their worth to God.

The second verse of "O Holy Night" calls us to consider the incredible fact that the King of kings was born as a human infant and placed in a manger. Most of us cannot relate to that kind of birth--our children are usually born in hospitals and nurtured in the most sterile of environments. Jesus was not. He was born in a stable. More than that, He lived a life of poverty, experienced severe temptation and persecution, and died a brutal death, abandoned by His friends and wrongly condemned by His enemies. Thus, although we cannot always relate to His experiences, He can relate to ours. This empathy is what Dwight was describing when he wrote,

**The King of kings lay thus in lowly manger,
In all our trials born to be our Friend.
He knows our need, to our weakness is no stranger.
Behold your King, before Him lowly bend.**

It must have seemed ironic for grown men to bow down before a baby, but no act of worship was ever more appropriate.

Considering our Lord's birth should cause us to worship Him, and it should cause us to respond to one another with humility. The third verse of "O Holy Night" reads,

**Truly He taught us to love one another;
His law is love and His gospel is peace.
Chains shall He break, for the slave is our brother,
And in His name all oppression shall cease.**

We no longer have slavery in this country, but we have many other forms of oppression, and Dwight was correct in writing that the oppression of human beings is inconsistent with the worship of Christ.

The Bible tells us that we are to model the humility that Jesus demonstrated when He voluntarily laid aside His rights as God and became also a man in order to suffer for our salvation.

Paul tells us that we are wrong when we put our own interests ahead of someone else's, whether through the slavery that John Dwight spoke against or simply through insensitivity toward others. Because He loved us, Jesus chose not to exercise all of His rights. May we follow that pattern of humility as we love one another, even after Christmas.

O Little Town of Bethlehem

"O Little Town of Bethlehem" was written in 1867 by Phillips Brooks, an Episcopal pastor from Philadelphia. He had been in Israel two years earlier and had celebrated Christmas in Bethlehem. This song describes the city not so much as it was when Brooks observed it, but as he thought it might have appeared on the night of Jesus' birth.

The first verse reads,

**O little town of Bethlehem, how still we see thee lie!
Above thy deep and dreamless sleep the silent stars go by.
Yet in thy dark streets shineth the everlasting light;
The hopes and fears of all the years are met in thee tonight.**

The streets of our own cities are quiet on Christmas day; stores are closed and most people are at home. It is possible that Bethlehem was quiet on the night that Jesus was born, but we know that the place was full of people from out-of-town, and chances are that there were even more people on the streets than usual. But this song does not say as much about the level of activity in Bethlehem as it does about the fact that very few people even noticed the Baby who was born. One line from the second verse reads, "While mortals sleep, the angels keep their watch of wondering love"--a situation that is true even today. The world goes on about its business, working, eating, sleeping, and playing, utterly oblivious to the spiritual realities around it. As Brooks wrote in the third verse of the song,

**How silently, how silently, the wondrous gift is given!
So God imparts to human hearts the blessings of His heaven.
No ear may hear His coming, but in this world of sin,
Where meek souls will receive Him still, the dear Christ enters in.**

When Christ came into this world, He came quietly. The angelic announcement to the shepherds was the only publicity that accompanied Him. He was born in a stable and laid in a feeding trough; He did not arrive with the pomp that one would expect of a King. For the most part, He still does not. When people today place their faith in Jesus Christ, the Bible tells us that He comes to live inside them through the indwelling Holy Spirit ([John 14:16-23](#); [Rom. 8:9-11](#)). There is not a lot of flash associated with an entrance like that, and some of your friends might not even notice the difference at first, but when you trust in Jesus Christ an incredibly significant event takes place. Your sins are forgiven and you are made a new person ([John 5:24](#); [2 Cor. 5:17](#)).

Jesus' coming means that Christmas does not have to be the lonely time that it is for so many people. We can experience His salvation and enjoy His presence as individuals, even though the world around us does not understand what is really going on. As the last verse of the song reads,

**O holy Child of Bethlehem! Descend to us we pray,
Cast out our sin, and enter in; be born in us today.
We hear the Christmas angels the great glad tidings tell;
O come to us, abide with us, Our Lord Emmanuel.**

Silent Night

The words of “Silent Night” were written by a Priest called Fr. Joseph Mohr in Mariapfarr, Austria, in 1816 and the music was added in 1818, by his school teacher friend Franz Xaver Gruber, for the Christmas service at St. Nicholas church in Oberndorf, Austria.

Fr. Mohr asked Franz Gruber to compose the melody with a guitar arrangement. It was several years later that Franz Gruber wrote an arrangement for the organ. Historians who have conducted research in recent years believe that Fr. Mohr wanted a new carol that he could play on his guitar.

At Midnight Mass in 1818, Fr. Mohr and Franz Gruber sang each of the six verses with the church choir repeating the last two lines of each verse. Mohr set down the guitar arrangement on paper around 1820 and that is the earliest manuscript that still exists. It is displayed in the Carolino Augusteum Museum in Salzburg. There are a number of manuscripts of various 'Stille Nacht' arrangement that were written by Franz Gruber in later years.

The original words of the song were in German (and it was called 'Stille Nacht! Heilige Nacht') and translated in to English went:

**Silent night, holy night,
Bethlehem sleeps, yet what light,
Floats around the heavenly pair;
Songs of angels fills the air.
Strains of heavenly peace.**

It's thought that the song might have travelled around the area with an organ repairman, Karl Mauracher, who could have taken an early arrangement with him in about 1820. Then two singing families seem to have discovered the song and performed it as part of their concerts. In December 1832, the Strasser family performed it at a concert in Leipzig. It was first performed in the USA in 1839 by the Rainer family, who sang 'Stille Nacht' at the Alexander Hamilton Monument outside Trinity Church in New York City. During this time the tune changed to the one we know and sing today!

It was translated into English in 1863 by John Freeman Young. The carol was sung during the Christmas Truce in the First World War in December 1914 as it was a song that soldiers on both sides knew!

By the time that the carol was famous, Fr Mohr had died. Franz Gruber wrote to music authorities in Berlin saying that he had composed the tune, but no one believed him and it was thought that Haydn, Mozart or Beethoven had written it! But then the 1820 manuscript was found and in the top right corner Fr Mohr had written: 'Melodie von Fr. Xav. Gruber.'. It's now one of the most, if the the most, recorded songs in the world!

The 12 Days of Christmas

In England, between 1558 and 1829, it was not legal for Catholics to practice their kind of Christianity in public or private. Being a Catholic was treated as a bad crime. If you even owned a Catholic Bible, you could be put in prison! Catholics were stopped from worshipping because King Henry VIII fell out with the Catholic Church and started his own 'Protestant' Church (what is now the Church of England). There were many people who were still Catholics and they worshipped in secret. 'The Twelve Days of Christmas' was written in England at the beginning of this time. Some people think that it was written to help children learn about their Catholic religion. In the carol, the days are supposed to represent special symbols and have hidden meanings, because it was illegal to have anything in writing that would indicate that you were a Catholic.

But there's no evidence that this is true and it seems most likely just to be a folk song and that the meanings were added at a later date! Also, all the symbols can be used by Protestants and other Christians! There was another song called 'A New Dial', written in 1625, which gave religious meanings to the 12 Days of Christmas, but not so people could practice their faith in secret.

"The 12 Days of Christmas" refer to the twelve day period that starts with Christmas day and ends on [Epiphany](#) (6th January). The song begins, On the first day of Christmas my true love gave to me... The 'true love' was meant to represent God, the true love of the world. The 'me' in the carol is the Christian man or woman who receives these presents. The meanings given to the 12 Days are:

1. The 'partridge in a pear tree' is Jesus who died on the cross. In ancient times, a partridge was often used as a symbol of a divine sacred king.
2. The 'two turtle doves' are the Old and New Testaments of the Bible - another gift from God. Doves also symbolize peace.
3. The 'three French hens' are faith, hope and love - the three gifts of the Holy Spirit. ([1 Cor.13](#)). The French hens can also represent God the Father, His Son Jesus and the Holy Spirit.
4. The 'four calling birds' are the four Gospels in the New Testament of the Bible
5. The 'five golden rings' are the first five books of the Bible also called the Pentateuch, the Books of Moses or the Torah.
6. The 'six geese a-laying' are the six days of creation.
7. The 'seven swans a swimming' are the seven gifts of the Holy Spirit. ([1 Cor. 12:8-11](#), [Romans 12](#), [Ephesians 4](#), [1 Peter 4:10-11](#)).
8. The 'eight maids a milking' are the eight beatitudes, Jesus' teachings on happiness. ([Matthew 5:3-10](#))
9. The 'nine ladies dancing' are nine fruits of the Holy Spirit. ([Galatians 5:22](#))
10. The 'ten lords a-leaping' are the Ten Commandments in the Bible. ([Exodus 20](#))
11. The 'eleven pipers piping' are the eleven faithful disciples of Jesus.
12. The 'twelve drummers drumming' were the twelve points of the Apostles' Creed.

How many gifts are there in total in "The 12 Days of Christmas"?
If you were to receive all the presents in the song, you'd get 364!

O Come All Ye Faithful

Evidence about the history of this very famous carol is unclear and conflicting, which makes it difficult to ascertain the truth.

Dealing first with the lyrics, at various times the original words of the carol have been attributed to the Franciscan Order of monks and the 13th century Italian theologian Saint Bonaventure, and to various authors from the 14th to the 17th centuries. A royal author has also been proposed - namely Portuguese King John IV, a noted musical patron and composer. (According to one source, the hymn was briefly known as the Portuguese Hymn, as it was frequently played during the visits of the King's daughter Catherine of Braganza to England in the mid 17th century, during her courtship of future husband, King Charles II).

Other suggested authors have included the composers Handel, Gluck, and Thomas Arne. However, it must be said that the evidence for any of these is very limited, and there is no clear proof of the existence of the lyrics before the middle of the 18th century.

At this time, a noted Catholic hymn writer and supporter of Bonnie Prince Charlie's rebellion against King George II of England fled across the sea to France to escape fears of persecution. His name was John Francis Wade and around the year 1743, he wrote down the lyrics of four verses of "O Come all ye Faithful." He wrote in Latin, and the hymn was named for the opening words of the first verse - 'Adeste Fideles', and it was first published in 'Cantus Diversi' in 1751.

What was the purpose of the hymn? A belief has developed that "O Come all ye Faithful" was in reality a coded show of support for the Catholic Jacobean cause in England, and that the song was imploring 'the faithful' to come to the aid of Prince Charles. Whatever the truth of that, John Francis Wade is now seen as the most likely original author of these lyrics. The authorship of the melody is also very unclear; Wade may have composed the music too, although a similar tune also appears in a contemporary comic opera by French composer Charles Favart. Some years later, Samuel Webbe, a colleague of Wade's, published the music and Wade's four Latin verses together for the first time in 1782. Four additional French verses were later penned by Abbé Étienne Jean François Borderies and others. The definitive English text dates to 1841, when the words of John Francis Wade's four verses were translated into English by Reverend Frederick Oakley, who called the carol '*Ye Faithful, approach ye*'. The additional French verses were then translated by William Thomas Brooke in 1885.



God Rest Ye Merry, Gentlemen

“God Rest Ye Merry, Gentlemen” is of uncertain origin. It is believed to be one of the most ancient carols in this list, probably written more than 500 years ago, at a time when its exuberant tone did not go down well with church leaders who preferred more somber devotional songs sung in Latin. Our first record of the song is from an 18th century manuscript, and the oldest surviving publication is from 1833 in the same Sandys and Gilbert compilation as “The First Noel.”

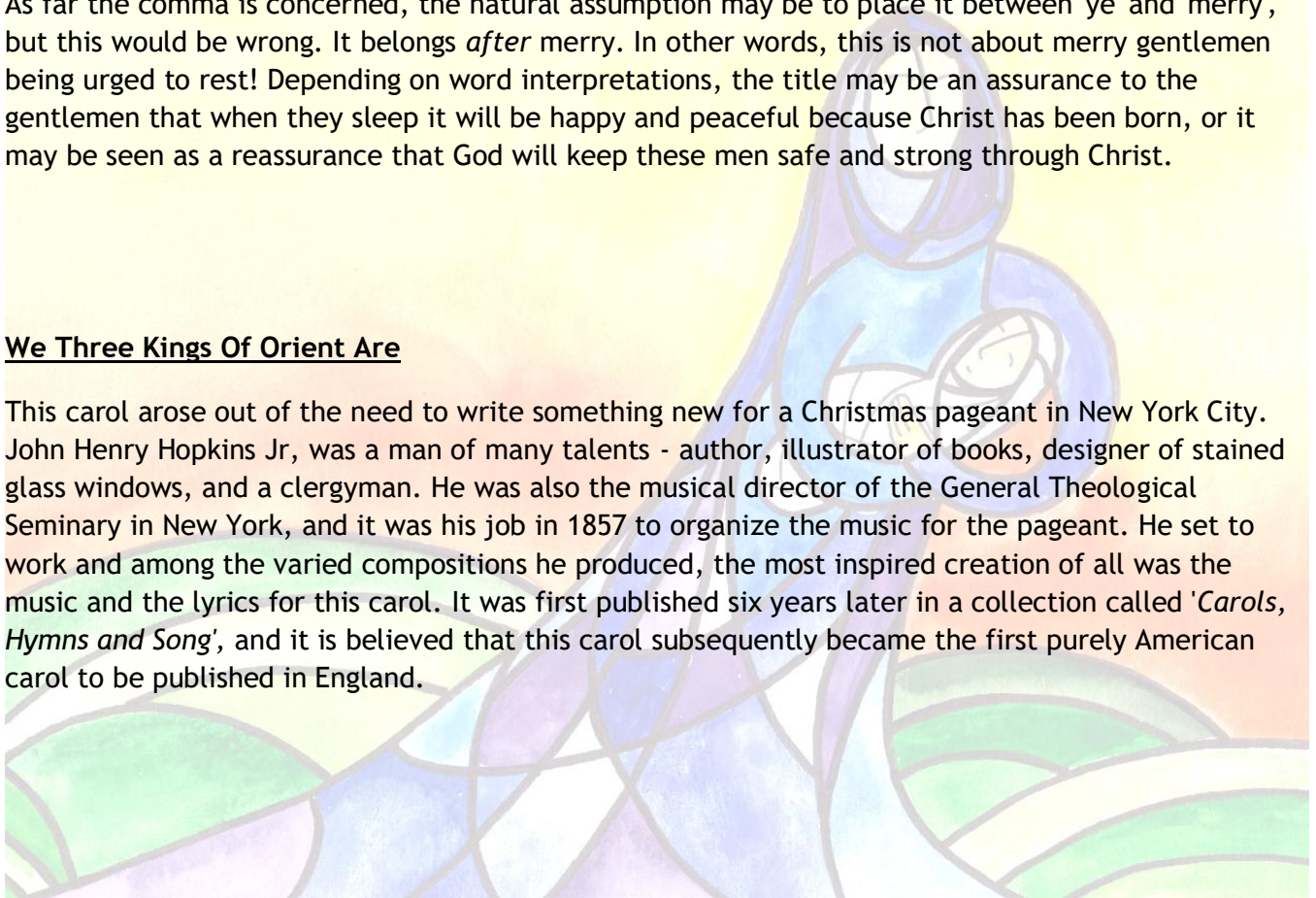
From then on, the festive joy of the words and the rich melodic tone allowed the carol to grow hugely in popularity and at least two English sources from late Victorian times described it as the nation's favourite carol. Indeed, one special claim to fame is that this song is the only one mentioned in Charles Dicken's “A Christmas Carol.” It is - in effect - the Christmas carol of the title.

One final point of note concerns the much misunderstood title. The words '*rest*' and '*merry*' have both changed in meaning over the centuries. '*Rest*' may have meant 'to keep', and '*merry*' may once have meant 'strong' or 'mighty', as in the phrase 'Robin Hood's merry men'. (Both these original definitions are disputed).

As far the comma is concerned, the natural assumption may be to place it between 'ye' and 'merry', but this would be wrong. It belongs *after* merry. In other words, this is not about merry gentlemen being urged to rest! Depending on word interpretations, the title may be an assurance to the gentlemen that when they sleep it will be happy and peaceful because Christ has been born, or it may be seen as a reassurance that God will keep these men safe and strong through Christ.

We Three Kings Of Orient Are

This carol arose out of the need to write something new for a Christmas pageant in New York City. John Henry Hopkins Jr, was a man of many talents - author, illustrator of books, designer of stained glass windows, and a clergyman. He was also the musical director of the General Theological Seminary in New York, and it was his job in 1857 to organize the music for the pageant. He set to work and among the varied compositions he produced, the most inspired creation of all was the music and the lyrics for this carol. It was first published six years later in a collection called '*Carols, Hymns and Song*', and it is believed that this carol subsequently became the first purely American carol to be published in England.



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