

By Derek Olsen

I doubt you've heard of Sapientia-tide—but I'll bet you know “O Come, O Come Emmanuel.” The liturgical obscurity and the popular hymn are both vestiges of an ancient tradition that celebrates the Incarnation of Christ: The Great “O” Antiphons. The intentional liturgical communities of the Middle Ages—the monastic houses and cathedrals—always sang the Song of Mary, the Magnificat, as part of their Evening Prayer (Vespers). To further their meditation upon the various mysteries of Christ made present in the liturgical cycles, one-line antiphons drawn from biblical or traditional sources were interwoven with Mary's canticle. The verses we now know as “O Come, O Come Emmanuel” are versions of the antiphons traditionally sung on the seven nights leading up to Christmas Eve. These antiphons are worthy of our attention as we enter this time before Christmas for both their spiritual riches and for their place in our Anglican heritage.

(Meditations on the O Antiphons will be featured on the Speaking to the Soul blog, December 16-24.)

A curious entry appears in the December liturgical calendar of English Books of Common Prayer. The year 1561 brought an influx of minor saints from the Roman cycle back into the calendar of the Elizabethan Book of Common Prayer by way of the Latin Book of Common Prayer used in college chapels—places where Latin was expected to be “a tongue understood of the people.” But among this number came an entry that was not the name of a saint or martyr. December 16th bears the legend: O Sapientia—O Wisdom. Formally ratified by its inclusion in the calendar of the 1662 Prayer Book—still the official prayer-book of the Church of England and often considered the liturgical norm for the Anglican Communion—this entry holds an indisputable place in our history grounding the “O” Antiphons in the Anglican tradition although they have never yet appeared in an authorized prayer book. The Roman Catholic Church has retained these antiphons as well, but their course begins on December 17th—meaning that the Anglican tradition retains an antiphon no longer used by Rome. Ironically, the missing antiphon is the one addressed to the Blessed Virgin Mary.

Jumping back a thousand years, the deep roots of the antiphons in the English tradition may be seen in the leaves of the Exeter Book, a collection of poetic texts and riddles from the tenth century written in Old English. The opening lines—only partially preserved—are poetic paraphrases of not seven but twelve “O” antiphons that ponder the Advent, the time of waiting, the Incarnation, and its implications for fallen humanity. The choice of these antiphons is not happenstance—rather these texts are rich with spiritual and doctrinal content that beg for further expansion, explanation, and appreciation. I feel this urge today as surely as it was felt over a millennium ago.

The antiphons are a mosaic of Scriptural citations and allusions. As Advent privileges the writings of the prophets, so the central image of each antiphon is drawn from a prophet nugget. Since the Book of Revelation was composed in a similar fashion—always in conversation with the prophets and the psalms—many of the antiphons have multiple Scriptural sources. We hear the words of the prophets not only from their own time and place but through the lens of New Testament's use of them as well. In the scriptural cloud that surrounds each core image, some links are obvious—others are less so, drawing on the interpretive methods and decisions of the Church Fathers.

Each antiphon begins with a metaphor, a title for Christ, most evoking not just a passage but whole swathes of Scripture. This metaphor is expanded by ancillary images and references that add depth and dimension to the Scriptural stories. Last, an imperative beseeches Christ to come and liberate us from sin, death, and darkness. As we take the words and images of the prophets in our mouths, we join their cry for the coming of the babe of Bethlehem. And speaking our own future, we call for the Coming King who will consummate the redemption of all creation. And—furthermore—we cry Christ into our own hearts, asking that the birth of the divine child be not only in history of distant days or future consummation but that we see, we experience, his redemptive resurrection power in our own flesh.

Dec 17th:* O Wisdom that comest out of the mouth of the Most High, that reachest from one end [of the heavens] to another, and dost mightily and sweetly order all things: come to teach us the way of prudence!

Dec 18th: O Adonai, and Ruler of the house of Israel, who didst appear unto Moses in the burning bush, and gavest him the law in Sinai: come to redeem us with outstretched arm!

Dec 19th: O Root of Jesse, which standest for an ensign of the people, at whom the kings shall shut their mouths, unto whom the Gentiles shall seek: come to deliver us, make no tarrying!

Dec 20th: O Key of Davd and Sceptre of the house of Israel; that openest and no man shutteth; and shuttest and no man openeth: come to bring out the prisoners from the prison, and them that sit in darkness, and in the shadow of death!

Dec 21st: O Day-spring Brightness of the everlasting Light, Sun of Righteousness: come to give light to them that sit in darkness, and in the shadow of death!

Dec 22nd: O King of the Gentiles, yea, and Desire thereof, O Cornerstone that makest of twain [two] one: come to save man, whom Thou hast made of the dust of the earth!

Dec 23rd: O Emmanuel, our King and our Law-giver, Longing of the Gentiles, yea, and Salvation thereof: come to save us, O Lord our God!

(If the missing optional antiphon is used, it should be used on the 23rd and the others moved back one day: O Virgin of Virgins, how shall this be? For neither before thee was any like thee, nor shall there be after. Daughters of Jerusalem, why marvel ye at me? That which ye behold is a divine mystery.)

* English texts from the public domain *The Roman Breviary*, translated by John, Marquis of Bute (Edinburgh: Blackwood, 1908), p. 244.

Derek Olsen is completing a Ph.D. in New Testament (with a healthy side of Homiletics) at Emory University. His reflections on life, liturgical spirituality, and being a Gen-X dad appear at Haligweorc.