

Commentary on the Revised Lyrics to "O Come, O Come, Emmanuel"

About The Hymn:

The haunting and evocative melody, which for many epitomizes the spirit of Advent, seems to have originated as "Veni Emmanuel," from a 15th century processional of French Franciscan nuns (the setting for the funeral hymn *Libera me*). The original Latin lyrics appear to have been combined from various antiphons by an unknown author, possibly in the 12th century (*Veni, veni Emanuel*):

*Veni, veni Emanuel! Captivum solve Israel !
Qui gemit in exilio, Privatus Dei Filio.*

Refrain:

*Gaude, gaude, Emanuel
Nascetur pro te, Israel .*

Veni, veni o oriens!
Solare nos adveniens,
Noctis depelle nebulas,
Dirasque noctis tenebras. (*Ref*)

Veni, veni Adonai! [Note the use of the Hebrew *Adonai*]
Qui populo in Sinai
Legem dedisti vertice,
In Maiestate gloriae. (*Ref*)

Possibly first translated into English by John M. Neale, *Mediaeval Hymns*, 1851, additional verses and alternative translations have been added over the centuries. The added verses all express christological readings of various Old Testament metaphors. [Some of the above information is from: <http://www.cyberhymnal.org/htm/o/c/ocomocom.htm> .]

Assessing This Hymn's Lyrics in Terms of Its Theology of Judaism and the Church

One can look at the question of the theology conveyed by hymn lyrics both atomistically, i.e., is this word or phrase theologically sound or pastorally edifying? and also more globally, i.e., what is the theological orientation of the hymn in its entirety, including what is the progression of thought from verse to verse or what story does the entire lyric tell?

Globally speaking, O Come, O Come, Emmanuel's more-or-less traditional lyrics (though there are variations) pretty well summed up pre-Vatican II Catholic understanding of the relationship of the New Testament to the Old Testament, and therefore also of the Church to Israel: The Old Testament was understood to have spiritual validity only when read in reference to Christ and the Church, and Israel was spiritually valid only as the precursor to Christianity.

The "traditional" lyrics thus describe Israel as waiting in exile for its *raison d'etre* to come in the birth of Jesus and applies biblically-sounding titles (based on the "O-Antiphons") to petitions for Jesus to come.

The Second Vatican Council's Declaration on the Relationship of the Church to Non-Christian Religions, *Nostra Aetate*, reversed prior predominant theologies of Judaism. The covenantal life between God and Israel was now recognized as eternal and not superseded by the establishment of the Church's covenant with God through Christ. Official documents urged Catholics to respect Judaism's self-understanding and to understand Jesus as a "faithful son of Israel" (John Paul II) in continuity with, not the termination of, Israel's story.

The traditional lyrics suggest that Jews at the time of Jesus felt themselves to be captives, in lonely exile, and awaiting the appearance of the Son of God. This not only contradicts Jewish self-understanding but historical evidence from written texts of the time.

In addition, since Vatican II, Catholic teaching has emphasized that Advent should ritualize three "comings" - the birth of Jesus, the coming of Jesus in the Church today, and the eschatological coming of Christ at the End of Days. The traditional lyrics do a poor job of this.

Revised Lyrics with Comments

1. O come, O come, Emmanuel
And with your people always dwell
Who mourn in mortal exile here
Until the Lord of Life appear.

The opening verse summarizes the tri-fold Advent longing: Come again, You who have come before, and are with us now [Immanu-el = God is with us].

Rejoice! Rejoice! Emmanuel Shall come again and with us ever dwell .

The refrain repeats the Advent hope for the coming of God to live directly among God's people.

2. O come, Redeemer of the slave,
The shackled Hebrews you did save.
And then your covenant was sealed,
The Torah on the mount revealed
3. O come, O God's revealing Word,
Your voice the Hebrew prophets
heard;
They saw that one day war will cease,
And all creation be at peace.
4. O come, O Wisdom from on high,
Who brings the truth of Adonai,
To us the path of knowledge show,
And teach us in your ways to
go.

Verses 2, 3, and 4 express God's saving actions in the three divisions of the Hebrew Bible: the Torah or Teaching (verse 2), the Prophets (verse 3), and the Writings, including the Wisdom literature (verse 4). There are also Trinitarian echoes, though not a direct verse by verse correspondence.

Verses 2, 3, and 4 also point the way to the ministry of Jesus, which can be understood as embodying Israel's experience of God.

Verse 4: Adonai is the Hebrew word for "Lord." Since the Babylonian Exile, Jews often say this word where the Bible texts inscribes the divine name. Lady Wisdom is a feminine personification of God's actions in Creation. In the Bible she is poetically portrayed as God's assistant during the creation (Prov. 8), as "pitching her tent" among the People of Israel in the Temple in Jerusalem, and as expressed in the Torah (Sir 24). The New Testament writers applied these images to Jesus.

5. O come, Incarnate Word revealed,
Your people you both taught and
healed,
You trusted Abba's love would save,
And so were raised up from the grave.

Verses 5 and 6 summarize the paschal mystery – the ministry, death, and resurrection of Jesus.

6. O come, O Lamb of God who was
slain,
You underwent our human pain,
Dispel our fear of endless night
And death's dark shadow put to flight.

Verse 6 expresses the Advent and winter longing to be freed from the darkness of death.

7. O come, O Bread of Heav'n sublime,
Who come to us in bread and wine.
Still sacraments will one day cease
In God's eternal Reign of Peace.

Verse 7 expresses our faith that Christ comes to us sacramentally, but concludes with the Advent perspective that this presence pales before the direct experience of God at the End of Days.

Seven verses recall the biblical notion of "completeness" that is linked with that number (the first prime number 3 + the 4 directions). But all seven verses do not always need to be sung. A shorter form might include 1,2,3,4 early in Advent and 1,5,6,7 later in Advent.