

Chapter 7

Go Tell It on the Mountain: Singing the Incarnation Through the Ages

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Theological Introduction by Geoffrey C. Moore

Theological Introduction

Along with the Resurrection, the Incarnation constitutes the central event in the Christian narrative, standing at the heart of Christian theology and doctrine. The central questions at stake in the doctrine of the Incarnation seek to describe the relationship between the human and the divine in Jesus Christ, and as with the third person of the Trinity, answers to these questions are grounded in the doctrine, discussion, categories, and terminology of the Trinity, particularly **hypostasis**, **person**, and **nature**. In many ways, the essence of this doctrine is succinctly captured in the closing of the prologue to the Gospel according to John (1:14). In four words—*the Word became flesh*—we encounter the core mystery of the Incarnation. On the one hand, we encounter the Word, the **Logos**, the second person of the Trinity: Light from Light, True God from True God, eternally **begotten** of and **consubstantial** with the first person of the Trinity. On the other hand, we learn that this eternally **begotten** person somehow becomes **flesh**, the biblical term used to describe not simply the human (corporeal) body, but the whole of human nature, including, often figuratively, the human condition of sin. This is a radical idea, that God would enter creation, much less become **incarnate**, literally enfleshed, as a human. Through the power of the Holy Spirit, God takes on human **nature** and, in doing so, creates what Cyril of Alexandria (ca. 376–444 CE) calls the **economy** of the flesh (or of the Incarnation); in other words, a new dispensation in and under which the second **person** of the Trinity takes human form and human **nature** and functions as a human **person**.

It is in the tension of this **economy** of the Incarnation that the essence of salvation is both manifestly encountered and mysteriously elusive: somehow Jesus Christ possesses that very identity with/of God necessary for him to save humanity and possess a union with humanity which makes salvation available to humanity. As Anselm of Canterbury (1033–1109 CE) describes it: we are in need of salvation but we cannot save ourselves; only God can redeem us, but God has no ontological need to do it; therefore, the God-man, Jesus Christ, was chosen who did not need to be saved but could save.¹ Anselm's statement has several powerful implications. First, God voluntarily undertakes incarnation and in doing so is entirely consistent with both the Trinity's **perichoresis** and the sheer generosity in which God creates. Second, Jesus Christ is both fully human and fully divine. For Anselm,

¹ See Anselm of Canterbury, *Cur Deus Homo?*, esp. II.7, in Anselm of Canterbury, *The Major Works*, edited by Brian Davies and G. R. Evans, Oxford World's Classics (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 320–321.

the only way the gap between God and humanity can be bridged is by God taking on human **nature**. As Gregory of Nazianzus (329–390 CE) states, “that which he has not assumed he has not healed; but that which is united to his Godhead is also saved.”² Third, much like the Trinity’s **perichoresis**, these two **natures**, human and divine, remain distinct and peculiar yet are united in one **person**.

Exactly how these two **natures** co-exist in one **person** has not always been clear, however. In the early years of the church, various explanations were advanced. Archbishop of Constantinople Nestorius (386–451 CE), desiring to preserve the integrity of each nature, argued that the two **natures** were completely separate, having no contact with each other, and that in fact there were two distinct **persons**, one human and one divine. Conversely, followers of Cyril of Alexandria, later known as Monophysites (lit. “one nature”), desiring to preserve the unity of Jesus, argued that the two **natures** came together to form a new, unified **nature**. Some, desiring to emphasize Jesus’ humanity, argued that Jesus was born a natural human and later adopted as the Son of God (usually at his baptism). Others in the **Gnostic** tradition, teaching that all matter is evil and desiring to emphasize Jesus’ divinity, argued that Jesus only appeared to have a human form, a view known as **Docetism** (from the Gk. *dokeîn*, “to seem,” or *dókēsis*, “apparition”). Still others, following Arius (ca. 250–335 CE), argued that Jesus was not fully divine nor **co-eternal** with the first person of the Trinity but had a beginning and was rather first among all created beings. In 431 CE, the church decreed at the Council of Ephesus that Jesus was neither a person adopted by God nor a human possessed by a divine nature, but rather was a one **person (hypostasis)** with two **natures**, fully God and fully human, a doctrine which became known as the **hypostatic union**. Unfortunately, the matter was far from settled, as the church was forced to call another Council at Chalcedon twenty years later in 451 CE. In what became known as the **Chalcedonian definition**, the church finally decreed that Jesus Christ was **consubstantial** with the first **person** of the Trinity, eternally **begotten** according to his divinity and temporally **begotten** according to his humanity; that Christ is one **theanthropic** (from the Gk. *theós*, “god,” and *ánthrōpos*, “human”) **person** in two **natures** held together in a personal union; that Christ’s two **natures** are fully human and fully divine, the former including a human body, a human will, a human mind, a rational soul; and that Christ’s two **natures** are united, without division or separation, though remain distinct, without confusion or change, so as to form some kind of hybrid. It is this last part—without division, without separation, without confusion, without change—which becomes the core of the **Chalcedonian definition** and thus the church’s Christology, tracing, in a sense, the most delicate of boundaries inside of which, somehow, lies the mystery of the Incarnation.

It is perhaps due to the simultaneously elusive and expansive nature of this mystery that the church has historically not restricted its observance of the Incarnation to Christmas, but rather celebrated it throughout the larger Incarnational Cycle of Advent-Christmas-Epiphany. Whereas Christmas commemorates the actual birth of Christ, Epiphany

² Gregory of Nazianzus, “To Cledonius Against Apollinaris” (Epistle 101), in *Christology of the Later Fathers*, edited by Edward Rochie Hardy, Library of Christian Classics: Ichthus Edition (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1977), 218.

celebrates the visitation of the “wise” men, and, in many ways, this visitation is “mirrored” by the divine visitation of Gabriel to Mary celebrated in Advent, a mirroring which echoes the interplay of the human and the divine in the Incarnation itself. The larger Incarnational Cycle, with its great canticles such as the *Magnificat* and the *Nunc Dimittis*, reminds us of the radical nature of God’s salvific plan for creation. It also reminds us that God achieved such a radical incarnation through the womb of Mary, in which Jesus received the human nature he assumed in order to be redeemed, earning her the honored title of **Theotokos**, from the Greek, meaning “bearer of God.” Yet Mary was not simply a vessel, she was an agent; not merely an icon, but a mirror. Mary willingly assented to the divine mission. The angel did not force Mary to participate but waited patiently for her response (known as her **fiat**, from the Latin, meaning “let it be done”). And this interaction reveals God’s desire to interrelate with us freely and graciously. However radical the intersection of the human and the divine might be, here God interacts with creation in a non-competitive way, foreshadowing the confounding mystery of the Incarnation, and God’s non-competitive entry into creation in the Incarnation opens up a new dimension for creation and the “other” to interact.

“Of the Father’s Love Begotten” (“Corde Natus ex Parentis”) (ca. 405, tr. 1854, 1859)

In the first centuries of the church, Christians sought to understand the identity and the work of Jesus. One of the oldest texts we sing of the Incarnate Christ reflects the theological discourse surrounding the codification of the Nicene Creed (325 C.E.). Both this creed and the hymn “Of the Father’s Love Begotten” affirm the mystery of Christ being both fully human and divine.

Aurelius Clemens Prudentius (348-c. 413 C.E.), a retired Spanish magistrate, wrote this text amidst **Arian** heresies that Jesus was not co-eternal with God, and was merely a created being. The 4-6 stanza hymn traditionally sung today is extracted from his 37-stanza text *Hymnus Omnis Horae* (A Hymn for Every Hour), which is a thorough commentary praising Jesus Christ as savior and redeemer.³

In defending orthodoxy, the historic Nicene Creed confirms Jesus Christ as:

the only Son of God,
eternally begotten of the Father,
God from God, Light from Light,
true God from true God,
begotten, not made,
one Being with the Father. (hymnary.org)

Notably, this hymn asserts from its opening lines that Christ is one with God, existing before creation. The Latin “Corde natus ex Parentis ante mundi exordium” translates literally as “born from the parent’s heart before the beginning of time,” a beautiful, non-gendered image lost in

³ The entire 37-stanza hymn is available at Project Gutenberg’s *The Hymns of Prudentius*, <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/14959/14959-h/14959-h.htm#p09t> (accessed May 2016)

translation.⁴ Prudentius emphasizes this assertion by adding a *tautology**, a poetic device reinforcing an idea by repeating it using different words. “Source and ending,” Alpha and Omega,” “things that are, that have been...” all affirm Christ as past, present, and future.

*Of the Father's love begotten
ere the worlds began to be.
he is Alpha and Omega —
he the source, the ending he,
of the things that are, that have been,
and that future years shall see.*

Subsequent stanzas promote incarnation theology with focus on Jesus' birth as fulfillment of prophecy (“This is he whom seers in old time chanted...whom the voices of the prophets promised,” st. 4) and as redeemer of the world (“...Savior of our race...the world's Redeemer,” st. 3). The final stanzas acknowledge Christ as worthy of praise and adoration from the “heights of heaven” to “powers and dominions,” and concluding with a Trinitarian doxology (st. 5).

Other stanzas from the longer poem, seldom sung, expand the praise of Christ by recounting numerous events in Jesus' life: wedding at Cana, restoring sight to the blind, healing the lame, casting out demons, feeding of the five thousand, the raising of Lazarus, and his own death, resurrection, and ascension.⁵ Some hymnals include the following stanza which highlights Christ's willingness to and rationale for becoming one with us (**kenosis**):

He assumed this mortal body,
frail and feeble, doomed to die,
that the race from dust created
might not perish utterly,
which the dreadful law had sentenced
in the depths of hell to lie.
evermore and evermore! (*PCH*, 141)

Today congregations conclude each stanza singing “*evermore and evermore*,” a short refrain added by John Mason Neale (1818-1866) who translated the text from Latin. This refrain reinforces the belief that Christ was, and is, and evermore shall be!

This hymn is sung to the tune DIVINUM MYSTERIUM, a plainsong from the late Middle Ages. C. Winfred Douglas (1867-1949) harmonized it in 1940. Although the tune first appeared in *Piae Cantiones* (1582) in triple meter, it is now published in many American collections as unmeasured plainsong, a style suited to the text's origin and mystery.

⁴ C. Michael Hawn, “History of Hymns: ‘Of the Father's Love Begotten,’” <http://www.umcdiscipleship.org/resources/history-of-hymns-of-the-fathers-love-begotten1> (accessed May 2016)

⁵ Lenti, “‘Of the Father's Love Begotten’: a hymn by Aurelius Clemens Prudentius,” 10.

Singing the Incarnation with this early text reminds us of the labors of our ancestors in faith in their efforts to resolve disputes about the **hypostases** of the Trinity. In addition to doctrinal heresies circulating in those times, Christianity had been undermined by the Emperor Julian the Apostate who espoused that “faith was not equal to true learning, philosophy and poetry.” (*PCH*, 120) Prudentius dispels this perception by writing a text that is theologically sound expressed with poetic beauty.

“O Come, O Come, Emmanuel” (Veni, veni Emmanuel”) (Latin prose pre-9th century, composite trans. 19th century)

As God’s people hoped for a Messiah, they imagined what kind of Messiah would come: priest, king, redeemer, etc. From its origin in the medieval monastic tradition, “O Come, O Come, Emmanuel,” has traversed centuries, languages, and practices, becoming a familiar hymn that names the Incarnate God of Many Names.

Latin *antiphons**, commonly known as the “O Antiphons,” “Great ‘O’ Antiphons,” or simply the “Os,” serve as the source of “O Come, O Come, Emmanuel.” With the rise of monastic cloistered communities in the medieval era, priests prayed scripture at designated times during the day and night. In the course of one week, a community chanted or recited all 150 psalms. These daily vigils acquired the designation of liturgical hours or divine offices. As early as 530 CE, eight offices were observed daily:

- Matins (Midnight)
- Lauds (at daybreak or 3:00 a.m.)
- Prime (6 a.m.)
- Terce (9 a.m.)
- Sext (12 noon)
- None (3 p.m.)
- Vespers (early evening or 6 p.m.)
- Compline (before retiring or 9 p.m.).

The essential format of each office involved alternation of five psalms with music (antiphons, *canticles*, and hymns), prayer, and other biblical passages. An antiphon, similar to a modern refrain or chorus, is a short sentence set to music, intended to reinforce the meaning of that scripture. Traditionally, an antiphon was inserted between each verse of a psalm, with the practice eventually abbreviated to singing the antiphon before and after a psalm or New Testament canticle. Vespers included the *Magnificat* canticle (Canticle of Mary, Luke 1: 46-55) in addition to the psalm of the day.

During Vespers of the last week in Advent (December 17–23), the community sang the “O Antiphons” preceding and following the *Magnificat* in anticipation of the coming Christ child. There are seven “O Antiphons,” one sung at each of the seven Vesper services during that week. Anonymous authors compiled images of the coming Messiah, drawing primarily from the Old

Testament. Each antiphon begins with “O” and a title for the coming Christ and ends with a petition, full of eloquent imagery. (NOBC, 45) The antiphons in the English versification identify the coming Incarnate God as Wisdom, Lord of Might, Root of Jesse, Key of David, Dayspring, Desire of Nations, Emmanuel,” as displayed in this table.⁶

Latin “O” and scriptural basis	English and stanza order
O Sapientia (Isa. 11: 2-3, 28-29)	st. 2 O come, thou Wisdom
O Adonai (Isa. 11:4-5; 33:22, Mic. 6:4; Exod. 19:16)	st. 3 O come, thou Lord of might
O Radix Jesse (Isa. 11:1; Isa. 52:15; Rom. 15:11)	st. 4 O come, thou Root of Jesse
O Clavis David (Isa. 9:6; 22:22; Rev. 3:7)	st. 5 O come, thou Key of David
O Oriens (Isa. 9:1; 58:8; 60: 18-20; Mal. 4:2; Jn. 8:12)	st. 6 O Come, thou Dayspring
O Rex Gentium (Isa. 2:4; 9:5; Dan. 7:14; Eph. 2:20)	st. 7 O come, Desire of Nations
O Emmanuel (Isa. 7:4; Matt. 1:23)	st. 1 O come, Emmanuel

Note that the antiphon (O Emmanuel) associated with stanza one of the modern hymn appears last, as the antiphon set’s traditional arrangement forms an acrostic. The first letters of the Latin text spell SARCORE, which when read in reverse order spell the phrase “ero cras,” meaning “I come tomorrow” or “I shall be [with you] tomorrow.” The singing of the final antiphon completes the acrostic the night before Christmas Eve, revealing its hidden message of joyful affirmation that the “Son of God” is coming. (NOBC, 45)

The petition following each invocation voices our hopes for the Incarnate God: Emmanuel to ransom us, Wisdom to guide our path, Key of David to open the heavenly home, Dayspring to dispel night death’s dark shadows, Desire of nations to bind us all in God’s unity.

The modern hymn “O Come, O Come, Emmanuel” is an adaptation of the “O Antiphons” rather than mere translation into the *vernacular**. By the 12th century, a Latin *versification** of the “Os” was in use. The 19th-century translator John Mason Neale used a *metrical** (rhythmic) version of

⁶ Felix Just, S.J., ““O Antiphons”” for the Week before Christmas,” The Roman Catholic Lectionary Website, <http://catholic-resources.org/Lectionary/Advent-O-Antiphons.htm> (accessed June 2016).

the antiphon set, adding the jubilant *refrain** as published in an eighteenth-century collection. Appearing first as “Draw nigh, Draw nigh, Emmanuel” in *Mediaeval Hymns and Sequences* (1851), a revised version was included in *Hymns Ancient and Modern* (1859–1861) with its familiar opening stanza of “O come, O come, Emmanuel.”⁷ Congregations sing the hymn to the 15th-century plainsong VENI EMMANUEL, a tune appearing in current collections as either plainsong or in four-part setting.

This hymn asserts great expectations for the coming Messiah. As we encounter the Incarnate God in this hymn, what are our expectations? Perhaps the compilers’ original order, ending with Emmanuel is best. While we may yearn for wisdom, power, vision, unity, it is God-with-Us that enables us to accomplish those things.

“From Heaven Above to Earth I Come” (“Vom Himmel Hoch da Komm Ich Her”), (c. 1534-1535), (tr. 1863, 1948)

Before churches began producing annual Christmas pageants where children assume roles of angels, shepherds, and the Holy Family, Martin Luther wrote a 15-stanza hymn for his family celebration on Christmas Eve, presumably performed by his own children and guests. (*G2GC*, # *III*) Luther, the seminal German reformer, combines “dogma with drama” in the charming domestic carol “From Heaven Above to Earth I Come.” (*PCH*, 2) Based on Luke 2:1-14, the first five stanzas are the paraphrased angel’s song, presumably sung by a child, perhaps Luther’s eldest son Hans. (*G2GC*, #*III*) Stanzas 6-14, sung by the children per Luther’s direction, relate the manger scene: finding the infant (“Who is that little lovely one? The baby Jesus, God’s own Son.” [st. 7]), welcoming the baby Jesus (“Be welcome Lord, be now our guest.” [st. 8]), and marveling at the paradox of Incarnation (“Here lies a prince and Lord of all, a king within an ass’s stall.” [st. 11]). The children’s instinctive response is to care for the baby and embrace him in their lives (st.13):

O dear Lord Jesus, for your head
now will I make the softest bed.
The chamber where this bed shall lie
is in my heart, inside of me. (*PCH*, 9)

Luther uses the stanzas sung by the children to convey the mystery of the Incarnation. In their singing, they ponder the abstract theology of **kenosis**, asking *how* and *why* the God of all creation would choose to come to earth as an infant (st. 9).

O Lord, who made and molded all,
how did you come to be so small
that you could lie upon dry grass,
the fodder of the ox and ass? (*PCH*, 9)

⁷ Mary Louise Mary Louise Bringle and Beverly A. Howard, ““O Come, O Come, Emmanuel”: Reflections on Four Seasonal Hymns for Adults,” Session 3: O Come, O Come, Emmanuel.

As only children can, they imagine a cradle suitable for the baby Jesus who is, paradoxically, the lord of all (stanzas 10-11).

And if the world were twice as wide,
with gold and precious jewels inside,
still such a cradle would not do
to hold a babe as great as you.

The velvet and the silken ruff,
for these the hay is good enough,
Here lies a prince and Lord of all
a king within an ass's stall.

The children's kenotic queries are satisfied in stanza 11 when they sing of Jesus giving up his glory to become one of them.

You wanted so to make me know
that you had let all great things go.
You had a palace in the sky;
you left it there for such as I. (*PCH*, 9)

Luther directs children and adults to sing the final stanza (st.15), repeating the angel's song:

"Glory to God in highest heaven,
Who unto us the Christ has given!"
With angels sing the Savior's birth,
A glad new year to all the earth. (*G2G*, #111)

The curious reference to the "new year" in the final line recalls the custom in Saxony, at that time, to begin the new year on Christmas Day rather than January 1. (*G2GC*, #111)

Today, congregations sing stanzas 1-3 and 14-15, which are the angel's song, our response, and the doxology.

Luther first set this text to a familiar German folk song, "Ich komm aus fremden Landen her," but later sought a tune more appropriate for a sacred text. VOM HIMMEL HOCH is the tune currently used, attributed to Luther himself.

Frequently, children offer perceptive insights in their understanding and relationship to God. This text, full of children's wonder, teaches both the **paradox** and **kenosis** of the Incarnation and reminds us that children can comprehend theological concepts through singing!

"Hark! the Herald Angles Sing" ("Hymn for Christmas Day") (1739)

It is hard to imagine the Christmas season without singing Charles Wesley's "Hark! the Herald Angels Sing." Although this Christmas hymn is not a birth narrative, it exuberantly expresses tenets of the Incarnation.

Popularly dubbed the "bard of Methodism," Wesley wrote an estimated 6500 hymns, many of which were intended for the evangelistic services he and his brother John conducted throughout Britain. Congregational singing was a vital part of the Methodist movement, with people singing their faith publicly in society meetings and evangelistic services and privately in devotions. Thus, the Wesleys enlisted hymns as part of their evangelistic efforts, to disseminate Methodist doctrine, and to enrich the spiritual life of members of the Methodist society.

Seldom does a hymn survive several centuries without some revision. Occasionally, authors self-edit their work, but more frequently textual alterations are made by hymnal committees or editors who may replace archaic words or terms with ones more appealing to modern sensibilities. Consider the original opening lines of "Hark! The Herald Angels Sing":

Hark how all the welkin rings
"Glory to the King of kings."

Singing Wesley's lines with understanding requires our knowing that a "welkin" is a literary term describing the celestial spheres as encased within a crystal dome. Imagine hearing the angel song resounding throughout the heavens celebrating the birth of the King of kings! Shortly after this hymn's publication, the English evangelist George Whitefield altered the text to the more familiar:

Hark! The herald angels sing,
"Glory to the newborn King"

"Hark! the Herald Angels Sing: Jesus the Light of the World" is a 19th-century adaptation of Wesley's text. By interpolating a repeated internal line "Jesus the Light of the World" and adding the refrain "We'll walk in the Light," the carol is transformed into a gospel song popular in African American congregations. Similar adaptations are common in the African American church, using hymn texts by Isaac Watts and Charles Wesley.

Although Whitefield's alteration may be one reason congregations continue singing this text with gusto every year, Wesley's extraordinary sonic image is lost.⁸

Typical of other Wesley texts, this hymn is replete with scriptural allusions, including the angel's message (Luke 2:14), "offspring of a Virgin's womb" (Gal. 4:4), "Prince of Peace" (Isa. 9:7), "Sun of Righteousness" (Mal. 4:2), "Mild he lays his glory by" (Phil. 2:8). After the appeal for humanity to "join the triumph of the skies" in stanza 1, Wesley lays out his theology of Incarnation by acknowledging the

⁸ Bringle and Howard, "'O Come, O Come, Emmanuel': Reflections on Four Seasonal Hymns for Adults," Session 1: Come Thou Long-Expected Jesus

eternal Christ (**hypostasis**) as “Christ, the everlasting Lord,” st. 2) the incarnate Deity “veiled in flesh” (st. 2) and “Jesus, our Immanuel” (st. 3). Wesley makes several references to **kenosis** doctrine with Christ choosing to live among us: “pleased as man with men to dwell” (st. 2) and “Mild he lays his glory by” (st. 3).

In stanza three, Wesley employs *anaphora**, effectively emphasizing why Christ chose to become human.

Born that man no more may die,
Born to raise the sons of earth,
Born to give them second birth.

Wesley penned “Hymn for Christmas Day” as ten quatrains without the refrain we sing today. The revised opening lines were added as a refrain in Tate and Brady’s *New Version of the Psalms of David* (1782). (*G2GC*, #119) When the hymn was set to the now familiar tune MENDELSSOHN, the text was truncated to three stanzas of two quatrains each. The eliminated final stanzas sing of the salvific work of Christ.

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. (*PCH*, 62)

This hymn adds to our understanding that the Incarnation involves more than the Nativity event. It encompasses a broad theological grounding in the **hypostasis** of Christ, his willingness to engage as one with humanity, and challenges us to consider why he came.

“It Came Upon the Midnight Clear” (1849)

Unique among popular Christmas carols is this text by the American Unitarian minister Edmund Hamilton Sears (1810-1876). Unique because “It Came Upon the Midnight Clear” does not emphasize the Incarnation as the Nativity event, but rather the angel’s song of peace to a warring world. It is considered one of the first social justice hymns written in America.

Published in the *Christian Register* (December 29, 1849), a Unitarian weekly newspaper, this five-stanza hymn pleads for peace when social discord plagued the United States. Historically, the nation had concluded the Mexican-American War (1846-1848) and was experiencing mounting tensions that would result in America’s Civil War. (*G2GC*, #123)

The hymn’s “glorious song of old” sung in the first stanza cites Luke 2:14: “Peace on earth, good will to men, from heaven’s all gracious King.” Sears employs *antithesis** in emphasizing his theme which contrasts humanity’s proclivity for war with the angels’ anthem of peace. One such example (st. 2) assures the singer that in spite of humanity’s clangorous “Babel sounds,” the angels’ song still sounds. Another instance juxtaposes the “noise” and “strife” of war with hearing the “love-song” the angels sing (st. 3).

During the 19th century, all five stanzas were customarily published. Beginning in the 20th century, only three or four stanzas appeared in hymnals, with the original stanza three being omitted. Lamentably, these words are as relevant in today’s world torn asunder by war, poverty, and humanity’s inhumanity as they were in mid-19th century America.

But with the woes of sin and strife
The world has suffered long;
Beneath the angel-strain have rolled
Two thousand years of wrong;
And man, at war with man, hears not
The love-song, which they bring:
O hush the noise, ye men of strife,
And hear the angels sing! (*PCH*, 327)

The pathos of stanza three lends perspective to the fourth stanza’s “glad and golden hours” promised to those bent “beneath life’s crushing load,” underscoring the Incarnation as Jesus articulated it in Matthew 11:28-30:

“Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light.” (RSV)

The final stanza sings of a future when there will be peace on earth and the angels’ song will resound throughout the world.

The text of this popular Christmas carol represents a shift in sung theological perspective about the Incarnation. While the earlier texts either dealt with creedal confessions or the Nativity event, this text prods people to consider the transformational power of the Incarnation with its gospel message.

“At the Name of Jesus” (“Ascension Day”) (1870)

Perhaps it seems unusual to include a hymn associated with Ascension Day in a group of hymns on Incarnation, but Caroline M. Noel’s text is considered a significant hymn on the great New Testament **kenosis** hymn quoted by Paul in Philippians 2: 6-11.

6 who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, 7 but emptied himself, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. 8 And being found in human form he humbled himself and became obedient unto death, even death on a cross. 9 Therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name which is above every name, 10 that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, 11 and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father. (RSV)

While the scriptures contain numerous songs and canticles, New Testament hymns tend to be creedal in nature, allowing the emerging church to sing what it believed about Christ and his witness. Believing that Jesus willingly gave up his divine nature to become human, or **kenosis**, is an important tenet of Christian faith.⁹

Noel (1817-1877), the daughter of Church of England vicar, turned to writing devotional poetry to encourage people, like herself, who experienced chronic illness. Her poems were published in *The Name of Jesus and Other Verses for the Sick and Lonely* (1861) and *The Name of Jesus and Other Poems* (1870). The poet wrote in the preface:

These verses were printed in their rough unfinished state, just as they were written down at the dictation of one who is incapacitated by weakness for the task of revision and correction.¹⁰

Such modest words to describe a great confessional hymn, which is now included in the canon of congregational song!

⁹ C. Michael Hawn, “History of Hymns: ‘At the Name of Jesus,’” <http://www.umcdiscipleship.org/resources/history-of-hymns-at-the-name-of-jesus> (accessed July 2016)

¹⁰ Bert Polman (Bertus Frederick). "Hymn interpretation: 'At the Name of Jesus,'" *The Hymn: A Journal of Congregational Song* 43, no. 3 (1992): 39.

The poet skillfully crafts an eight-stanza hymn, stressing Incarnation through the pre-incarnate Christ and his birth, ministry, death, resurrection, and ascension. Although the scriptural basis for her text is the Philippians passage, she also alludes to John 1:1-5 and Colossians 1:16. Hymnals now include only four to seven stanzas of the original text. Stanza one is a bold paraphrase of Phil. 2: 10-11, which frames the hymn.

At the name of Jesus every knee shall bow,
Every tongue confess him, King of glory now;
'tis the Father's pleasure we should call him Lord,
who from the beginning was the mighty Word. (*PCH*, 269)

Stanza two, seldom printed, elegantly echoes John 1:1-5 and parts of the Nicene Creed affirming Christ as co-eternal with God:

Mighty and mysterious in the highest height,
God from everlasting, very Light of light:
in the Father's bosom with the Spirit blest,
love in love eternal, rest, in perfect rest. (*PCH*, 269)

Noel vividly describes Christ as an agent in creation in stanza three.

At his voice creation sprang at once to light,
all the angel voices, all the hosts of light,
throne and dominations, stars upon their way,
all the heavenly orders in their great array. (*PCH*, 269)

The original fourth and fifth stanzas appear universally in hymnals, resuming the **kenosis** theology of Christ's self-emptying. This bold text carries no suggestion of a **docetic** or **gnostic** Christ who only appeared to be human, but rather a human who bore the pain and scourge of death.

Humbled for a season, to receive a name
from the lips of sinners, unto whom he came;
faithfully he bore it spotless to the last,
brought it back victorious when from death he passed.

Bore it up triumphant, with its human light,
through all ranks of creatures, to the central height,
to the throne of Godhead, to the Father's breast,
filled it with the glory of that perfect rest. (*PCH*, 269)

Stanzas six and seven urge us to name this Jesus with "love as strong as death," tempered by "awe and wonder, and with bated breath," as we worship and trust him, and to acquiesce to his will that "will enfold you in its light and power."

The final stanza sings of the return of Jesus and the glorious reign of Christ. Many current

hymnals publish the first line with broader, more inclusive opening word, replacing “Brothers” with “Christians.” The hymn closes as it opened with “hearts confess him King of glory now.”

Brothers, this Lord Jesus shall return again,
with his Father’s glory, with his angel-train;
for all wreaths of empire meet upon his brow
and our hearts confess him King of glory now. (*PCH*, 269)

By tracing events in Christ’s life and referring to the second coming, Noel’s text expands earlier **kenosis** themes in “Of the Father’s Love Begotten” and “From Heaven Above to Earth I Come.”

“In the Bleak Midwinter” (“A Christmas Carol”) (c. 1872)

From the Victorian Age (1837-1901) comes a devotional poem written by Christina Rossetti, a prominent English poet. “In the Bleak Midwinter” was first published in *Scribners Magazine* (1872), an American periodical, and later appeared in a collection of Rossetti’s poems. This poem became a congregational song after Gustav Holst wrote the tune CRANHAM specifically for this text for publication in *Hymns Ancient and Modern* (1906). Although few of Rossetti’s poems evolved into hymns, noted hymnologist Erik Routley held her work in high esteem, describing Rossetti’s texts as displaying “subtle variety” and a “special facility in writing short epigrammatic poems of true lyric quality” with “profound evangelical diction.” (*PCH*, 259)

Like other English-language carols, the Nativity is imagined in terms of northern climates with frost, snow, and bitter cold setting the scene.¹¹ Such images are contextual, rendering the Nativity more immediate and personal. Indeed, stanza one of this text receives criticism for such imagery, but the frozen landscape is not literal; it symbolizes a moral winter.¹² Rossetti masterfully paints a dismal scene where we hear howling wind, feel cold so bitter it has frozen earth and water, and see endless drifts.

In the bleak midwinter, frosty
wind made moan,
earth stood hard as iron, water
like a stone;
snow had fallen, snow on snow,
snow on snow, in the bleak
midwinter, long ago. (*PCH*, 270)

How is Christ’s birth sung about in other parts of the world? “Carol Our Christmas,” by New Zealand hymn writer Shirley Erena Murray, presents the Incarnation in sharp contrast to “In the Bleak Midwinter.” Her text describes a southern hemisphere Christmas as “upside-down” where “snow is not falling, and trees are not bare.” Warm sunshine and beaches have their allure. People “sing a nativity summer can reach!”

¹¹ Carols such as “The Snow Lay on the Ground,” “People, Look East,” “’Twas in the Moon of Wintertime.”

¹² Mary Louise Bringle and Beverly A. Howard, ““O Come, O Come, Emmanuel’: Reflections on Four Seasonal Hymns for Adults,” Session 4: In the Bleak Midwinter, 2015, p. 2. www.TheThoughtfulChristian.com (accessed June 2016)

“Frozen ground” is neither a conducive environment for cultivating plants nor for nurturing spiritual life. We speak of hard, cold, and stony hearts as people who lack compassion or mercy. This is the bleak world into which Jesus came.

In stanza two, Rosetti juxtaposes opposing images (*antithesis**) of God Incarnate, reminding us that our transcendent God, unconfined by the cosmos, chooses to become human, not as a powerful ruler, but as a vulnerable infant.¹³

Our God, heaven cannot hold him, nor earth sustain;
Heaven and earth shall flee away when he comes to reign:
In the bleak midwinter a stable-place sufficed
the Lord God Almighty—Jesus Christ. (*PCH*, 270)

The oft omitted third stanza intimately portrays the simple human needs of the Christ-child: nourishment and a resting place.

Enough for him whom cherubim worship night and day,
a breastful of milk and a mangerful of hay;
enough for him whom angels fall down before,
the ox and ass and camel which adore. (*PCH*, 270)

Stanza four reiterates incarnational aspects of stanza three with the adoration of angels, archangels, cherubim, and seraphim replaced by the tender kiss of the baby’s loving human mother.

Angels and archangels may have gathered there,
Cherubim and seraphim thronged the air;
But only his mother in her maiden bliss
Worshiped the Beloved with a kiss. (*PCH*, 270)

The final stanza changes voice from objective narrative to first person, pondering the adoration bestowed by the heavenly host and mother Mary to what we can offer the Christ-child. While the gifts of shepherds and magi certainly have their place, we can give our hearts.

What can I give him, poor as I am?
If I were a shepherd I would bring a lamb;
if I were a wise man I would do my part,
yet what I can, I give him—give my heart. (*PCH*, 270)

¹³ Mary Louise Bringle and Beverly A. Howard, Session 4: In the Bleak Midwinter, p. 3.

In singing this Incarnation text, we are confronted with the basic truth that simple human needs of food, shelter, and a mother's love were sufficient for the King of Heaven. Through this infant, God reveals what is important: a self-giving love.

“Go Tell It on the Mountain” (“Christmas Plantation Song”) (1909, 1940)

Following the Civil War, audiences throughout north America and Europe encountered a new type of song: the spiritual. In the early 1870s, the Fisk Jubilee Singers, a student choral ensemble from Fisk University, embarked on an 18-month concert tour to raise funds for their financially beleaguered college. Their repertoire included hymns, folk songs, and art songs; however, it was the spirituals that captivated audiences.¹⁴ Prior to this time, these texts had only been sung by slaves on plantations as a catharsis for their sorrow, grief, and *faith*. Understandably, some students expressed reluctance to perform these songs because of their strong association with slavery and the institution they represented. Although The Fisk Jubilee Singers' intent was to save their university, they fortuitously saved the spiritual.

Congregations can now sing from a vast repertoire of spirituals because of the efforts of early collectors such as John Wesley Work II (1872-1925) and his brother Frederick Jerome Work (1878-1942). The brothers were graduates and employees of Fisk University where Work II directed the Fisk Jubilee Singers and Frederick transcribed, arranged and composed spirituals intended for preservation and publication. They published *New Jubilee Songs as Sung by the Fisk University Singers* (1901) and *New Jubilee Songs and Folk Songs of the American Negro* (1907).¹⁵

“Go, Tell It on the Mountain,” arranged by John Work II, has evolved from the oral tradition of plantation songs to its current place in the Christmas canon. The spiritual begins its published life in *Religious Folk Songs of The Negro, as Sung on The Plantations* (1909) under the title “Christmas Plantation Song” and printed in slave dialect. Although the refrain survives the oral tradition unchanged, the original stanzas appear to be lost to oral history. (CUMH, 360) Appearing in the 1909 publication, the following stanzas are in the voice of one seeking guidance from the Lord and who accepts appointment as a “watchman.” In ancient cultures a watchman was stationed on a tower to alert the community to danger. Here, watchman is used as a *metaphor** for a prophet, one who proclaims Christ.

When I was a seeker
I sought both night and day.

¹⁴ Eileen Guenther, *In Their Own Words: Slave Life and the Power of Spirituals* (St. Louis: MorningStar Music Publishers, 2016), 337.

¹⁵ Clark Kimberling, "Three Generations of Works and Their Contributions to Congregational Singing." *The Hymn: A Journal of Congregational Song* 65.3 (2014), 25.

I ask de Lord to help me,
An' He show me de way.

He made me a watchman
Upon the city wall,
An' if I am a Christian
I am the least of all.

Refrain:

Go tell it on de mountain,
Over de hills an' everywhere.
God tell it on de mountain,
Dat Jesus Christ is born.

Another stanza, added by R. Nathaniel Dett (1882-1943), appeared in *Religious Folk-Songs of the Negro As Sung At Hampton Institute* (1927).

If you cannot sing like Angels,
If you cannot pray like Paul,
You can tell the love of Jesus,
You can say he died for all.

In 1940, the spiritual appeared in *American Negro Songs and Spirituals* with now-familiar new stanzas, supplied by Work II, that focus on the birth narrative. (Luke 2:8-10).

While shepherds kept their watching o'er
silent flocks by night
Behold through out the heavens there
shone a holy light.

The shepherds feared and trembled, when lo! above the earth
rang out the Angel course that hailed our Saviors birth...

Down in a lowly manger the humble Christ was born...
And God sent us salvation that blessed Christmas morn.¹⁶

According to James Weldon Johnson (1871-1938), an early editor of spiritual collections, there are relatively few spirituals devoted to the birth of Jesus as compared to other

From *Religious Folk Songs of The Negro, as Sung on The Plantations* (1909)

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Go Tell it on de Mountain
(CHRISTMAS PLANTATION SONG)

The musical score is written in 4/4 time with a key signature of one flat (Bb). It features a melody line and a bass line. The lyrics are as follows:

1. When I was a seek-er I sought both night an' day,
2. He made me a watch-man Up-on a cit-y wall,
I ask' de Lord to help me, An' He show' me de
An' if I am a chris-tian, I am de least of

CHORUS
way..... Go tell it on de moun-tain,
all.....

O-ver de hills an' er-er-y-where; Go
tell it on de moun-tain, Dat Je-sus Christ is born.

¹⁶ Clark Kimberling, "Three Generations of Works and Their Contributions to Congregational Singing." *The Hymn: A Journal of Congregational Song* 65.3 (2014), 11.

topics. Johnson asserted that the slaves needed the image of Jesus as a powerful king rather than a vulnerable infant.¹⁷ What did spirituals with a Christmas theme mean for slaves? James H. Cone, noted African American theologian, eloquently writes of the slave's understanding of Incarnation theology.

Although the Son is divine, he is also human. He was born of "sister Mary" in Bethlehem, and "everytime the baby cried, she'd a-rocked Him in the weary land." The spirituals tell us of Jesus' life on earth, and of his rejection and death on the cross. There is no suggestion of a docetic or gnostic Christ who only appeared to be human. His suffering was real and his pain was great. He died the death of a natural man...

According to the spirituals, the meaning of Jesus' birth, life, death, and resurrection is found in his identity *with the poor*, the blind, and the sick. He has come to set them free, to restore their wholeness. He is the conquering King and the crucified Lord who has come to bring peace and justice to the dispossessed of the land. That was why the slaves wanted to

Go tell it on de mountain,
Over de hills an everywhere.
God tell it on de mountain,
Dat Jesus Christ is born.¹⁸

Whether we sing this spiritual as seekers, sinners, or Nativity storytellers, it is the boisterous refrain, with its allusion to Matthew 28:19, compelling us to sing the gospel news of the Incarnation throughout the world.

"Tell Out My Soul" (1961)

No study of Incarnational congregational song would be complete without a *Magnificat*, Mary's canticle found in Luke 1: 46-55. This text is an historic part of the church's liturgy since it was first sung as plainsong during the Vespers office. Although numerous notable composers from the 14th-20th centuries composed choral settings of the text, it is not until the 20th century that hymn writers create metrical paraphrases of this text for congregational singing.

"Tell Out, My Soul," by British hymn writer Timothy Dudley-Smith (1926-), is an effective *paraphrase** of the scripture that appears in many hymnals. The hymn was published in the 1965 *Anglican Hymn Book* and the following year in *Youth Praise*. Dudley-Smith found inspiration in reading a new translation of the Luke passage in the *The New English Bible*. He writes:

¹⁷ Eileen Guenther, *In Their Own Words: Slave Life and the Power of Spirituals*, 376.

¹⁸ James H. Cone, *The Spirituals and the Blues: An Interpretation* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1972, 1992), 49.

I did not think of myself . . . as having in any way the gifts of a hymn-writer when in May 1961 I jotted down a set of verses, beginning "Tell out, my soul, the greatness of the Lord." I was reading a review copy of the *New English Bible New Testament*, in which that line appears exactly as I have put it above; I saw in it the first line of a poem, and speedily wrote the rest.¹⁹

"Tell out, my soul," a bold opening *apostrophe**, serves as a unifying proclamation for all four stanzas. Each stanza's opening line *itemizes** and elaborates on an attribute worthy of our praise: the greatness of the Lord (st. 1), his name (st. 2), his might (st. 3), and his word (st. 4).

Tell out, my soul, the greatness of the Lord!
Unnumbered blessings give my spirit voice;
tender to me the promise of his word;
in God my Savior shall my heart rejoice.

Tell out, my soul, the greatness of his name!
Make known his might, the deeds his arm has done;
his mercy sure, from age to age the same;
his holy name—the Lord, the Mighty One.

Tell out, my soul, the greatness of his might!
Powers and dominions lay their glory by.
Proud hearts and stubborn wills are put to flight,
the hungry fed, the humble lifted high.

Tell out, my soul, the glories of his word!
Firm is his promise, and his mercy sure.
Tell out, my soul, the greatness of the Lord
to children's children and forevermore! (*PCH*, 408)

Historically, this setting of the *Magnificat* is noteworthy as it was a product of the British *hymn explosion** of the 1960s. As one of Dudley-Smith's most popular texts, it has been published in over 260 hymnals and supplements and has inspired other hymn writers to emulate his style.²⁰ A striking difference between this paraphrase of the *Magnificat* and others is the strength the text exudes. Many settings are more contemplative and moderate the social justice inferences of this scripture. As an Incarnation hymn, it represents the fulfillment of Old Testament prophecy of a promised Messiah and envisions a world radically changed by that Messiah.

¹⁹ "Tell Out My Soul," http://www.hymnary.org/text/tell_out_my_soul_the_greatness_of_the_lo (accessed August 2016)

²⁰ Christopher Idle, "Tell out, my soul, the greatness of the Lord." *The Canterbury Dictionary of Hymnology*. Canterbury Press. Web. <http://www.hymnology.co.uk/t/tell-out,-my-soul,-the-greatness-of-the-lord> (accessed July 2016).

“Sing of God Made Manifest” (1990)

This Epiphany hymn by Carl Daw advances our understanding of Incarnation as we sing about four significant events in which Christ’s status as “God’s Anointed One” is clearly and visibly revealed. (*G2GC*, 163) As in Dudley-Smith’s previous hymn, “Tell Out, My Soul,” Daw effectively employs *itemization**, connecting the adoration of the Magi, the baptism of Jesus, the wedding at Cana, and the Transfiguration as manifestations of God Incarnate.

The focus of the first stanza is the visit of the Magi as recounted in Matthew 2: 1-12. In this stanza, the poet portrays Jesus as a healthy and happy child, one who has grown beyond the vulnerable infant depicted in many Christmas carols. Although God Incarnate is first seen as an infant, it is the adoration and gifts offered by the Magi that reveal this Child as both human and divine, God and king. The prophetic meaning of the gifts listed in the final line of this stanza hint at this infant’s future. Myrrh, a burial ointment, frankincense, an incense used by priests, and gold, a gift for a king, mirror Christ’s human death, his divine nature, and his reign as king of heaven.

Sing of God made manifest in a child robust and blest,
to whose home in Bethlehem where a star had guided them,
magi came and gifts unbound, signs mysterious and profound:
myrrh and frankincense and gold grave and God and king foretold. (*G2G*, #156)

The Baptism of Jesus is the subject of the second stanza, relating the event as told in Matthew 3: 13-17, Mark 9: 1-11, Luke 3:21-22, John 1:29-34. In presenting himself for baptism, Jesus participated in a traditional cleansing ritual practiced by the Hebrews. His divine nature is revealed in the dual divine signs of the Spirit descending as a dove and God’s voice affirming the “Anointed One” as the beloved son.

Sing of God made manifest when at Jordan John confessed,
“I should be baptized by you, but your bidding I will do.”
Then from Heaven a double sign—dove-like Spirit, voice divine—
Hailed the true Anointed One: “This is my beloved Son.” (*G2G*, #156)

Christ’s miracles and ministry are reviewed in stanza three, beginning with the Wedding at Cana. The Gospel of John (John 2:1-11) regards the turning water into wine as the first sign of Christ’s manifestation. The remainder of the stanza refers to how his love was demonstrated in his ministry.

Sing of God made manifest when Christ came as a wedding guest
and at Cana gave a sign, turning water into wine;
further still was love revealed as he taught, forgave, and healed,
bringing light and life to all who would listen to God’s call. (*G2G*, #156)

Stanza four recounts the Transfiguration when Peter, James, and John glimpse Christ's manifested glory. (Matthew 17: 1-9, Mark 9: 2-9, Luke 9: 28-36). With the certainty of Jesus's impending death, this final stanza brings us full circle from the prophecy of the grave in the first stanza.

Sing of God made manifest on the cloud-capped mountain's crest,
where the law and prophets waned so that Christ alone remained:
glimpse of glory, pledge of grace, given as Jesus set his face
towards the waiting cross and grave, sign of hope that God would save. (G2G, #156)

There are relatively few hymns dealing with any one of these events, much less all four. Daw is sensitive to the differing understandings of Epiphany between the Western and Eastern branches of Christianity. Western Christianity considers the Feast of the Epiphany (January 6) as the central manifestation of the Messiah to the Gentiles; whereas, Eastern Christianity regards the Baptism of Jesus as one of the primary occasions of Christ's manifestation and the initial revelation of the Trinity. (G2GC, 163)

Singing this hymn, we view the Incarnation traversing the manger to the mountain with glimpses of Christ as beloved son, miracle-worker, teacher, and healer.

“We Meet You, O Christ” (“The Tree Springs to Life”) (1968, 1999)

Fred Kaan (1929-2009), a Dutch-born minister in the United Reformed Church, began writing hymns for his congregation in Plymouth, England. When he embarked on his hymn-writing journey in the 1960s, both Protestant and Roman branches of the church were seeking a new song. He became an integral hymnist in the post-World War II *hymn explosion**. Kaan once commented that his motivation sprang from two sources: inspiration from his biblical study and frustration in not being able to find the right text in existing hymnals for use in worship.²¹

“We meet You, O Christ” was inspired by a script that Kaan wrote for a 1966 BBC television program “Seeing and Believing.” It was broadcast on the 25th anniversary of the destruction of the city of Plymouth, England in a German air raid. The title of the program was “The Tree Springs to Life,” based on a photograph of the ruins of St. Andrew's Church which showed an apple tree growing out of the rubble that was once church's nave. Kaan wrote this hymn, titled after the photograph, which was sung on the broadcast and later published in *Pilgrim Praise* (1968). (CUMH, 678)

Singing the Incarnation in this hymn reminds us that God is not remote, but shared in our humanity, and is present now in our lives. Christ clearly states in Matthew 25:31-40 that

²¹ Fred Kaan, “My Hymn-writing Journey,” *The Hymn: A Journal of Congregational Song* 47.3 (1996), 15.

whenever we feed the hungry, clothe the naked, care for the sick, show hospitality to the stranger, we are doing all of these things to Christ. In stanza one, we encounter Christ in people both humble and learned, living in wealth or poverty.

We meet You, O Christ, in many a guise:
Your image we see in simple and wise.
You live in a palace, exist in a shack.
We see You, the gardener, a tree on Your back.

In stanza two, we engage Christ as neighbors near and far.

In millions alive, away and abroad;
Involved in our life You live down the road.
Imprisoned in systems, You long to be free.
We see You, Lord Jesus, still bearing Your tree.

In stanza three we see Christ suffering, taking a stand alongside us, as we pursue justice in our world.

We hear You, O Christ, in agony cry.
For freedom You march, in riots You die.
Your face in the papers we read and we see.
The tree must be planted by human decree.

In stanza four, we mourn Christ's ultimate sacrifice, death; and miraculously, from this death springs hope and new life, like the apple tree pushing its way up through the rubble at St. Andrew's Church.

You choose to be made at one with the earth;
The dark of the grave prepares for Your birth.
Your death is Your rising, creative Your word:
The tree springs to life and our hope is restored.

Kaan skillfully uses the image of a tree, a traditional symbol of the cross, to conclude each of the four stanzas. He captures our imagination with visualizing the Incarnate Christ as a gardener shouldering a tree throughout his life (stanzas 1-2), in death (stanza 3) and miraculous resurrection (stanza 4).

Kaan firmly believed society, community, and individual people matter immensely, not only because all were created by God, but because Christ chose to become fully human.

And so, throughout my hymn-writer's life I have poured my concern and commitment into the crafting of a number of texts that focus on the earth and the city, on human, society, on Christ among us in the here-and-now, sharing our humanity, on justice and

life in all its fullness for all women, men, and children, on the pursuit of human rights for everyone.²²

“We Meet You, O Christ” illustrates that the Incarnation is more expansive than the birth event, encompassing all of Christ’s life, ministry, death and resurrection. Other hymns and carols applying a broader concept of Incarnation include “O Love, How Deep,” “I Danced in the Morning” [“Lord of the Dance”], “O Sing a Song of Bethlehem,” and “Tomorrow Shall be My Dancing Day.”

“Um menino” (“A Child”) (1987, tr. 1998)

Sharing hymns across linguistic and cultural boundaries has enriched the church worldwide. One Incarnation hymn from Brazil invites us to see the Child of God in an unwanted street child, contextualizing the Incarnation. Simei Monteiro (b. 1943), a Methodist seminary professor wrote “Um Menino” as part of a collection of hymns describing the desperate plight of Brazilian children. The text with her tune appeared in *Canções de Rua* [Songs of the Street] (1992). As a tunesmith, she draws on the rhythms and modal melodies of Brazil, in this instance a *samba**.²³

Refrain:

Look in the face of children everywhere
and see a child of God, a gift of love.
Find in the face of every newborn child
the Son of God, the Savior of the world.

He’s the Word who has come to all people,
lives among us in grace and truth.
He’s the Light that illumines our history;
in his face shines the glory of God!

The invisible God is now with us,
who created from nothing all life.
He’s the child who was born to bring justice
and renew us with hope and with peace.

He is tiny, an infant so fragile,
yet he fills the whole world with his love.
He is human, a child born so humble,
Yet he brings us the fullness of life. (*PCH*, 671)

Monteiro’s text is replete with scriptural and doctrinal allusions. Stanza 1 references John 1: 1-5.

²² Fred Kaan, “My Hymn-writing Journey,” 16.

²³ C. Michael Hawn, *New Songs of Celebration Render* (Chicago: GIA, 2013), 277.

The first two lines of stanza 2 echo portions of the Nicene Creed:

And in one Lord Jesus Christ, the only Son of God,
begotten from the Father before all ages,
God from God, Light from Light,
true God from true God, begotten, not made;
of the same essence as the Father.
Through him all things were made.

Stanza three presents an excellent of *paradox** with the mystery of a fragile infant's ability to fill our world with love.

Recalling earlier doctrines of Incarnation, we sing of Christ who was actively engaged at Creation and became human to live among us to show us God. We sing of a Savior who leads us into full lives of hope and justice.

“like a child” (1993)

Since the last half of the 20th century, hymnwriters have progressively brought justice issues into sharp focus. Daniel Charles Damon (b. 1955), a Methodist minister, jazz musician, and respected hymn text and tune writer, raises awareness of the needs of children by portraying Jesus as coming to us like a child with ragged clothes and dirty feet.²⁴

Several textual elements immediately capture our attention. Damon wrote the poem as printed here in six stanzas of seven three-syllable lines. When paired with its tune, composed by Damon, the hymn appears in 3 four-line stanzas.

like a child
love would send
to reveal
and to mend,
like a child
and a friend,
Jesus comes

like a child
we may find
claiming heart
soul and mind,
like a child
strong and kind,

²⁴ Dan Damon and Eileen Johnson, “A Cry for Justice in Hymnody,” *The Hymn: A Journal of Congregational Song*, Vol. 61 no.4 (Autumn 2010), 9.

Jesus comes

like a child
we will meet,
ragged clothes,
dirty feet,
like a child
on the street,
Jesus comes

like a child
we once knew
coming back
into view,
like a child
born anew,
Jesus comes

like a child
born to pray
and to show
us the way,
like a child
here to stay,
Jesus comes

like a child
we receive
all that love
can conceive,
like a child
we believe
Jesus comes²⁵

Printed in its poetic form, the lines are indented, symbolizing Christ descending to earth as on stair steps.²⁶

²⁵ Routley and Richardson, *A Panorama of Christian Hymnody*, 595.

²⁶ C. Michael Hawn, "History of Hymns: like a child"
<https://www.umcdiscipleship.org/resources/history-of-hymns-like-a-child> (accessed January 2017)

Visually, the text lacks capitalization and displays minimal punctuation, echoing the poetic style of e e cummings. Damon comments on his stylistic choice:

I was being playful years ago when I left off the upper case letters except for the name of Jesus. I liked making that name stand out strong. I had never tried writing with such short lines. It was fun and easy to write. Shirley [Erena] Murray wrote at the time that she was surprised to find such depth of meaning in the short lines.²⁷

Damon uses the *simile** “like a child” twelve times in this poem. Lacking endstops such as semicolons or periods, these short lines flow seamlessly from line to line and verse to verse. The resulting *enjambment** prompts the singer to move ahead, probing beneath the surface of this seemingly simple message. Unfortunately, hymnal editors have succumbed to the temptation to add periods at the ends of the stanzas, obscuring the unique beauty and meaning of this text.

Damon crafts an exquisite image of God Incarnate coming as a child; as a friend, strong and kind; and as a street child. Ostensibly, we see Christ in other children. However, we also find ourselves in these lines. Stanza one reminds us that it was God’s extravagant love that sent a Messiah to heal humanity’s brokenness. What new parent has not experienced the overwhelming, all-consuming obsession with a newborn child, as tenderly expressed in stanza two? Stanza three reminds us that while many children live in poverty, Jesus is there. Stanza four is thought provoking. Does the “child we once knew” embody our loss of innocence or childlike faith? Does Jesus bring us new birth?

The lack of a period at the end of each stanza leads us directly into the next image of a child. Lacking a period at the end of the final stanza, gives us hope the Jesus will continue coming into our world. In the words of the author,

I have always loved the passage that says, “if you do it to the least of these, you do it to me.” I think that is the core message of the text. Jesus still comes to us like a poor child born into this hurting world. How will we respond?²⁸

This hymn has some tantalizing connections with “O Come, O Come, Emmanuel.” Those early Christians anticipated Jesus coming in many guises, offering a petition of each: Wisdom, God of Might, Rod of Jesse, Key of David, Dayspring, and Emmanuel. “like a child” also envisions God Incarnate in various guises, but begs the question, “How will we respond to Jesus coming into our world, today?”

Conclusion

The hymns introduced in this chapter span centuries and were created for diverse purposes:

²⁷ Dan Damon, e-mail message to author, October 17, 2016

²⁸ Dan Damon, e-mail message to author, October 17, 2016

monastic services, private/family devotionals, and corporate worship. The texts share strong biblical references, including Old Testament images and messianic prophecies: “O Come, O Come, Emmanuel,” “Hark! The Herald Angels Sing,” “Tell Out, My Soul.” As understanding of **paradox**, **hypostasis** and **kenosis** unfolds in these Incarnation hymns, some include birth narratives from Luke 2 and John 1 (“From Heaven Above to Earth I Come,” “In the Bleak Midwinter,” “Go, Tell It on the Mountain.” Other texts trace Christ’s activity and interaction with humanity such as “Sing of God Made Manifest.” Several hymns are bold creedal confessions of **hypostasis** and **kenosis** theology: “Of the Father’s Love Begotten” and “At the Name of Jesus.” Other hymns allude to tenets in the Nicene Creed: “Of the Father’s Love Begotten,” and “Um Menino.” Most texts from the latter 20th century prod us to consider the Incarnation in terms of how we live out Christ’s witness of God’s love: “We Meet You, O Christ,” “Um Menino,” “like a child.”

Hymns that sing the Incarnation encompass more than the birth narrative, which emerges as an idolized theme in many Christmas carols. The hymns in this chapter offer substantive theology which explores the mystery and paradox of Jesus’s birth, his life, and death. Ultimately, hymn writers understand the Incarnation as an imperative to engage in mission, recognizing Christ in the here-and-now.

Abbreviations:

CUMH *Companion to the United Methodist Hymnal*

NOBC *New Oxford Book of Carols*

G2G *Glory to God*

G2GC *Glory to God Companion*

PCH *A Panorama of Christian Hymnody*

RSV *Revised Standard Version*

Additional Hymns on Incarnation Theme

A Stable Lamp is Lighted

As Joseph Lay in Troubled Sleep

Canticle of the Turning

Carol Our Christmas

Come, Thou Long Expected Jesus

From a Distant Home

He Came Down

I Danced in the Morning

Jesus Entered Egypt

Let All Mortal Flesh

Lo, How a Rose E’er Blooming

Love came down at Christmas

My Soul Cries Out

Now the Heavens start to whisper

O Love, How Deep, How Broad How High

O Sing a Song of Bethlehem

Once in Royal David's City
People, Look East
Silence! Frenzied, Unclean Spirit
Swiftly Pass the Clouds of Glory
The Snow Lay on the Ground
'Twas in the moon of wintertime
You Walk Along Our Shoreline
What is the world like
When a Poor One (Cuando el Pobre)

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