

The “O Antiphons”

O Sapientia (Wisdom from on high) — Dec. 17

Isaiah 11:2 (see also 28:29) And the Spirit of the LORD shall rest upon him, the Spirit of wisdom and understanding, the Spirit of counsel and might, the Spirit of knowledge and the fear of the LORD.

1 Corinthians 1:30 And because of him you are in Christ Jesus, who became to us wisdom from God...

O Wisdom, who proceeds from the mouth of the Most High,
reaching out mightily from end to end,
and sweetly arranging all things:
Come to teach us the way of prudence.

O come, Thou Wisdom from on high,
Who ordered all things mightily;
To us the path of knowledge show,
And cause us in her ways to go.

O Adonai (Lord) — December 18

Isaiah 11:3-5 He shall not judge by what his eyes see, or decide disputes by what his ears hear, but with righteousness he shall judge the poor, and decide with equity for the meek of the earth; and he shall strike the earth with the rod of his mouth, and with the breath of his lips he shall kill the wicked.

Righteousness shall be the belt of his waist, and faithfulness the belt of his loins.

Isaiah 33:22 For the LORD is our judge; the LORD is our lawgiver; the LORD is our king; he will save us.

Matthew 2:6 And you, O Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for from you shall come a ruler who will shepherd my people Israel.

O Mighty Lord, and leader of the house of Israel,
who appeared to Moses in the burning bush,
and on Sinai gave him the law:
Come to redeem us with outstretched arm.

O come, O come, Thou Lord of Might!
Who to Thy tribes on Sinai's height,
In ancient times did give the law,
In cloud and majesty and awe.

O Radix Jesse (Root of Jesse) — December 19

Isaiah 11:1, 10 (see also 45:14; 52:15) There shall come forth a shoot from the stump of Jesse, and a branch from his roots shall bear fruit. ... In that day the root of Jesse, who shall stand as a signal for the peoples—of him shall the nations inquire, and his resting place shall be glorious.

Romans 15:8-12 (see also Revelation 5:5) For I tell you that Christ became a servant to the circumcised to show God's truthfulness, in order to confirm the promises given to the patriarchs, and in order that the Gentiles might glorify God for his mercy. ... And again Isaiah says, "The root of Jesse will come, even he who arises to rule the Gentiles; in him will the Gentiles hope."

O Root of Jesse, who stands as a sign for the people,
kings stand silent in your presence,
whom the nations will worship:
Come to set us free, and delay no longer.

O come, Thou Root of Jesse, free
Thine own from Satan's tyranny;
From depths of hell Thy people save,
And give them victory o'er the grave.

O Clavis David (Key of David) — December 20

Isaiah 22:22 And I will place on his shoulder the key of the house of David. He shall open, and none shall shut; and he shall shut, and none shall open.

Isaiah 42:6-7 I am the LORD; I have called you in righteousness; I will take you by the hand and keep you; I will give you as a covenant for the people, a light for the nations, to open the eyes that are blind, to bring out the prisoners from the dungeon, from the prison those who sit in darkness.

Isaiah 9:7 Of the increase of his government and of peace there will be no end, on the throne of David and over his kingdom, to establish it and to uphold it with justice and with righteousness from this time forth and forevermore. The zeal of the LORD of hosts will do this.

Revelation 3:7 And to the angel of the church in Philadelphia write: "The words of the holy one, the true one, who has the key of David, who opens and no one will shut, who shuts and no one opens."

O Key of David, and scepter of the house of Israel,
you open, and no one shuts, you shut, and no one opens:
Come, and lead the prisoner from jail, seated in darkness
and in the shadow of death.

O come, Thou Key of David, come,
And open wide our heavenly home.
Make safe the way that leads on high,
And close the path to misery.

The O Antiphons — History and Devotional Use

O Oriens (Rising Sun, Dayspring, Light from the East) - Dec 21

Isaiah 9:2 The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who dwelt in a land of deep darkness, on them has light shone.

Isaiah 60:1 Arise, shine, for your light has come, and the glory of the LORD has risen upon you. For behold, darkness shall cover the earth, and thick darkness the peoples; but the LORD will arise upon you, and his glory will be seen upon you.

Malachi 4:2 But for you who fear my name, the sun of righteousness shall rise with healing in its wings.

Luke 1:78-79 ...the sunrise shall visit us from on high to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace.

O Rising Sun,
splendor of eternal light, and sun of justice:
Come, and shine on those, seated in darkness
and in the shadow of death.

O come, Thou Dayspring, come and cheer
Our spirits by Thine Advent here;
Disperse the gloomy clouds of night
And death's dark shadows put to flight.

O Rex Gentium (King of the Nations) — Dec 22

Isaiah 9:6 For to us a child is born, to us a son is given; and the government shall be upon his shoulder, and his name shall be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.

Isaiah 2:4 He shall judge between the nations, and shall decide disputes for many peoples; and they shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war anymore.

Haggai 2:7 (KJV) And I will shake all nations, and the desire of all nations shall come: and I will fill this house with glory, saith the LORD of hosts.

Isaiah 28:16 thus says the Lord GOD, "Behold, I am the one who has laid as a foundation in Zion, a stone, a tested stone, a precious cornerstone, of a sure foundation: 'Whoever believes will not be in haste.'"

Isaiah 64:8 But now, O LORD, you are our Father; we are the clay, and you are our potter; we are all the work of your hand.

Mark 12:10 (see also Psalm 118:22; Matthew 21:42; Luke 20:17; Acts 4:11; 1 Peter 2:4-8) "Have you not read this Scripture: 'The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone...'"

Ephesians 2:14-20 He himself is our peace, who has made us both one and has broken down in his flesh the dividing wall of hostility...you are fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God, built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone...

Revelation 15:3 And they sing the song of Moses, the servant of God, and the song of the Lamb, saying, "Great and amazing are your deeds, O Lord God the Almighty! Just and true are your ways, O King of the nations!"

O King of the Nations, and the one they desired,
keystone, who makes both peoples one:
Come and save mankind,
whom you shaped from the mud.

O come, Desire of nations, bind,
All peoples in one heart and mind;
Bid envy, strife and quarrels cease;
Fill the whole world with heaven's peace.

O Emmanuel (God with Us) — Dec 23

Isaiah 7:14 Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign. Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and shall call his name Immanuel.

Matthew 1:21 "She will bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins." All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had spoken by the prophet: "Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall call his name Immanuel" (which means, God with us).

O Emmanuel, our king and lawgiver,
the one awaited by the Gentiles, and their Savior:
Come to save us, Lord our God.

O come, O come, Emmanuel!
And ransom captive Israel;
That mourns in lonely exile here,
Until the Son of God appear.

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

The O Antiphons — History and Devotional Use

I love Christmas carols. I love the tradition, the nostalgia, the familiarity. Most of all, I love the way a good carol points us to who Jesus Christ came to be and who he is for us.

One of my favorites is “O Come, O Come, Emmanuel.” This carol has its origins in a set of seven Latin antiphons known as “The O Antiphons” or “The Great Antiphons.” The verses may have originated as early as the 6th century. They were used in the Benedictine Abbey, being recited by leaders in descending order before presenting gifts to members of the community. The O Antiphons were shaped into Latin verse in the 12th century.

John Mason Neale translated antiphons 2, 3, 4, 5, and 7 into English for his *Mediaeval Hymns* (1851), titled “Draw nigh, draw nigh, Emmanuel.” His verses were altered in *Hymns Ancient and Modern* (1861) Henry Sloane Coffin also translated the verses for *Hymns of the Kingdom of God* (1916). (The verses in the attached document use Neale’s translation.)

The traditional tune, “VENI EMMANUEL,” is a 15th-century processional, first paired with Neale’s translation in *The Hymnal Noted* (1854, edited by J.M. Neale and Thomas Helmore).

Each antiphon begins with the letter “O,” followed by a name or attribute of the Messiah as foretold in Old Testament prophecy:

- December 17 — O Sapientia (*O Wisdom*)
- December 18 — O Adonai (*O Lord*)
- December 19 — O Radix Jesse (*O Root of Jesse*)
- December 20 — O Clavis David (*O Key of David*)
- December 21 — O Oriens (*O Dayspring*)
- December 22 — O Rex Gentium (*O King of the Nations*)
- December 23 — O Emmanuel (*O God With Us*)

They were used during the last seven days of Advent, December 17-23, at Vespers (*evening prayers*), with the Christmas celebration beginning on the evening of December 24 (Christmas Eve). These reflections on the promises that Jesus fulfilled build anticipation for celebrating his birth at Christmas.

When the first letter of each antiphon are put together and read backward, they form a Latin acrostic—“*ero cras*,” “I am tomorrow”—reminding us not only of the approaching Christmas Day but also of Christ’s promise to return for his people.

I’d encourage you to incorporate The O Antiphons into your Advent season. Here’s how:

- Read the name of Christ, followed by the accompanying Scripture.
- Meditate on each name with these questions:
 - Why was it Good News in Isaiah’s day that the Messiah would be _____?
 - How did Jesus fulfill this in his life, death, and resurrection?
 - Why is it Good News to us today that Jesus is _____?
 - How should this attribute of Christ make us long for his return?
- Read the prayer (left column) aloud together.
- Sing the verse (right column) together.

Rejoice! For the Messiah Jesus has appeared as Wisdom, Lord, Root of Jesse, Key of David, Dayspring, King of the Nations, and God With Us! And he shall return to reign with us forever!