

The “O Antiphons”

O Sapientia (Wisdom from on high) — Dec. 17 (Isaiah 11:2; 1 Corinthians 1:30)

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; 33:22; Matthew 2:6)

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; 45:14; 52:15; Romans 15:8-12; Revelation 5:5)

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 9:7; 22:22; 42:6-7; Revelation 3:7)

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.

O Oriens (Rising Sun, Dayspring, Light from the East) - Dec 21 (Isaiah 9:2; 60:1; Malachi 4:2; Luke 1:78-79)

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 (Isa 2:4; 9:6; 28:16; 64:8; Hag 2:7; Mk 12:10; Eph 2:14-20; Rev 15:3)

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; Matthew 1:21)

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!