

Week 14: Christmas

Hark the Herald Angels Sing

Text: Charles Wesley (1707–1788), 1739

- Written less than a year after Wesley's conversion in May of 1738
- Wesley's original opening line read "Hark! how all the welkin rings / Glory to the King of Kings", with "welkin" being an archaic term used to mean "sky" or "heavens"
- This was altered to the current version by George Whitefield in 1753

Tune: Felix Mendelssohn (1809–1847), 1840

- Originally written as a chorus in Mendelssohn's cantata "Festgesang", honoring the 400th anniversary of Johann Gutenberg's invention of the printing press
 - This was adapted into a hymn tune by British organist W. H. Cummings in 1857
 - First paired with this text in *Hymns Ancient and Modern* in 1861
1. This hymn, written specifically as a "Hymn for Christmas-Day", has a grand, triumphant sense to it. What is it about the text and tune that contribute to this feeling?
 2. Is it proper to have such boisterous, jubilant Christmas music, when only two of the four gospels consider Christmas important enough to include in their narrative? How much effort do we put into Christmas festivities compared to Easter? Is the current balance where it should be?

Of the Father's Love Begotten

Text: Aurelius Prudentius Clemens (348–413), c. 405

- A successful Spanish lawyer, Prudentius rose to become a regional governor in the Roman empire
- At the age of 57, he left public life, retired to a monastery and focused on writing poetry
- Prudentius' *Liber Cathemerinon* ("Book of the Christian Day") contains 12 Latin poems, one for each hour of the day, with this text excerpted from the 9th hour
- Initially translated to English by John Mason Neale (also translator of "All Glory, Laud, and Honor", among others) in 1851, beginning "Of the Father sole begotten..."
- Neale's version was heavily revised by Henry Williams Baker for *Hymns Ancient and Modern* in 1861

Tune: Anonymous, c. 950

- Manuscripts from the 10th century point to the tune's origins as a plainchant used for the "Sanctus" portion of the Catholic mass
 - Later tropes (chant alterations and additions) were set to the Latin text "Divinum Mysterium"
 - The first printed copy is a metrical version provided in 1582 by Theodorici Petri, who sought to preserve the medieval carols of his native Finland
 - Thomas Helmore (adapter of VENI EMMANUEL used with "O Come, O Come, Emmanuel", also by Neale) used DIVINUM MYSTERIUM for the first publication of Neale's translation; the two have been inseparable
1. We noted the relationship between Christmas and the resurrection in "God Rest Ye Merry, Gentlemen" and "We Three Kings"; this hymn explores the relationship between Christmas and creation. Incidentally, the final four verses of Wesley's original text for "Hark the Herald" also makes this connection. Comparing the two, what similarities and differences do you find? Do these hymns add anything new to your understanding or perception of Christmas?