

O Antiphons of Advent

Beginning on December 17th of each year, the Church enters into the “final days” of Advent. For these seven days from December 18th to December 24th, the Church celebrates with song the titles and prerogatives of Jesus, in what are known as the O Antiphons, or, also known as the Great Antiphons. These Antiphons begin with the *Magnificat* during evening prayer on the 17th, and become part of the Eucharistic celebration for the following morning as the Gospel Acclamation. These continue daily for the next seven days. This tradition dates from the 8th century.

Each Antiphon is rooted in the Hebrew Scripture, foretelling the coming of the Savior of the world. They are designed as a kind of scriptural mosaic from the Old Testament, and they are highly messianic. They progress from the very beginning of salvation history to the birth of Christ.

One of the more popular hymns sung during Advent, “O Come, O Come Emmanuel,” contain the titles of these Antiphons. The order in which they are presented in the hymn is quite different than in the design of the prayers in the Divine Office and in the Lectionary. The O Antiphons for Advent begin with seeking Wisdom (*Sapientia*) and ending with Emmanuel. The popular hymn begins with Emmanuel

The interesting feature of this difference-of-presentation is to be found when these Antiphons appear in Latin as an Acrostic. The first letter of each title, when the titles are arranged in reverse order, from the Divine Office, which spells the Latin phrase, **ERO CRAS**, which can be rendered as “I will come into existence, tomorrow.” Or, I will be born, tomorrow.

The following presentation is in the reverse order from the Divine Office

E mannel	Emmanuel	God with us
R ex	Rex	King of the People
O riens	Oriens	Dawn of the East
C lavis	Clavis	Key of David
R adix	Radix	Root of Jesse
A donai	Adonai	Lord, Leader of Israel
S apientia	Sapientia	Wisdom from on High

The following is the order in which they appear, in English, beginning with the Gospel Acclamation for the Mass on December 18th.

O Sapientia. Here, Wisdom orders all things. Jesus, the Logos, the Word of God, Second Person of the Blessed Trinity, He who is present in the very deepest recesses of eternity. Before creation itself, God existed. References are to Sirach, 24:5; and Wisdom, 8:1; and to the Prologue of the Gospel of St John. We pray to participate in the Wisdom of God, through Jesus our Lord. The Antiphon invites Jesus to “come and teach us the way of prudence.”

O Adonai, meaning, My Lord, the older sacred name of YHMH, Yahweh, which was left as unable to be pronounced. Adonai is a more concrete and intimate form of address, a title which emerges from the Exodus experience. Jesus is now our new Exodus, leading us from sin into freedom and salvation. References are to Exodus, 3:2; and 20:1. The Antiphon invites Jesus to “come and with an outstretched arm redeem us.”

O Radix Jesse, the root of Jesse, father of David, ancestor of Jesus. The dream of the Messiah is rooted in David and his inheritance. The messianic story is found in II Samuel, 7: 11-17. Isaiah speaks of the stump of Jesse in IS 11: 1, 10; and Jeremiah speaks of the Shoot from the House of David. The Antiphon invites Jesus to “come and deliver us, and tarry not.”

O Clavis David, key of David, again from Isaiah, 22: 22. Jesus will give these keys to Peter, head of the new Church. Reference is also found in Revelation 3:7; and Luke 1:69. All power is given to Christ the Lord. The Advent prayer is now an invitation to come and build your Church on Earth. The Antiphon prays that Jesus will “come and bring forth from prison the captive that sits in darkness and in the shadow of death.”

O Oriens, O rising sun of God, radiance of the Father, Light of the world. Oriens means a “rising,” as in the rising sun from the East, the dawn of the new day. Malachi speaks of the “sun of justice.” 3:20; and Isaiah speaks of those who have seen a great light, IS 9:1. The Antiphon prays that Jesus will “come and enlighten those that sit in darkness and in the shadow of death.”

These first five Antiphons come from Hebrew origins. The Messiah was to be the fulfillment of the Jewish expectations. The next two Antiphons are more closely tied to the New Testament.

O Rex Gentium, King of all the People. The roots for this title are in the Hebrew tradition, in Jeremiah 10:7; and Isaiah 33:17. Jesus is the new Cornerstone binding all peoples together. Paul calls Jesus the new peacemaker, Ephesians 2:14; and he calls us all to be one in Christ, Galatians, 3:28-29. The Antiphon prays that Jesus will “come and deliver mankind whom God did form out of the dust of the earth.”

O Emmanuel, the last of the Antiphons, gathers all the themes and titles together, acknowledging Jesus as the expected One of nations, as noted in Matthew, 11: 2-6. Isaiah wrote that the virgin shall bear a son and name him Immanuel, IS 7:14, and IS 33:22; and Matthew 1:23. Isaiah speaks of the “Lord our king, he it is who will save us.” IS 33:22. The Antiphon prays that “Emmanuel our King will come to save us, O Lord our God”

As we enter more nearly into the true season of Christmas, and sing joyfully the hymn O Come O Come Emmanuel, we can reflect on the many gifts that have developed in the tradition over the centuries.

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