

Carols of

CHARLES WESLEY

"Hark! the Herald Angels Sing"

The Christmas carol which we know as *Hark! the Herald Angels Sing* was first published in 1739 as a ten stanza poem entitled, *Hymn for Christmas Day*, in the John Wesley collection, *Hymns and Sacred Poems*. It was written within a year of the Whitsunday on which Charles Wesley “found rest for his soul”—when “the inspiration of his newly-made contact with God was still fresh” (Albert Bailey, *The Gospel in Hymns*, 100).

Wesley’s hymn originally began with the words: “Hark, how all the welkin [heaven/sky] rings.” In 1753, George Whitefield, another of the founders of Methodism, altered that line to “Hark! the herald angels sing,” and his first line and title have been used ever since. In the 1782 publication of *New Version of the Psalms of David*, Whitefield’s adaptation was used with the repetition of the opening line repeated at the end of each stanza as it is sung today.

The theologically rich lyrics are set to a melody composed by Felix Mendelssohn which was part of a cantata (*Festgesang an die Künstler*, 1840) written to celebrate the 400th year of Johann Gutenberg's invention of movable type printing. Mendelssohn had noted that his tune would never do for use with sacred words, writing that "there must be a national and merry subject found out." Wesley had originally envisioned the tune for his song celebrating the resurrection of Christ, "Christ the Lord is Risen Today" being used for his Christmas hymn. But in 1856, disregarding Mendelssohn's words, British musician William Cummings adapted Mendelssohn's tune to fit the text of Wesley's hymn. The angel's "good news of great joy" is indeed a "merry subject found out" and Mendelssohn's melody is the perfect accompaniment to Wesley's words of joyous truth.

Hark! the Herald Angels Sing is preeminently Christological—

from “King of kings” and “Everlasting Lord” in “highest heaven adored” to the “woman’s conquering Seed” who is the “second Adam from above”—it is saturated with Scriptural revelation and theological truth in its presentation of Christ as “the Fullness of Deity in bodily form” (Colossians 2.9)—

Veiled in flesh the Godhead see, hail the Incarnate Deity!

Pleased as Man with men to appear, Jesus our Immanuel here.

In his doctrinal presentation, Wesley set forth: the divine nature of Christ, his *kenosis* (“emptying out”—i.e. his divestiture of his divine prerogatives, cf. Philippians 2.7), his sinless conception and incarnation, his substitutionary work, his prophecy-fulfilling achievements, and his indwelling life. Thus, we are assured of being reconciled to God and reinstated in His love.

In his composition of *Hark! the Herald Angels Sing*, Charles Wesley—

- Encompasses the scope of Messianic promise from the Garden of Eden to the final prophet, Malachi, to the appearance of the angels in the skies of Judea announcing the promise fulfilled, the birth of the Messiah in Bethlehem;
- Lays bare humanity's ruined state and its need for restoration from the indelible imprint of sin on human nature;
- Presents the work of regeneration and the mystic union experienced by the born-again believer who, as evidence of this transforming work, experiences the likeness and life of Christ which is “formed in every believing heart”;
- Incorporates no less than ten exclusive names and titles for Christ, numerous Old Testament allusions, and phrases from the Gospels of Luke and John and the epistles of Paul to portray the exclusive and preeminent Christ.

*Hark! the herald angels sing, “Glory to the newborn King;
Peace on earth and mercy mild; God and sinners reconciled.”*

*Joyful, all ye nations rise, Join the triumph of the skies;
With angelic hosts proclaim, “Christ is born in Bethlehem.”*

*Christ, by highest heavens adored; Christ the everlasting Lord;
Late in time behold Him come, Offspring of a virgin’s womb.*

*Veiled in flesh the Godhead see, hail the incarnate Deity!
Pleased as man with man to dwell, Jesus our Immanuel.*

Hail the heaven-born Prince of Peace! Hail the Sun of Righteousness!

Light and life to all He brings, risen with healing in His wings:

Mild He lays His glories by, born that man no more may die;

Born to raise the sons of earth, born to give them second birth.

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.

As evidence of its enduring significance, Charles Wesley's *Hymn for Christmas Day* has been published in more than 1,240 hymnals.