

Hark! The Herald Angels Sing¹

The background to this hymn might have been the joyous sounds of London's church bells, thrilling Charles Wesley as he walked to church one Christmas morn. Perhaps to his ears it sounded as if the heavens, the *welkins*, were ringing the bells as for a coronation of the king of kings. It was published in 1739, and various people have tweaked it, somewhat annoying the Wesleys, who thought that mucking around with their songs could only cheapen them. Charles will now admit the need of updating, though may well smile with a head shake at my puny endeavour. I am well aware that though the Wesleys made their own changes to songs written by Isaac Watts, that nevertheless the strap of their shoes I am not worthy to stoop down and unloose. In composing my version, I have compared a few versions to Wesley's original. I don't wish change for change's sake, nor to overlook improvements already made. I keep *hark*, as in "hark hark the lark", since it is not too archaic and keeps the title. Wesley's 10 stanzas of 4 lines, became 5 stanzas of 8 lines. I have ignored the last less common 16 lines.²

Rhyming is a simple ABABABAB pattern, though nowadays *come/womb* seldom rhyme. A number of archaisms exist, not least *welkin* and *men*. A tardisial element is built in, yet Christ wasn't born last Christmas, nor shall be this Christmas. The historical reality of the incarnation predates the Christian celebration, Christmas, which seems to merely have taken a pagan festivity, Saturnalia, and related its prophecy of the

¹ www.hymnsandcarolsofchristmas.com/Hymns_and_Carols/hark_how_all_the_welkin_rings.htm

² 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 Pow'r / Ruin'd Nature now restore / Now in Mystic Union join / Thine to Ours, and Ours to Thine. // Adam's likeness, Lord, efface / Stamp thy Image in its Place / Second Adam from above / Reinstate us in thy Love / Let us Thee, tho' lost, regain / Thee, the Life, the Heav'nly Man: / Oh to All Thyself impart / Form'd in each Believing Heart. It features terms from *Genesis*, *John*, and Adam Christology. On the negative side, if sung by Christians, it asks Jesus (bad) to come where he already is (bad)—to convert the converted. Moreover it seems that redemption is getting back to *Genesis*, rather than getting onto *Revelation*, so fails to capitalise on Adam Christology. He has not restored me what I had, or to what sinless Adam had, but gives me what neither Adam nor I ever had. On the positive side, the gospel is about Jesus offering mystic union to all, a 'vertical' link, and us letting God replace the fallen likeness by the new (Eph.5:26f.).

risen sun (effectively a then winter solstice day) to the true rising of God's light. It is unlikely that Jesus was actually born on our Dec.25th. My main concern, however, is the imagining of an annual rebirth day, as if it's an annual myth.

I dismiss the argument that Wesley implied that God needed to be reconciled, since I dismiss the assumption that a breach between two parties always stems from both parties being at fault. The mediator, Christ, brought the flawed party, man (in part), back to the flawless party, God. And, a little mystery being good, I have maintained the idea of deathlessness. The solution is that this isn't bodily deathlessness, but is spiritual deathlessness (which will include bodily resurrection, or perhaps, more precisely, re-embodiment in the age to come).

From: *Hark how all the Welkin rings / Glory to the King of Kings, / Peace on Earth, and Mercy mild, / GOD and Sinners reconcil'd / Joyful all ye Nations rise, / Join the Triumph of the Skies / Universal Nature say, / Christ the Lord is born to Day.*

Christ, by highest Heav'n ador'd, / Christ, the Everlasting Lord, / Late in Time behold him come, / Offspring of a Virgin's Womb. / Veil'd in Flesh, the Godhead see, / Hail th' Incarnate Deity! / Pleas'd as Man with Men t'appear / Jesus, our Immanuel here!

Hail the Heav'nly Prince of Peace ! / Hail the Sun of Righteousness! / Light and Life to All he brings, / Ris'n with Healing in his Wings. / Mild he lays his Glory by / Born that Man no more may die / Born to raise the Sons of Earth, / Born to give them Second Birth.

To: *Hark, the heralds loud did sing / glory to the one born king / Peace on earth, and mercy mild / God and sinners reconciled! / Joyful now our hearts arise / join the triumph of the skies / With angelic ones we say / Christ was born, momentous day.*

Christ, by highest heaven adored / Christ the everlasting lord / Let all hearts prepare him room / firstborn of the virgin's womb / One with us God's son we see / greet the incarnate deity / Pleased as one with us to dwell / Jesus our Immanuel.

Greet the heaven born Prince of Peace / in his name, all war shall cease / Light and life to all he brings / and frees us from evil things / Selfless left his home on high / born that man need never die / Born to raise us from the earth / born to give us second birth.