

## O Holy Night<sup>1</sup>

Around 1847, a Roman Catholic parish priest living near Avignon, France, thought it would be nice to have a new poem for Christmas Midnight Mass, particularly after getting a new organ. He might also have thought that it would be nice to covertly evangelise a gifted parishioner, Placide Cappeau (wine merchant and poet). Two birds with one stone? With that request on his mind, Cappeau went on a business trip to Paris. He read the birth narrative in *Luke*, and probably in *Matthew*, imagining himself being present, and wrote *Minuit, Chrétiens* (*Midnight, Christians*), which later became known as *Cantique de Noël* (*O Holy Night*).<sup>2</sup> He then asked an acclaimed Parisian friend, Adolphe Adams, to provide a tune, and hopefully it drew Cappeau & Adams towards messiah. Anyway, the song was on the priest's desk in time for that midnight mass, and it became a firm favourite in France. When word came out that Cappeau and Adams had written, respectively, as backslider and as Judaic, it lost Rome's vote and was officially blacklisted. But, judged on its merit, not its authors, the song got the people's vote.

It certainly had some good insights. For instance, it picked up that Jesus was against blind slavery (see Lk.4:18; Gal.3:28; Phm.16). Whether Dwight picked up on spiritual emancipation (Jhn.8:34), I'm not so sure, though suspect that at least Cappeau saw the deliverance was for all—ie that all were born spiritually enslaved.<sup>3</sup> Messiah's own people had largely limited their sight to freedom from slavery to Rome, rather than to sin & death, and such short-sightedness is common. Dwight may have misunderstood that though human slaves were part of the human family (brothers & sisters, *imagoes dei*), from a new creation perspective not all in Adam are in the Second Adam, ie spiritual family (*imagoes christi*, slaves in Christ). The first and favourite English version, was by Unitarian and Abolitionist, John S Dwight (1855), of Boston, Massachusetts: stanza 3 speaks of Jesus as our brother and social reformer abolishing slavery.<sup>4</sup> During the American Civil War, it achieved star status for Dwight's fellow Americans in the north. It was destined to achieve a special global accolade, too. On Christmas Eve, 1906, the first ever radio transmission of a human voice (and human tune) was made. To some that seemed a Christmas miracle, a Prof. Reginald Fessenden read from Lk.2, and then played on his violin, *Oh Holy Night*. That day (possibly night) was certainly exceptionally holy, in the sense of set aside by God—probably in cosmic history there has only been one actual incarnation, though some prophetic myths did the rounds in the gentile world. The poetic licence draws a parallel between sin and nature's night, and the stars illuminating that fact that the true light had come to mankind, and deserves some slack. Likewise, the bit about Jesus being our friend. While the context

<sup>1</sup> [www.hymnsandcarolsofchristmas.com/Hymns\\_and\\_Carols/o\\_holy\\_night.htm](http://www.hymnsandcarolsofchristmas.com/Hymns_and_Carols/o_holy_night.htm)

<sup>2</sup> Luke and Matthew wrote as redactors, selecting material that fitted their main interests. Matthew thus picked up the royalty theme, while Luke picked up the humility theme. Their accounts complement with, and tie into, each other.

<sup>3</sup> ...attends ta deliverance / Noël! Noël! Voici le Rédempteur!

<sup>4</sup> Further assessment is based on Dwight's version.

doesn't require us to assume more than that he was a friend in the sense of ally "in all our trials", it can reinforce buddy theology. Another issue for me is the puzzle over what "the soul/spirit/Spirit [feeling] its worth", should mean. Did the human soul feel its own worth; did the Holy Spirit feel the worth of the incarnation? That's Dwight's line. Cappeau's *Et de son Père arrêter le courroux*, carried the plain picture of messiah's mission likened to protecting sinners from his father's anger.<sup>5</sup>

**From:** *O holy night! The stars are brightly shining / It is the night of our dear saviour's birth / Long lay the world - in sin and error pining / 'Til he appear'd and the soul felt its worth. / A thrill of hope the weary world rejoices / For yonder breaks - a new and glorious morn / Fall on your knees! O hear the angel voices! / O night divine, O night when Christ was born / O night, o holy night, O night divine.*

*Led by the light of faith serenely beaming / With glowing hearts by his cradle we stand / So led by light - of a star sweetly gleaming / Here come the wise men from [the] Orient land / The king of kings lay thus in lowly manger / In all our tri-als born to be our friend / He knows our need, our weakness is no stranger / Behold your king! Before him lowly bend! / Behold your king, Before him lowly bend!*

*Truly he taught - us to love one another / His law is love and - his gospel is peace / Chains shall he break - for the slave is our brother / And in his name all oppression shall cease / Sweet hymns of joy in grateful chorus raise we / Let all within - us praise his holy name / Christ is the Lord! O praise his name forever / His power and glo-ry evermore proclaim / His power and glo-ry evermore proclaim.*

**To:** *Oh holy night, the stars were shining brightly / It was the night of - our dear saviour's birth / Long weary lay - the world in sin so tightly / Then he appeared and we sang with true mirth / A thrill of hope - for now the earth rejoices / For then did break - the new and glorious morn / Fall on your knees, Oh hear the angel voices / Oh night divine - oh night when Christ was born / Oh night divine - oh night, when Christ was born.*

*Then led by light - of star especial gleaming / There came the magi - from eastern far land / They worshipped Christ - but Herod was not heeding / He was enraged - and God's own son was banned / The king of kings - he then was in grave danger / Against our pride - our guilt and our discord / He knows our need - our weakness is no stranger / Worship your king! - And bow, he is the lord / Worship your king! - and bow, he is the lord.*

*He came in love - to free us from our slavery / Emancipated - oppression shall cease / Christians unite - and live and love as family / His law is love and his gospel is peace / Sweet hymns of joy - in grateful chorus raise we / May all within us - praise his holy name / Christ is the lord! From earth into eternity / God's love - is now and evermore the same / God's love - is now and evermore the same.*

<sup>5</sup> It is a just picture, and the term *expiation* is sometimes used. God's wrath at the cancer of sin, and those harbour it, is well justified (righteous). Getting away from objective truth, we have gotten away from objective redemption, and are in danger of being blind to the fact that evil, even for its own sake, should be rejected. God's wrath is primarily rejection of sin, a walking out on fallen humanity, but he provided his son, his very 'heart', as the only one who could beyond our comprehension cosmically absorb that wrath, allowing humanity to walk back to him. Other biblical pictures, such as it allowing transformation akin to being adopted, even being spiritually born into God's family, help paint redemption's true landscape.