



THE MYSTERY OF FAITH

Furthermore it is necessary to everlasting salvation that he also believe rightly the incarnation of our Lord Jesus Christ. For the right faith is that we believe and confess that our Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God, is God and man. God of the substance of the Father, begotten before the worlds; and man of substance of His mother, born in the world. Perfect God and perfect man, of a reasonable soul and human flesh subsisting. Equal to the Father as touching His Godhead, and inferior to the Father as touching His manhood. Who, although He is God and man, yet He is not two, but one Christ. One, not by conversion of the Godhead into flesh, but by taking of that manhood into God. One altogether, not by confusion of substance, but by unity of person. For as the reasonable soul and flesh is one man, so God and man is one Christ; (From "The Athanasian Creed", lines 29-37)

Especially prior to Western Scholasticism—which used dialectical reasoning to resolve contradictions—the ancient Christian mind was mostly content to accept the “mysteries of faith” given by Divine Revelation without too much interference from philosophical explanation. Most importantly, faith always needed to be prior to reason. As St. Augustine advised in the early 5th century, *crede ut intellegas*, (“believe so that you may understand”) and St. Anselm repeated in the late 11th, *Neque enim quaero intelligere ut credam, sed credo ut intelligam* (“I do not seek to understand in order that I may believe, but rather, I believe in order that I may understand”). Although Patristic theology found the need to use the vocabulary of philosophy, it remained in line with St. Paul’s conclusion in I Corinthians 1-2 that divine truth is spiritually discerned and would always be “foolishness” to man’s natural wisdom.

The Advent Of Christ

In Early English Poetry
Based on Holy Scripture

*An installment in the series:
Orthodox Anglicans Studying Scripture*

Lesson 1: The Incarnation Mystery

“Wit Wonders”

The faith of the author behind the Anglo-Saxon poem “Wit Wonders” (page 10) written sometime during the 7th – 10th centuries maintains this attitude, especially with regard to the Persons of Jesus and Mary in the mystery of His Incarnation.

QUESTION – “What is man’s “wit” and what does the writer say limits “wit” and its ability to comprehend?

How does this reflect the biblical record of the Incarnation in passages like St. Luke 1-2 & St. John 1?

With what does the author conclude “wit” must be content and how do we as Anglicans continue this in our spirituality, especially in our approach to religious mysteries of the Incarnation, like the sacraments?

“Et Incarnatus est”

From the Creed, “And was made Man” (page 18). Langland writes that God’s love was so great that it had to become personified in the Incarnation of His Son.

QUESTION – What lines particularly convey this, and how are they reminiscent of Johannine theology?





THE TITLES & TALENTS OF CHRIST

The Old Testament prophets provided names and proficiencies of the Messiah, meaningful to Jews who understood their covenant and history, when they foretold of His Coming to explain His character and the establishment of His Kingdom. None was more thorough, nor has been more influential, than the prophet Isaiah who ministered over 700 years before the birth of Jesus. It is from his book(s) that later prophets like Micah and Malachi would also prophesy of Messiah, and whom important Gospel figures such as Gabriel, Zechariah, and John the Baptist would invoke to explain the fulfillment that was happening.

The Church has assembled these titles/talents from Isaiah into what we know as the “O Antiphons” since at least the 7th century when they included liturgically by the Benedictines of Fleury Abbey as Magnificat antiphons at Vespers during the final seven days of Advent:

- 17 December: *O Sapientia* (O Wisdom)
- 18 December: *O Adonai* (O Lord)
- 19 December: *O Radix Jesse* (O Root of Jesse)
- 20 December: *O Clavis David* (O Key of David)
- 21 December: *O Oriens* (O Dayspring)
- 22 December: *O Rex Gentium* (O King of the Nations)
- 23 December: *O Emmanuel* (O With Us is God)

“Advent Lyric II”

Some time during the early 9th century, an Anglo-Saxon poet from East Anglia or Mercia (traditionally attributed to Cynewulf) composed a series of poetic meditations on the O Antiphons that still survive today in a codex known as the Exeter Book. Incredibly, they precede the even more famous poems Christ I (The Advent Lyrics), Christ II (The Ascension), and Christ III (The Last Judgment by almost a century and a half.

The Advent Of Christ

In Early English Poetry
Based on Holy Scripture

*An installment in the series:
Orthodox Anglicans Studying Scripture*

Lesson 2: The First Advent

The selection in our book is the poem based on the fourth “O Antiphon”, *O Clavis David* which was inspired by Isaiah 22:22:

*O Clavis David, et sceptrum domus Israel;
qui aperis, et nemo claudit;
claudis, et nemo aperit:
veni, et educ vinctum de domo carceris,
sedentem in tenebris, et umbra mortis.*

“O Key of David and sceptre of the House of Israel;
who opens, and no one can shut,
shuts, and no one can open:
come, and lead the captives from the prison house,
those who dwell in darkness and the shadow of death.”

QUESTION – What does both the antiphon and the poet see Christ “the Key” spiritually unlocking, as compared with Isaiah’s original verse?

What importance does the poet also give to the B.V.M.?

“Advent”

“Advent” is a much later Middle English poem written by an anonymous 14th-century cleric at Merton College (founded at Oxford University in 1264). The poem is interesting for the way it orientationally describes Christ and the accomplishments of His Advent in the first half, and then gives Him a voice to explain Himself and His redemptive work in the second half.





THE B.V.M. AND THE FIRST ADVENT

The medieval English tradition was the most Marian in regard to recognizing the person and role of the B.V.M. at the First Advent of Christ. This is especially evident with her inclusion in the Sarum Use of the O Antiphons:

*O Virgo virginum, quomodo fiet istud?
Quia nec primam similem visa es nec habere
sequentem.
Filiae Jerusalem, quid me admiramini?
Divinum est mysterium hoc quod cernitis.*

“O Virgin of virgins, how shall this be?
For neither before thee was any seen like thee, nor shall
there be after.
Daughters of Jerusalem, why marvel ye at me?
The thing which ye behold is a mystery.”

The language of the antiphon is loosely based on that of Mary and Jesus in chapters 1 and 23 of St. Luke’s Gospel, respectively. Like much of Patristic thought and classical Christian spirituality, it highlights the uniqueness of the B.V.M. and her Divine Son, and the mystery of their special relationship. Moreover, as with all eight of the Sarum O Antiphons, a poem written in Old English was also composed to meditate on the mystery of this antiphon, which appears with the others in the Exeter Book (“Eala wifa wynn, O Joy of Women” see handout).

“I Sing of a Maiden”

This poem is written in late Middle English, just before the transition to Modern English at the end of the 15th century, as is evident in its vocabulary and rhyme scheme. Thanks to its more or less chiasmic structure, the poem takes advantage of repetition to ponder the serenity of the Incarnation and Nativity events (“He came all so still”) and redemption paradox (stanzas 1 and 5).

The Advent Of Christ

In Early English Poetry
Based on Holy Scripture

*An installment in the series:
Orthodox Anglicans Studying Scripture*

Lesson 3: Born of the Virgin Mary

QUESTION – What is the importance of stressing the “stillness” of Christ’s Coming at the First Advent?

The thrice-reiterated seasonal imagery of Christ descending “as dew in Aprille” also beautifully emphasizes the Coming of the Christ Child as a spiritual springtime bringing the promise of new life. The metaphor of Jesus descending “as dew” might also have been inspired by the *Rorate caeli*, the daily versicle and response at Vespers during Advent and the Introit for the Fourth Sunday of Advent based on Isaiah 45:8:

*“Rorate coeli desuper et nubes pluant justum
(Drop down dew, ye heavens, from above,
and let the clouds rain the just)
Aperiatur terra et germinet salvatorem”
(Let the earth be opened and send forth
a Saviour).*

“The Virgin’s Song”

This poem, another from the Harley Manuscript (see also “Wit Wonders”), depicts the Nativity from the wonder and concern of Mary’s perspective as Our Lord’s Mother. The poet accentuates the love and compassion of Mary for her Son in their inadequate circumstances, and the humility of the Christ Child for condescending to enter into them, at all.





A LULLABY TO THE CHRIST CHILD

In the latter part of the 14th century, the portrayal of Jesus in English poetry reflected the current trend of devotion to the Christ Child. This feature of medieval Christian piety may have been prompted by the introduction of the crèche at Christmas, courtesy of the Franciscans in Italy about a century beforehand. The affection of favorite saints of the era like Francis, Anthony, and Dominic to the child Jesus inspired a new expression of spirituality that would have eventually found its way to Britain and into the lyrics of her poets. These ‘love carols’, as they are commonly known, tenderly address the Christ Child with romantic language appealing to the beauty of nature, recalling the Song of Songs from the Old Testament and the chivalrous poetry of the time. Most of these carols were lullabies (‘lullays’, from “lu lu, la la”) composed from the perspective of the Blessed Virgin Mary to the Baby Jesus, such as the famous early 15th century poem “*Lullay, mine liking*”.

“Lullay, Lullay, Little Child”

This poem, possibly rooted earlier in the 14th century, is unique among the lullaby carols, as it is not sung from the view of Mother Mary, but from that of penitent person who mournfully recognizes that it is for to die for sinners that the Christ Child has been born. Although the person sings to Jesus as “the little child...becomen meek and mild” (stanza 1) and “thou little thing, thou little baron, thou little king” (stanza 5), his song makes no effort to sentimentalize the scene in the stable, but only to look ahead to His sufferings at Calvary; hence, his admission that he does not lullay for “joy” but “for woe” (stanza 5). Moreover, he addresses Jesus as if He were already at the cross in lines: “*And now thou weepest therefore*” (stanza 3) “*Mankind is cause of thy mourning*” (stanza 5).

The Advent Of Christ

In Early English Poetry
Based on Holy Scripture

*An installment in the series:
Orthodox Anglicans Studying Scripture*

Lesson 4: A Penitent’s Lullaby

QUESTION – What does the poet cite as the direct cause for the Incarnation of God’s Son?

Do you agree with his theology or is it more complex than the scope of this poem?

Nonetheless, it is out of His love for fallen mankind that the poet identifies Christ’s incentive to be born to die:

*Mankind is cause of thy mourning,
That thou has loved so yore.
For man that thou hast ay loved so
Yet shalt thou suffer pains mo,*

QUESTION – What is the three-fold hope in the sacrifice of Christ that the poet finds in the last stanza?

“The Coventry Carol”

The most famous of the “lullaby carols”—of grimmer topic than most realize—is the so-called “Coventry Carol” which was part of a mystery play called “The Shearman and the Tailors”, dating back to the 1390s. The text extant in the present dates back to the 1534 and the melody (a Picardy third) is known from 1591.

QUESTION – Although a Christmastide carol, is this a Nativity hymn? What is the story/who are the speakers?

