

O come, O come, Emmanuel

A Christmas carol about Israel - but why Israel?

Perhaps the most unusual carol of all in the list of Christmas favourites (based on Scripture) is *O come, O come, Emmanuel*. No one seems to know where the words came from, but the internet tells me the tune came from a 15th century funeral hymn for French Franciscan nuns ministering in Portugal. Four centuries later an Anglican priest found it, translated the Latin text into English, and from there it made its way into the list of favourite Christian carols sung at Christmas.

But how did a hymn that focuses so much on **Israel** become a carol celebrating the birth of Jesus? In the popular version of the carol with two verses, for instance, the first verse is about the plight and plaintive cry of **Israel**:

“O come, O come Emmanuel and ransom captive **Israel**” - and -
“Rejoice, rejoice, Emmanuel shall come **to thee, O Israel.**”

And in the second verse:

“O come thou Rod of Jesse free **thine own**” – “thine own” meaning Israel again, since Jesse was the father of King David, who was **king of Israel** - and -
“From depths of hell **thy people** save” – again referring to Israel, God’s people.

The carol is very much about Israel, and looking through the eyes of an Israelite. There’s a clue, of course, in the title of the carol as to how it came to be associated with Christmas, because *O come, O come Emmanuel* harks back to **Isaiah 7:14**, “Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign: The virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son, and will call him Immanuel.”

But that verse itself raises some questions too. Yes, it’s obviously talking about the birth of Jesus to the virgin Mary, but how come a prophecy about his birth suddenly pops up in Isaiah chapter 7? And how come it was a “sign”? A sign of what? A sign to whom? What was happening in Isaiah 7 that needed this prophecy about Jesus’ birth to be written at all? And how does it connect up with our modern-day Christmas, so that we now want to include it in our carols?

A trip back to Isaiah 7 sets the scene.

It opens in **verse 1** with a couple of angry, arrogant, nasty-minded kings of Israel combining forces to invade Judah and attack Jerusalem, putting the frights up Ahaz, king of Judah. So God sends Isaiah to Ahaz with a rousing pep talk in **verse 4**: “Keep calm,” Isaiah tells Ahaz, “and don’t lose heart because of those two smouldering stubs of firewood” - referring to the two kings of Israel - because “the Sovereign Lord says (their horrible little plot) will not take place, it will not happen” (verse 7). There’s a little added bit after that too, in **verse 9**. “Oh and by the way, Ahaz, if you do not stand firm in your faith, you will not stand at all.”

In other words, Ahaz, hold steady and trust God, no matter how bad, or how frustrating, or how ridiculous your situation appears to be, because if you think for a second that God won’t look after you, you’ll turn into mush. You’ll get all moody and discouraged and weak at the knees, and give up. And just so you know God is with you, **verse 11**, “Ask the Lord your God for a SIGN, whether in the deepest depths or in the highest heights” - and it’s yours, Ahaz.

Imagine being in THAT kind of situation. Ahaz could choose whatever sign he wanted and God would do it. Make the sun turn bright purple, or make a wave in the Sea of Galilee as high as Everest - anything to let God prove to Ahaz he was with him through this mess and would sort it out for him. But Ahaz says, “I will not ask,” because, **verse 12**, “I will not put the Lord to the test.” No, I don’t want a sign, Ahaz replies, because I don’t believe God does things like that.

Well, that’s when Isaiah turns bright purple and he yells at Ahaz in **verse 13**, “Will you try the patience of God?” – followed up immediately with, “You’re going to get a sign anyway, Ahaz,” and out pops Isaiah with this prophecy in verse 14 about a virgin giving birth to a son call Immanuel.

Strange though it seems to suddenly launch into virgins giving birth in the middle of Ahaz not wanting a sign, it’s actually spot on, because God is willing to do anything to prove to Ahaz he’s with him, and Immanuel *means* “**God with us.**” It’s a perfect time, therefore, to introduce a prophecy that not only gets the point across to Ahaz that God is **with him** at a very difficult time, it also puts in place THE sign that will keep **all Israel** trusting God is with them through all the stuff they’ll be going through in the future too. And there’s a hint of what that future holds in **verse 17** – “The Lord will bring on you and on your people and on the house of your father a time unlike any since Ephraim broke away from Judah – he will bring **the king of Assyria.**”

Please, not the king of Assyria. The Assyrians were the most arrogant, vicious, power-hungry people on earth. Quoting from *The Minor Prophets* by Farrar, there was "no power more savage. The kings of Assyria exult to record how they flung away the bodies of soldiers like so much clay; made pyramids of human heads; impaled 'heaps of men' on stakes; cut off the hands of kings and nailed them on the walls, left their bodies to rot on the entrance gates of cities, and covered pillars with the flayed skins of rival monarchs."

Assyria was your worst nightmare, but in **Isaiah 8:7**, not only would the king of Assyria pour through Israel like "mighty flood waters," he will "sweep on into Judah" too, **verse 8**, causing Israel and Judah to cry out, "O Immanuel (the God who says **he's with us**) - HELP."

It's interesting to note, then, what happens next, because the Israelites suddenly get a surge of courage. For simply using the name Immanuel in real and desperate belief that God was with them, they lose all their fear, and in **verses 9-10** they actually yell out a challenge of their own to Assyria - and to any other nation that dared lift a finger against them - "Prepare for battle and be shattered!" they yell. "Devise your strategy, but it will be thwarted; propose your plan, but it will not stand, for **GOD IS WITH US.**"

Hurray! **They** believed the sign given to Ahaz that God was with them - and unlike Ahaz they stood firm in their belief. And look at the difference between them and Ahaz. They stood firm, but Ahaz died a morose reject at age 35 after sixteen useless, terrible years as king of Judah. Isaiah was right; Ahaz never believed God was with him, and the result was he did not "stand at all" (Isaiah 7:9). He died a broken man.

But something quite different happens to Israel and Judah, which the writer of the carol brings out too, because even when Israel and Judah are beaten to a pulp and dragged off into exile, they're still crying out, "**O come, O come Immanuel and ransom captive Israel that mourns in lonely exile here.**" They never gave up on God being with them, even as year after year passed and there was NO sign of God rescuing them from their humiliating captivity.

And that's where the carol takes us, to **Israel crying out in exile in a foreign land to Immanuel**, not to the sweet pictures of Christmas so popular today, with angels singing to shepherds at Jesus' birth, the nativity scene, and the star guiding the Persian astrologers to Jesus with their gifts.

The focus of the carol is entirely on ISRAEL: "Rejoice, rejoice, Emmanuel shall come to thee **O Israel.**" Take heart, Israel, God is **with you.** The child born to a virgin is on his way to rescue **you, Israel.** But it's a rescue far greater than anything Israel might have imagined, because, in the words of the carol, "the Rod of Jesse" is coming to **"free you from Satan's tyranny, to save you from the depths of hell and give you victory over the grave."**

This is more than just rescue from exile in a foreign land. Through the baby Immanuel their rescue will include release from the grip of the Devil, hell and death as well. But why mention **"the Rod of Jesse"** in that context? Because it harks back to the prophecy in **Isaiah 11:1** that a shoot, or stem, from Jesse would spring up from the dead stump of Israel and grow into a tree again bearing fruit.

It's a prophecy that one day **Israel will be restored back to the glory it had** in the days of King David, son of Jesse. But how could that be, when the prophecy also talks of the Assyrian invaders having reduced Israel to a "remnant" (Isaiah 10:20) and nothing more than mere slaves, just as they'd been in Egypt?

But Isaiah has a bombshell answer to that question in **verse 11**, that through this offspring of Jesse "the Lord will reach out his hand a **SECOND TIME** to claim the remnant that is left of his people from Assyria."

It's a marvellous promise that Israel will be rescued from their exile in a **SECOND Exodus.** Immanuel, the rod of Jesse, is coming "to thee, O Israel," to save Israel from slavery again, just as God did in Egypt (verse 16), only this time the Exodus will be a shining demonstration of Immanuel to the **WHOLE WORLD.** It will "make known **among the nations** what the Lord has done," **Isaiah 12:4**, "for he has done glorious things," **verse 5**, so "let this be known **to the whole world**, for great is **the Holy One of Israel** among you," **verse 6.** The world will know what God is like. How? Through this "second time" he rescues his beloved Israel out of exile and slavery.

It puts a different shine on Christmas, because **the reason a child called Immanuel will be born to a virgin is to rescue ISRAEL in a Second Exodus,** an Exodus so great it will show the whole world how great the God of ISRAEL is. So instead of looking at Christmas through **OUR** eyes, we look at it through Israelite eyes, as the carol ***O come O come Emmanuel*** does. It takes us back to why a prophecy about a baby called Immanuel was made to Ahaz, and just before Israel was taken into captivity by Assyria.

It all came down to that name, **Immanuel**, and the meaning it had for ISRAEL, that God was truly with them no matter how bad things got. And things got *really* bad too. Israel was all but forgotten. Only a remnant survived, languishing in slavery and misery under the cruel thumb of a vicious, pagan power. And soon after that, Judah was taken into captivity into Babylon too. What possible hope could there be, therefore, of a shoot from Jesse growing from a withered stump into a flourishing nation again?

But God had given them a SIGN to prove he was with them. One day a shoot from Jesse would grow from the royal line of David, Jesse's son, that would lead to the virgin birth of a baby called Immanuel, who would prove to the whole world that God was true to his word to Israel. God would prove, as he wanted to prove to Ahaz, that there is nothing in the heights or the depths that he cannot perform on behalf of his beloved people Israel to prove that he's with them. And in that proof it would also show the whole world just how powerful and faithful he is.

And then one day it happened, the baby was born, **Matthew 1:22-23**, "to fulfill what the Lord had said through the prophet: The virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son, and they will call him 'Immanuel', which means 'God with us'."

This is the story behind the story of Christmas. It's the story of God's faithfulness to Israel, and Israel hanging on for dear life to Isaiah's promise that God was with them, and that one day, a second time, Immanuel would rescue them from exile and slavery. And that's the story the carol focuses on too, where, suddenly, Israel's cry of **O come, O come Emmanuel** turns into "Immanuel, he's come, he's come." At last Immanuel had come to save them.

And he'd come to save THEM, take note, not the whole world. The primary focus of Jesus' birth is not on Immanuel coming to save the whole world, it's on Immanuel saving ISRAEL. An angel made that very clear to Joseph in a dream, in **verses 20-21** - "Joseph, son of David Mary will give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus, because he will save **HIS PEOPLE** from their sins." The story of Jesus' birth is primarily about the saving of **God's people, Israel**.

The Christmas story, therefore, doesn't begin in a stable in Bethlehem, it begins way back in Isaiah, to the first time Immanuel is mentioned, and why that name was mentioned at all.

It brings back memories and pictures of a time **long before** Jesus lay in a manger, long before shepherds in their fields by night heard a choir of angels, long before wise men bearing gifts from Persia turned up at Jesus' house, and long before the Christmas scene so favoured by Christians today, with its stirring carols focusing on the night Jesus was born, like Silent Night, and O Holy Night.

Christmas is far more stirring than the events surrounding Jesus' birth. It's about the staggering reality of God's faithfulness to Israel, a point the angel Gabriel made very clear to Mary, too. In **Luke 1:31-33**, Gabriel tells Mary, "You will be with child and give birth to a son The Lord God will give him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over the **house of Jacob** forever."

Gabriel's focus wasn't on the starlit night of Jesus' birth, or the warm glow of a stable, it was on the fulfillment of a distant promise being desperately hung onto by Israel through centuries of misery in exile, that a child would be born who would reign forever on the throne of David, and restore Israel to its former glory.

Mary didn't grasp that right away either, though. It wasn't until she visited Elizabeth in verse 39 that it all began to click in her mind. Suddenly, she got it, and she burst into song, the last four lines of which, in **verses 54-55**, are: "He has helped **HIS SERVANT ISRAEL**, remembering to be merciful to **Abraham and his descendants** forever, even as he said to our fathers."

That's what Jesus' birth was all about – to Mary. To her it was about God never forgetting his promises to "his servant Israel," going all the way back to Abraham. She realized there was NEVER a moment - all through the centuries since Abraham - that God had NOT been with Abraham's descendants. He'd ALWAYS been Immanuel, God with them.

A few verses later it was Zechariah's turn to burst forth: "Praise be to the Lord, the God of ISRAEL," he cries out in **verses 68-69**, "because he has come and has redeemed **his people**. He has raised up a horn of salvation **for us** in the house of his servant David." And why had God done this? **Verse 72**, "to remember his holy covenant, the oath he swore to our father Abraham to **rescue US** from the land of our enemies."

The birth of Jesus takes us back to that. It focuses our attention on the faithfulness of God - to his covenant with Abraham, to the sign of Immanuel, to his promise to keep Israel alive and rescue them from their enemies. And, fortunately, at Christmas we have a CAROL that takes us back to that too.