**Hark! The Herald Angels**

**Hymn History**

Charles Wesley (1707-1788), the 18th and final child of Samuel and Susanna Wesley, was born in Lincolnshire, England. He became one of the world's most prolific hymn writers, writing 6000 hymns in his lifetime. All but four of the books of the Bible are quoted in one or more of his hymns.

Education was important to the strongly religious Wesley family. Like the rest of his brothers and sisters, Charles spent his first years of schooling at home under the tutelage of his mother. Later, during his time at Oxford University, Charles, his brother John, and a friend, George Whitefield, “**formed the Oxford Holy Club for the purposes of worship, Bible study, frequent Holy Communion and visiting the sick and imprisoned."[[1]](#footnote-1)** Their strict adherence to high standards and accountability granted them the name of Methodists.

Both Charles and his brother John were ordained in the national Church of England. Although John Wesley's name is most commonly connected with the founding of the Methodist movement, “**Charles was just as involved and instrumental in spreading and sustaining the Methodist movement as his brother, John Wesley.****The myth holding Charles as the poet and John as the organizer and preacher is not true.   John was one of the organizers of Methodism, but Charles was the one who developed its practical theology with his hymns. Throughout, Charles maintained his ties and allegiance to the Church of England and at times reprimanded his brother for his increasing distance from the church.”[[2]](#footnote-2)**

**In 1739, one year after his conversion, Charles wrote the hymn now known as “Hark! The Herald Angels Sing” as a ten four-line stanza poem retelling the Christmas story. He named it “Hymn for Christmas Day.”[[3]](#footnote-3) Originally the first two lines read, “'Hark! how all the welkin [vault of heaven] rings, Glory to the King of Kings.' In one of many revisions—that of George Whitefield (1753)—the lines were changed to read, 'Hark! the herald angels sing, Glory to the newborn King.'”[[4]](#footnote-4) Some believe this well-known version of the angel's announcement made to the shepherds may be the reason many people today speak of the angels as singing this great announcement even though Luke 2:13-14 upon which it is based reads, “a multitude of the heavenly host praising God and *saying* . . .”**

**In 1840, fifty-two years after Charles' death, Leipzig, Germany, planned a Gutenberg festival to celebrate the anniversary of Johann Gutenburg's printing invention. The famous composer, Mendelssohn, contributed to the occasion by writing a choral composition entitled *Festegsang (*“festival song”)*.* In speaking about this production, Mendelssohn said, “Singers and hearers will like this work, but it will never be suitable for sacred words.”[[5]](#footnote-5)**

**Fifteen years later, William Hayman Cummings while studying *Festegsang*, thought the “second chorus of the work, entitled 'Lied' a suitable tune for Wesley's well-known words to “Hymn for Christmas Day.” The tune required some adaptation, so Cummings “combine[d] two four-line stanzas, making four eight-line stanzas, and repeat[ed] the first two lines as a refrain.”[[6]](#footnote-6)Today most hymn books include only three of those four stanzas.**

**Literary Structure**

* Meter: 77.77.77.77.77
* Poetic Feet: Trochaic
* Rhyme scheme: aabbccddaa
* Poetic devices and figures of speech:
  + Alliteration—this hymn has many phrases with two or more prominent words beginning with the same letter such as:
    - * **H**ark! The **h**erald angels sing
      * Peace on earth and **m**ercy **m**ild
      * Christ, by **h**ighest **h**eav'n adored
      * Pleased as **m**an with **m**en to dwell
      * **H**ail the **h**eav'nborn Prince of Peace
      * **L**ight and **l**ife to all He brings
      * Born that **m**an no **m**ore **m**ay die
* Consecutive phrases beginning with the same word highlight themes:
  + - * **Born** that man no more may die; **Born** to raise the sons of earth, **Born** to give them second birth
      * **Christ** by highest heav'n adored, **Christ** the everlasting Lord
      * **Hail** the heav'nborn Prince of Peace, **Hail** the Sun of righteousness
* Paradox
  + Off-spring of a virgin's womb
  + Veiled in flesh the God-head see
  + Hail th' incarnate Deity!

**Thought Content**

This hymn of the Christmas story clearly demonstrates Charles Wesley's theological beliefs. Firmly convinced that sin separates man from God and that the gift of salvation is offered to all mankind comes out in the phrases “God and sinners reconciled, Joyful all ye nations rise.”

He believed in the virgin birth, as illustrated in the phrase “Offspring of the virgin's womb,” and that Jesus was both fully man and fully God, as seen in the words, “Veiled in flesh the Godhead see, Hail th' incarnate Deity!”

Throughout the hymn the main focus is a celebration of Jesus, the Savior of mankind. The rejoicing is pictured in words like hark, glory, joyful, triumph, proclaim, behold, and hail. He speaks of Jesus as adored by all of heaven, as eternal, and as Lord and King. Thrice Wesley calls us to hail (approve enthusiastically) Him.

**Musical Characteristics**

* Melodic Movement: While some lines move primarily step by step, others have significant jumps.
* Meter: 4/4
* Form: AB—AC—DD—B'E—B'E'

**Evaluative Questions**

The mysterious concept of the incarnation, a major theme of this hymn, begs thoughtful explanation. A number of other words and phrases in this hymn also require defining for young children.

* Hark (to listen attentively): after telling children this meaning, the teacher could set a timer to go off in a few minutes, leave it in another area of the room and instruct them that when it begins to ring, they are to sit up very straight, turn their heads toward the sound and listen carefully. While waiting for the timer to ring, they continue with routines—depicting how Jesus came in the midst of normal activities.
* Herald (an official messenger or announcer): a child could come walking in the door hands cupped to mouth loudly proclaiming a message.
* Reconciled (to reestablish friendliness): From a human standpoint it would work to ask two students to pretend being angry at each other, then, when the rest of the class says, “Be reconciled!” they smile at each other and hug. However, care should be taken to explain that the rift between God and man came because of man's sin and that God's anger is based in His holiness—not a capricious anger.
* Hosts means lots, a great multitude.
* Hail (welcome enthusiastically): this could easily be acted out to verify their understanding.
* Even a perfect explanation of the phrases, “Veiled in flesh the Godhead see, hail th' incarnate Deity!” would fail to grant true comprehension to young minds. However, the miracle of God becoming man is an idea that should be talked about. This could be done by talking about a man choosing to become an ant in order to help the ants. Such an explanation would lead toward understanding the phrase, “Pleased as man with men to dwell,” and the meaning of Emmanuel (God with us.)

The music of this hymn, very appropriate for the triumphant tone of the message, has quite a few notes too high for young voices to sing well. Both pitching the music down and explaining some of the terms, as outlined above, will help children enjoy singing this beloved Christmas song as well as open a door to delighting in the message of salvation.Bibliography

Johnson, Guye. Treasury of Great Hymns. Greenville: Bob Jones University Press, 1986.

Luther Seminary. “Charles Wesley (1707-1788).” Hymnuts of the World. <<http://hymnuts.luthersem.edu/hcompan/writers/wesleyc.htm>> (16 March 2007).

1. [Luther Seminary, “Charles Wesley (1707-1788),” Hymnuts of the World <<http://hymnuts.luthersem.edu/> [hcompan/writers/wesleyc.htm](http://hymnuts.luthersem.edu/hcompan/writers/wesleyc.htm)> (16 March 2007)](http://hymnuts.luthersem.edu/hcompan/writers/wesleyc.htm) [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. [Luther Seminary](http://hymnuts.luthersem.edu/hcompan/writers/wesleyc.htm) [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Guye Johnson, Treasury of Great Hymns (Grenville: Bob Jones University Press 1986). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Johnson, 79. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Johnson, 80. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Johnson, 80. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)