

## **The O Antiphons as a Pre-Christmas Meditation** (by Joe Colletti, PhD)

The "O Antiphons" are the seven antiphons that have been historically chanted or recited right before the Magnificat during Vespers of the Liturgy of the Hours during the period of Advent known as the Octave which consists of the seven days before Christmas Eve (December 17 - 23).

Each O antiphon is a reference to Christ. More specifically, each one highlights a title for the Messiah that relates to a messianic prophecy found in the book of Isaiah.

The messianic titles are as follows:

- O **S**apientia (O Wisdom)
- O **A**donai (O Lord)
- O **R**adix Jesse (O Root of Jesse)
- O **C**lavis David (O Key of David)
- O **O**riens (O Radiant Dawn)
- O **R**ex Gentium (O King of all Nations)
- O **E**mmanuel (O Emmanuel-God with Us)

Centuries ago a Benedictine monk noted that when you take the first initial of each title and read it backwards it forms an acrostic (E-R-O-C-R-A-S) for the Latin words "Ero Cras" which means "Tomorrow I Come" or "I will be there tomorrow."

May you take time out during the seven days before Christmas Eve and pray and mediate upon the O Antiphons and may you pause in between each in order to hear the Messiah say "Tomorrow I will Come."

"O Wisdom, O holy Word of God, you govern all creation with your strong yet tender care. Come and show your people the way to salvation."

"Tomorrow I will Come"

"O sacred Lord of ancient Israel, who showed yourself to Moses in the burning bush,  
who gave him the holy law on Sinai mountain:  
come, stretch out your mighty hand to set us free."

"Tomorrow I will Come"

"O Flower of Jesse's stem, you have been raised up as a sign for all peoples; kings stand silent in your presence; the nations bow down in worship before you. Come, let nothing keep you from coming to our aid."

"Tomorrow I will Come"

"O Key of David, O royal Power of Israel controlling at your will the gate of Heaven: Come, break down the prison walls of death for those who dwell in darkness and the shadow of death; and lead your captive people into freedom."

"Tomorrow I will Come"

"O Radiant Dawn, splendor of eternal light, sun of justice: come, shine on those who dwell in darkness and the shadow of death."

"Tomorrow I will Come"

"O King of all the nations, the only joy of every human heart; O Keystone of the mighty arch of man, come and save the creature you fashioned from the dust."

"Tomorrow I will Come"

O Emmanuel, king and lawgiver, desire of the nations, Savior of all people, come and set us free, Lord our God."

"Tomorrow I will Come"

The messianic prophecies found in the book of Isaiah that relate to each of the messianic titles of the O Antiphons follow:

**O Sapientia:** "O Wisdom, O holy Word of God, you govern all creation with your strong yet tender care. Come and show your people the way to salvation."

**Isaiah** - "The spirit of the Lord shall rest upon him: a spirit of wisdom and of understanding, a spirit of counsel and of strength, a spirit of knowledge and fear of the Lord, and his delight shall be the fear of the Lord." (11:2-3), and "Wonderful is His counsel and great is His wisdom." (28:29).

**O Adonai:** “O sacred Lord of ancient Israel, who showed yourself to Moses in the burning bush, who gave him the holy law on Sinai mountain: come, stretch out your mighty hand to set us free.”

**Isaiah** - “But He shall judge the poor with justice, and decide aright for the land’s afflicted. He shall strike the ruthless with the rod of his mouth, and with the breath of his lips he shall slay the wicked. Justice shall be the band around his waist, and faithfulness a belt upon his hips.” (11:4-5); and “Indeed the Lord will be there with us, majestic; yes the Lord our judge, the Lord our lawgiver, the Lord our king, he it is who will save us.” (33:22).

**O Radix Jesse:** “O Flower of Jesse’s stem, you have been raised up as a sign for all peoples; kings stand silent in your presence; the nations bow down in worship before you. Come, let nothing keep you from coming to our aid.”

**Isaiah** - “But a shoot shall sprout from the stump of Jesse, and from his roots a bud shall blossom.” (11:1), and “On that day, the root of Jesse, set up as a signal for the nations, the Gentiles shall seek out, for his dwelling shall be glorious.” (11:10). Remember also that Jesse was the father of King David, and Micah had prophesied that the Messiah would be of the house and lineage of David and be born in David’s city, Bethlehem (Micah 5:1).

**O Clavis David:** “O Key of David, O royal Power of Israel controlling at your will the gate of Heaven: Come, break down the prison walls of death for those who dwell in darkness and the shadow of death; and lead your captive people into freedom.”

**Isaiah** – “I will place the Key of the House of David on His shoulder; when he opens, no one will shut, when he shuts, no one will open.” (22:22), and “His dominion is vast and forever peaceful, from David’s throne, and over His kingdom, which he confirms and sustains by judgment and justice, both now and forever.” (9:6).

**O Oriens:** “O Radiant Dawn, splendor of eternal light, sun of justice: come, shine on those who dwell in darkness and the shadow of death.”

**Isaiah** - “The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; upon those who dwelt in the land of gloom a light has shown.” (9:1).

**O Rex Gentium:** “O King of all the nations, the only joy of every human heart; O Keystone of the mighty arch of man, come and save the creature you fashioned from the dust.”

**Isaiah** - “For a child is born to us, a son is given us; upon his shoulder dominion rests. They name him Wonder-Counselor, God-Hero, Father-Forever, Prince of Peace.” (9:5), and “He shall judge between the nations, and impose terms on

many peoples. They shall beat their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks; one nation shall not raise the sword against another, nor shall they train for war again.” (2:4).

**O Emmanuel:** “O Emmanuel, king and lawgiver, desire of the nations, Savior of all people, come and set us free, Lord our God.”

**Isaiah** - “The Lord himself will give you this sign: the Virgin shall be with child, and bear a son, and shall name him Emmanuel.” (7:14). Remember “Emmanuel” means “God is with us.”

Other Related Scripture References Include:

- **Wisdom:** Proverbs 1:20; 8; 9 and I Corinthians 1:30
- **Lord and Ruler of the House of Israel:** Exodus 3; Micah 5:2; Matthew 2:6
- **Root of Jesse:** Isaiah 11:10; Romans 15:12; Revelation 5:5
- **Key of David:** Isaiah 22:22; Revelation 3:7
- **Dawn of the East (Dayspring):** Luke 1:78, 79; Malachi 4:2
- **King of the Gentiles (Nations):** Revelation 15:3; Psalm 118:22; Isaiah 28:16; Matthew 21:42; Mark 12:10; Luke 20:17; Acts 4:11; Ephesians 2:20; I Peter 2:6
- **Emmanuel:** Isaiah 7:14; 8:8; Matthew 1:23; Haggai 2:7 (KJV)

The O Antiphons are also the inspiration of the beautiful medieval hymn, **Veni (O Come), Veni (O Come) Emmanuel**. Each stanza of this famous song is a poetic rendering of an O Antiphon, which is why the hymn is traditionally sung only during the eight days prior to Christmas. The lyrics follow.

### **O Come, O Come, Emmanuel**

**Words: Latin: c. 9th Century**

**Tr. by John M. Neale**

**Tr. by Henry S. Coffin**

**Music: VENI EMMANUEL**

**Adapted from Plainsong, Mode I**

**Thomas Helmore**

O come, o come, Emmanuel,  
And ransom captive Israel,  
That mourns in lonely exile here,  
Until the Son of God appear.

CHORUS: Rejoice! Rejoice! Emmanuel shall come to thee, O Israel!

O come, O Wisdom from on high,  
who orders all things mightily,  
to us the path of knowledge show,

and teach us in her ways to go.

CHORUS: Rejoice! Rejoice! Emmanuel shall come to thee, O Israel!

O come, O come, thou Lord of might,  
Who to Thy tribes on Sinai's height  
In ancient times didst give the law  
In cloud and majesty, and awe.

CHORUS: Rejoice! Rejoice! Emmanuel shall come to thee, O Israel!

O come, O Rod of Jesse free,  
Thine own from Satan's tyranny;  
From depths of hell Thy people save,  
And give them victory o'er the grave

CHORUS: Rejoice! Rejoice! Emmanuel shall come to thee, O Israel!

O come, thou Key of David, come,  
And open wide our heavenly home;  
Make safe the way that leads on high,  
And close the path to misery.

CHORUS: Rejoice! Rejoice! Emmanuel shall come to thee, O Israel!

O come, Thou Dayspring, come and cheer,  
Our spirits by Thine advent here;  
Disperse the gloomy clouds of night,  
And death's dark shadows put to flight.

CHORUS: Rejoice! Rejoice! Emmanuel shall come to thee, O Israel!

O come, Desire of nations, bind,  
In one the hearts of all mankind;  
Bid Thou our sad divisions cease,  
And be Thyself our King of peace.

CHORUS: Rejoice! Rejoice! Emmanuel shall come to thee, O Israel!