

The Singing Church 94

“The First Noel”

Sunday, January 5 at 8:00 & 10:45; Monday at 7 PM

The Epiphany of our Lord (observed) – 2014

Study with us on Wednesdays at 11 AM or 7 PM

Introduction: Dear friends in Christ: Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen! Today we are observing the **Epiphany** – *the day the Gentile wise men gave their worship and gifts to Jesus!* Before we turn our attention to the hymn, “**The First Noel**,” let’s consider its background:¹

- The hymn dates back to the 1500’s, *but it was an unpublished folk song until 1833.*
- The hymn is not entirely accurate, *as we will come to see*, but the writer was “**incredibly enthusiastic about Christmas and fully understood the wonder of Christ’s birth...**” But why the inaccuracy? Going back 500 years ago there were two key factors: (1) Few Bibles in circulation and (2) most people could not read, so “**the writer drew from the stories he had been told about the events of Christ’s birth.**”
- “The First Noel” also has a close connection to the Viking custom of the Yule Log: It was a fresh-cut hollowed-out tree, which was filled with oils and spices. “**Families that burned a Yule log each year believed that good luck would befall their household.** [Christians believe in God, not luck!] **When those who**

¹ Ace Collins, *Stories Behind the Best-Loved Songs of Christmas* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2001), 38.

embraced this custom became Christians, they adapted the Yule log to Christmas. Eventually the timber came to symbolize the wood of the cross.... In England, ‘The First Noel’ was sung each year by peasants as they lit the Yule log. Therefore, this became the song that started the entire Christmas season.... While the tradition of the Yule log has all but died out [*for which we give thanks to God*], the message of ‘The First Noel’ still burns brightly.”

1. **Stanza 1 and Refrain:** **The first Noel the angel did say, Was to certain poor shepherds in fields as they lay: In fields where they lay keeping their sheep, On a cold winter’s night that was so deep. Refrain: Noel Noel Noel Noel, Born is the King of Israel.** // Let’s focus on these words: Noel, shepherds, and King!
 - a. What does “Noel” mean? It’s the French word for “Christmas,” so our *Merry Christmas* is their *Joyeux Noel*. So Noel is “**a joyful shout expressing [happiness] at the birth of Christ.**”²
 - b. Shepherds: They were outside of Bethlehem caring for their sheep *when suddenly an angel appeared and announced:* “**Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is Christ the Lord.**” (Luke2:11 NIV)
 - c. King: Isaiah wrote about Jesus: “**He will reign on David’s throne and over his kingdom...from that time on and forever.**” (Isaiah 9:7 NIV)
2. **Stanza 2:** [Here is the *theological confusion*:] **They [the shepherds] looked up and saw a star, Shining in the east**

² Ibid., 38.

beyond them far: And to the earth it gave great light, And so it continued both day and night. // For the shepherds it was easy to find the Savior: *Go into nearby Bethlehem and find a baby lying in a manger (Luke 2:11-12)!* But the wise men came from far away, so they *saw* and *followed* the star ([Matthew chapter 2](#)).

3. **Stanza 3:** **And by the light of that same star, Three wise men came from the country far; To seek for a King was their intent, And to follow the star wherever it went.** // So the wise men, *probably three of them*, came “*from the east to Jerusalem and asked, ‘Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews? We saw his star in the east and have come to worship him.’*” ([Mt. 2:1-2 NIV](#)) So, as the stanza records, ♦they did come from far away ([2:1](#)), ♦they were seeking the newborn King of the Jews ([2:2](#)), and ♦they did follow the special star ([2:2, 9](#))!
4. **Stanza 4:** **This star drew nigh to the north-west; O’er Bethlehem it took its rest, And there it did both stop and stay, Right over the place where Jesus lay.** //
- a. So the star *led* and the wise men *followed*; their journey was long, but finally – *over Bethlehem* – it stopped. Somehow, *someway, by the power of God*, the star marked the spot where Jesus lay!
 - b. But when did the wise men actually arrive; on the night of Jesus’ birth or months later? Consider this Biblical timeline; Jesus:
 - i. Was born in a Bethlehem stable ([Lk. 2:1-20](#)).
 - ii. Was named on the eighth day ([Luke 2:21](#)).

- iii. Was consecrated at the temple at least 40 days after His birth *with the sacrifice of a poor man – since the gift of gold had not yet been received* ([Lev. 12:1-8; Luke 2:22-38](#)).
- iv. Was visited by the wise men in Bethlehem *while living in a house* ([Mt. 2:1-12](#)).
- v. Fled to Egypt ([Mt. 2:13-15](#)).
- vi. Returned from Egypt to live in Nazareth ([Mt. 2:19-23](#)).

5. **Stanza 5:** **Then entered in those wise men three, Fell reverently upon their knee, And offered there in his presence, Their gold and myrrh and frankincense.** // The gifts point to key aspects of Jesus: Gold: He is the King of kings; frankincense: Ultimate High Priest—*He intercedes for us*; myrrh: that perfume pointed to *His ultimate sacrifice for us*; **His life and His death removed our sins!**
6. **Stanza 6:** **Then let us all with one accord, Sing praises to our heavenly Lord, That hath made heaven and earth of nought, And with his blood mankind has bought.** // So the LORD is worthy of our praise – *creating everything from nothing*; then buying us with His own *holy precious blood!*

Conclusion: Therefore, let us gladly say “Joyeux Noel,” or “Merry Christmas,” which is “**a joyful shout expressing [happiness] at the birth of Christ**” our Savior!

And all God’s people said: **Amen!**

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