

Re-Writing Wesley: An Advent Intervention

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Background

At the appointment of The Episcopal Church's (TEC) Presiding Bishop, I served from 2009-15 as the TEC's representative to the Consultation on Common Texts (CCT). This body is the developer, publisher, and custodian of *The Revised Common Lectionary (RCL)*. During this period, I was concomitantly on TEC's Standing Commission on Liturgy and Music (SCLM). Just over a decade ago this latter agency commissioned me to convey to CCT a deep concern for the potential of the Holy Week lectionary to foster anti-Judaism, especially in the Year A proclamation of the Matthean Passion on Palm Sunday and the invariable yearly use of the Johannine Passion on Good Friday. The concern of the SCLM resolution to CCT was underscored with a paper by the late Louis Weil who explored the subject in depth.¹ Both as an ecumenically noted liturgical theologian of the Anglican Communion and as himself of Jewish heritage, Fr. Weil was particularly qualified to address the issues involved. Subsequently, as similar representations from other member traditions were communicated, CCT undertook to study and make recommendations for the mitigation of the potential for both tacit and explicit anti-Judaism in the *RCL* as well as any other common liturgical texts. These initiatives are presently reaching fruition through CCT's 2023 resolution to establish a task force to bring a report and recommendations on "Anti-Semitism in the Lectionary" to its annual meeting in April 2024.²

Meanwhile, work on questions of Anti-Semitism has expanded well beyond an exclusive focus on Holy Week. Indeed, when other "common texts" are added to lectionary considerations, the field is widened considerably. This is particularly true of hymns and, specifically, Charles Wesley's Advent hymn "Lo! he comes with clouds descending."³ Since its composition it has appeared in over 680 hymnals and now is published in an ecumenically wide range of contemporary hymnals.⁴ A problem arises, however, as a verse of Wesley's hymn is juxtaposed with the desideratum of avoiding Anti-Judaism in Christian liturgy.

In the summer of 2023, Stephen Kennedy, music director of Christ Church, Rochester, NY, and a teacher of sacred music at the Eastman School of Music in the University of Rochester, brought a related specific concern before me.⁵ Last Advent, choir members of Christ Church, replete with Eastman graduate students as well as parishioners, were articulating discomfort with the prospect of singing the second verse of Wesley's otherwise beloved Advent hymn. In particular, the patent Anti-Judaism character of that verse was represented as problematical. Knowing of my own involvement with such concerns, Kennedy asked me to consider a potential rewriting of the verse so as to alleviate the difficulty. The result of my reflections is set forth in the next section. Though the rationale for the rewriting is established by the concerns indicated here, specific reasons for certain changes will be presented in the commentary to follow.

Original Verse Juxtaposed with the Rewritten Verse

For the purposes of understanding the place of the old and new second verse in the poetic schema and development of the hymn, it will be useful first to lay out the entire hymn.

Lo! he comes with clouds descending, once for our salvation slain;
thousand thousand saints attending swell the triumph of his train:
Alleluia! Alleluia! Alleluia!
Christ the Lord returns to reign.

Every eye shall now behold him, robed in dreadful majesty;
those who set at naught and sold him, pierced and nailed him to the tree,
deeply wailing, deeply wailing, deeply wailing,
shall the true Messiah see.

Those dear tokens of his passion still his dazzling body bears,
cause of endless exaltation to his ransomed worshipers;
with what rapture, with what rapture, with what rapture,
gaze we on those glorious scars!

Yea, amen! let all adore thee, high on thine eternal throne;
Savior, take the power and glory, claim the kingdom for thine own:
Alleluia! Alleluia! Alleluia!
Thou shalt reign, and thou alone.⁶

Especially as paired with the tune *Helmsley*, the thrice-repeated words or phrases of the third line in each verse crescendo toward the final emphatic claims of the last lines. Thus, in the second verse, that refrain line literally nails the damnation of those who conspired to crucify the Christ/Messiah. And, although the authorities and military of the Roman Empire were co-conspirators in this result, they are no longer around. The Jews, however, are, and the all-too-easy imputation of collective guilt in the matter can detrimentally serve to foster Anti-Semitic attitudes and actions.

Here, then, is a proposed remedy to the problem in the rewriting of that second verse, laid out side-by-side with the original.

Every eye shall then behold him,
robed in dreadful majesty;
those who set at naught and sold him,
pierced and nailed him to the tree,
deeply wailing, deeply wailing,
deeply wailing,
shall the true Messiah see.

Every eye shall then behold him,
robed in splendidous majesty;
we who set at naught and sold him,
pierced and nailed him to the tree,
all repentant, all repentant,
all repentant,
shall our God's Anointed see.⁷

Rationale and Commentary

Like so many others before and after him, Wesley as hymnographer maintains an imaginary frame of reference informed by ancient (and therefore Scriptural) cosmology.⁸ The universe is three-tiered with heaven above, hell beneath, and the world flat. At any particular location on the face of that earth, the sun rises daily in the east and sets in the west. This pre-Newtonian imaginary for hymnody would not begin to change until the late 19th century. Among the examples that might be adduced, one of the first such efforts is to be found in John Ellerton's evening hymn "The day thou gavest, Lord, is ended."⁹ The missionary context of the hymn led Ellerton to an imaginary that, while still not Einsteinian in its cosmology, is yet more like the vast universe in which we live today than the ancient cosmological imaginary. Thus, in making his theological and liturgical point, Ellerton states in verses 2 and 3:

We thank thee that thy Church, unsleeping while earth rolls onward into light,
through all the world her watch is keeping and rests not now by day or night.

As o'er each continent and island the dawn leads on another day, the voice of prayer
is never silent, nor dies the strain of praise away.¹⁰

The point here is not so much to choose between imaginaries, but to recognize their limitations. In other words, we may still use the ancient/Scriptural imaginary to acknowledge in everyday speech a glorious sunrise or sunset. Who would exclaim, "What a magnificent earth turn!"? The problem lies in taking the older imaginary literally, or as fact. If Wesley's commonly shared imaginary of Christ's *parousia*, however scriptural, were so taken, then a difficulty arises. Since the world is a globe in a heliocentric system, it is always half in day and half in night as it turns on its axis. No matter, then, the day or hour when the *parousia* occurs, "every eye" could not behold it. The older imaginary also depends on locating heaven as above, beyond the skies. If, then, this older imaginary continues to be employed, its figurative theological meaning must be preferred over any literal interpretation so dear to a scriptural fundamentalist world view.

Again, this is not so much a criticism of the company of hymnographers that Wesley joins in his poem; it is, rather, to lay the foundation for an excellent develop-

ment in his imaginary of the *parousia*.¹¹ In that *parousia*, Wesley does not imagine Christ as showing alone. The text conjoins with the fulfilling appearance of Christ the “thousand thousand saints attending” as part and parcel of the completion. In this he echoes the Apostle in I Corinthians 15:

... for as all die in Adam, so all will be made alive in Christ. Christ the first fruits, *then at his coming [parousia]* those who belong to him.¹²

In the event of the kingdom’s fulfillment there is, by Wesley’s great image, a reuniting of the Church militant and triumphant. But the Church struggling on earth along with those “who swell the triumph of his train” only do so by virtue of the salvation offered through the cross. And to that theme the second of the hymn’s verses turns, along with the occasion of the contemporary problematic that has led to the proposed rewriting. The theme of judgment is articulated in the second line of verse two. Hence, Christ appears “robed in *dreadful* majesty.” As this theme is introduced, the salvific effect of the cross in offering salvation for the entire human community tends to be eclipsed by the image of judgment upon “those who set at naught and sold him” and their fate.¹³ Such considerations lie behind the alternative construction of verse two where the word “splendrous” is substituted for “dreadful,” thus rendering the final judgment welcoming rather than fearful. The difference of nuance here is thoroughly exhibited, for instance, in God’s judgment as extensively explored in that longest of Psalms *Beati immaculati*, no. 119.¹⁴ The distinction here rests upon the difference between judgment and judgmentalism.

This recasting of the quality of judgment attendant upon the *parousia* leads directly to the proposed change of pronoun at the outset of the third line in verse two. The “those” of the verse immediately brings to mind in the first place the ones who “sold” Jesus to be crucified as well as, secondly, the Roman authority and its agents who executed him. Included in the first group is everyone from Judas, to the crowd calling for Jesus’ crucifixion, to the condemning Sanhedrin that handed Jesus over. Nor should it be forgotten that according to the Gospels, even Jesus’ disciples either deserted or, as in Peter’s case, directly denied him. The Roman authority and its agents are, of course, no longer around, but in the history of Christianity it has been, almost from the beginning, all-too-easy to impute continuing guilt to the Jews for the whole crucial episode. This is the foundation of Christian anti-Judaism and has effectively promoted persistent anti-Semitic attitudes and the outbreak of pogroms or other violence against Jews.¹⁵ Insofar as the “those” of Wesley’s hymn participate in such attitudes or their incitement to violence, a change of pronoun in the verse is indicated.

The clue for the proposed change can be found in a standard Holy Week hymn particularly appropriate to the Good Friday liturgy with its Johannine passion: “Ah, holy Jesus, how hast thou offended?”¹⁶ The hymn asks the rhetorical question about the crucifixion, “Who was the guilty? Who brought this upon thee?” and answers, “Alas, my treason, Jesus, hath undone thee. ’Twas I, Lord Jesus, I it

was denied thee, I crucified thee.”¹⁷ The use of this hymn on Good Friday brings home the point of human solidarity in sin over time: the confession of personal guilt relieves the temptation to impute the rejection of a divinely proffered salvation to others, in this case the Jews collectively, but, rather, leads to the proposed change in Wesley’s hymn from others to oneself.

More, however, is involved here than individual piety acknowledging guilt and repenting the sin of separation from God in the person and work of Jesus as the Christ. The corporate nature of the sin attendant upon the crucifixion undergirds the change from “those” (pointing the finger at others) to “we” as participating in the willful rejection of the salvation offered to all. The anatomy of sin as moving through human history reflects the theological fact that, in the economy of salvation, atonement is not limited to a past (a *then*) but is a choice in the present (a *now*). All of this is aptly summarized in an Advent hymn by Walter Russell Bowie:

Lord Christ when first thou cam’st to earth, upon a cross they bound thee,
and mocked thy saving kingship then by thorns with which they crowned thee:
and still our wrongs may weave thee now new thorns to pierce that steady brow,
and robe of sorrow round thee.

O awful love which found no room in life where sin denied thee,
and, doomed to death, must bring to doom, the powers which crucified thee,
till not a stone was left on stone, and all those nations’ pride, o’erthrown
went down to dust beside thee!

New advent of the love of Christ, shall we again refuse thee,
till in the night of hate and war we perish as we lose thee?
From old unfaith our souls release to seek the kingdom of thy peace,
by which alone we choose thee.

O wounded hands of Jesus, build in us thy new creation;
our pride is dust, our vaunt is stilled, we wait thy revelation:
O love that triumphs over loss, we bring our hearts before thy cross,
to finish thy salvation.¹⁸

Among other considerations, this hymn provides ample emphasis for the corporate as well as personal repentance that is necessary to the appropriation of the divine salvation offered in, with, and through Jesus as the Christ. And, in this regard, it exhibits the inspiration that led to replacing the thrice repeated “deeply wailing” of Wesley’s penultimate line to a triple singing of “all repentant.” But to be clear, the word “all” here is not meant to imply universal salvation. It remains always a matter of choice whether humanity, individually or taken as a whole, accepts the proffered salvation and acts upon its implications. The “all,” rather, refers to the totality of a remorse that blossoms into repentance and lived participation in the fulfilling of the Reign of God/Kingdom of Christ/Commonwealth of the Holy Spirit.

In regard to Wesley's quintessential Advent hymn, then, a penultimate point about judgment stands to be made at the intersection of the three elements of kingdom, salvation, and judgment itself. It concerns the matter of universal salvation that has been a vexed question in the history of Christian doctrine. From a strictly orthodox point of view, universal salvation has been deemed heretical. However, there are nuances beyond the usual considerations of those who are saved and therefore included in the Divine Realm, and those who are excluded. This discussion has maintained that salvation is freely offered to all. Judgment comes into play, nevertheless, in consideration of whether that salvation is accepted and proves subsequently transformational for those involved. As Divine judgment has been her restated in a positive light, it has appeared not so much as a condemnation from God, but rather, the result of a stubborn human refusal to enter into the terms of salvation for living the life of the Kingdom. From the Hebrew tradition influencing Christian doctrine, for instance, this refusal is seen as preferring the things of death rather than opting for the proffered redeemed life.¹⁹ Similarly, from the influence of classical tradition on Christian doctrine, judgment can be viewed as the human propensity to prefer habits of deceit, dissolution, and disfigurement rather than entering into and living by the true, the good, and the beautiful.²⁰

As a final matter of commentary on the proposed rewritten verse, the last line in Wesley's version nails down (to put a fine point on it!) the potential exclusion of the "those who set at naught and sold him" from any hope of salvation. The proposed alternative serves at once to maintain the emphasis on Jesus as the Christ in effecting a salvation based on a profound change in the human heart and mind as well as avoiding the anti-Judaism or anti-Semitism implied by the contrast of seeing "the true Messiah" to the vision of "our God's Anointed" as redeemer.

With such a focus on the cross as the means of the proffered divine salvation, worshipers can then enter more positively into the vision of Wesley's concluding two verses. The penultimate verse reminds the singing assembly of the cost of salvation ("those dear tokens of his passion still his dazzling body bears"). And finally, making reference to the doxological ending to the Lord's Prayer,²¹ the last verse repeats the threefold "Alleluia!" and finishes with the acclamation of Christ's sovereignty in that kingdom as intended for the common good not only of the human community but of a renewed creation.

Concluding Reflection

The exercise of this essay has intended to reiterate the importance in our worship of paying attention to how we speak or sing of the Divine Realm. Worship is that locus wherein basic attitudes for Christian life and mission are formed, as well as the place where the energies of grace nourish their growth for exhibition in the world. The present effort has also relied on a corollary to this liturgical theory. Succinctly put, it is that people tend to believe what they sing. Taken together, then, it remains crucial that worshipers stay alert to said or sung language that we

employ in our celebration and appropriation of God's salvation through the presence and practice of the Divine Realm. We should not then fear to carefully alter even texts that have been hallowed by wide-ranging or long-time usage. After all, like the Sabbath, the texts were made for us, not we for them.²²

Notes

1. Weil's paper was attached to my 2013 Denominational Report to CCT (part II. C.). The minutes of CCT meetings are archived on the CCT website: www.commontexts.org.
2. See CCT's website at www.commontexts.org under News & Events. It appears that the preferred term in reference to these questions has changed from anti-Judaism to anti-Semitism.
3. Wesley's hymn was itself a re-composition of John Cennick's "Lo, he cometh, countless trumpets" first published in 1752. The text we have from Charles Wesley first appeared in his 1758 *Hymns of Intercession for All Mankind*. Wesley gave it the title "Thy Kingdom Come." Almost from the beginning the text was associated with the tune *Helmsley* and it remains so in an ecumenically wide-ranging number of hymnals today. *The Hymnal 1982* does, however, provide the tune *St Thomas* as an alternative. See Raymond F. Glover, gen. ed., *The Hymnal 1982 Companion*, vol. 3A (New York: Church Hymnal Corporation, 1994), 106-111. This hymn is in the public domain.
4. See the entry for this hymn at <http://www.thehymnary.org>.
5. Christ Church is a cathedral-sized building in the heart of the city. It features magnificent organs, and a superb musical program influenced greatly by its proximity to the world-renowned Eastman School of Music. As developed by Stephen Kennedy, the Sunday evening *Schola Cantorum* is often featured in syndicated broadcasts and with the general choir has also made a number of recordings. The choir field-tested the substitute verse with approbation during Advent 2023.
6. Text at *The Hymnal 1982* (New York: Church Hymnal Corporation, 1985), nos. 57, 58. The tunes are, respectively *Helmsley* and *St Thomas*, each metrically 87.87.12.7.
7. © 2023, William H. Petersen. All rights reserved. This text may be used in service bulletins or hymnal supplements with acknowledgement.
8. An *imaginary* or *imaginaries* are iconic frames of reference that serve to enable a social construction of reality. They are more comprehensive than *world views* which tend to be limited as solely intellectual concepts. As such, *world views* tend to neglect the basic anthropological fact that human beings are primarily desiring animals and only secondarily intellectual ones. This is, however, not to denigrate the intellectual: we would not know ourselves to be primarily desiring creatures if not for our intellectual capabilities as reflected in the self-complimentary designation we give ourselves as *homo sapiens*, in distinction to other life forms. *Imaginaries*, then, as more comprehensive in scope, allow for the presence and operation of affect and will as interacting with the intellectual. For a fuller, in-depth discussion of *imaginaries* as over against *world views*, see James K. A. Smith, *Worship, World View, and Cultural Formation* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2009), especially pp. 39-73.
9. Ellerton's text first appeared in 1870, revised slightly in 1875, and reached definitive form by 1889. Though other tunes have been employed, the text has virtually been wedded to *St Clement* from its inception. See *Hymnal 1982 Companion*, vol. 3A, 44-45.
10. *Hymnal 1982*, no. 24. Emphasis added.
11. In this discussion, I am purposely avoiding any use of the phrase "second coming" in reference to Christ's *parousia*. As I claimed in *What Are We Waiting For? Re-Imagining Advent for Time to Come* (New York: Church Publishing, 2017), "second coming" language does not appear until two-and-a-half centuries into the development of Christianity. It also has the immense difficulty of begging many questions about Christian claims and understandings of the permanence of Christ's post-resurrection presence. The point of the *parousia* is a looking forward to the ultimate fulfillment of the Reign of God/Kingdom of Christ/Commonwealth of the Holy Spirit that Jesus as the Christ in his earthly ministry proclaimed as present, accessible, and effective. See especially pp. 10-28 of my book for a fuller discussion of the point.

12. I Corinthians 15:22-23. NRSV (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989). Emphasis added.
13. The scope of the salvation proffered through the cross indicated in this sentence, of course, rejects any hint of the Calvinist view articulated by the Synod of Dort in 1619 in its key article 'limited atonement' i.e., that the cross is only effective for the pre-determined elect. This stands in stark contrast to the view expressed by the Anglican poet and preacher John Donne in the same period. See especially the line in Donne's poem *La Corona*, "Salvation to all that will is nigh" in the segment entitled "Annunciation."
14. As found in the 1979 *Book of Common Prayer* (pp. 763-780), the 176 verses of Psalm 119 are divided into sections of eight verses, each an acrostic on the letters of the Hebrew alphabet. God's judgment/judgments are extensively articulated and praised in a welcoming fashion, e.g., Ps 119:20, "My soul is consumed at all times with longing for your judgments." In terms of Last Judgment imagery, this positive view is echoed in the words of the late Old Testament scholar R.B.Y. Scott's Advent hymn, "O Day of God." See *Hymnal 1982*, 600, 601: "O day of God, draw nigh in beauty and in power, come with thy timeless judgment now to match our present hour," or again, in the last verse, "O day of God, draw nigh as at creation's birth, let there be light again, and set thy judgments in the earth." This is a view of the divine judgment(s) that leads to the attractiveness of "robed in *splendrous* (rather than *dreadful*) majesty," as Christ appears "to judge the living and the dead" as in the Nicene Creed.
15. Though the Romans are no longer around, the persistence of judicial murder of individuals or of acts of genocide carried out by secular and/or religious authority has been and is a continuing scourge in subsequent human history. As to the early appearance of anti-Judaism, see the Matthean Gospel's passion narrative ("let his blood be upon us and upon our children," Mt 27:25) or in the Johannine Gospel, the unrelenting use of the pejorative "the Jews" who stand in finally fatal opposition to Jesus and his disciples (as if these latter were not themselves Jews!).
16. That this hymn is a standard is evidenced by its inclusion in 134 contemporary hymnals (see <http://www.thehymnary.org>). Appearing as a pietist meditation in both Latin and German in 1630 by Johann Herrmann, it was set from the beginning to the affective Johann Crüger tune *Herzliebster Jesu*. The words are based on a medieval meditation jointly attributed to St. Anselm and Jean de Fecamp (†1078). See *Hymnal 1982 Companion*, vol. 3A, 319-321. Robert Bridge's translation of the text has appeared in English-language hymnals since 1899.
17. *Hymnal 1982*, no. 158.
18. This 20th-century hymn is found in thirty-four contemporary hymnals (see <http://www.thehymnary.org>). Bowie, a priest of the Episcopal Church, wrote the poem in 1928 and it appeared in 1931 linked to the 1529 tune *Mit Freuden Zart*. The text was slightly altered for *Hymnal 1982* to remove any hint of anti-Semitism in the second verse by changing "and all a nation's pride o'erthrown" to "and all those nations' pride o'erthrown." Emphasis added.
19. The central locus of this distinction is found near the conclusion of the Torah at Deuteronomy 30:19 as Moses speaks for God: "I call heaven and earth to witness against you today that I have set before you life and death.... Choose life so that you and your descendants may live, loving the Lord your God, obeying him, and holding fast to him; for that means life to you..."
20. The typical recasting of judgment in the light of this classical distinction is found in the Johannine Gospel at 3:19: "And this is the judgment, that the light has come into the world, and people loved darkness rather than light because their deeds were evil." This follows directly on John 3:17: "Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him."
21. "For yours is the kingdom, the power, and the glory, now and forever. Amen." This conclusion is a liturgical addition to the prayer Jesus gave to his disciples as indicated twice in the New Testament, with slight variations: Matthew 6:9-13 and Luke 11:2-4. Some Matthean manuscripts add the doxology. Luke's version does not include the final phrase "but deliver us from evil." See *The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible*, vol. 3: K-Q (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1962), 154.
22. The reference, of course, is to Jesus' saying "The Sabbath was made for humankind, not human-kind for the Sabbath" (Mark 2:27).