

'Angels we have heard on high' * Unwrapping the carols
December 18, 2022 * Langford Community Church * Graham Gladstone

Pop quiz for you here. When we sing 'Gloooooooria in excelsis Deo,' what are we saying? 'Glory to God in the highest.' And do you know what language that is? Latin. As a kid, I always thought that was so cool to be singing this song in English and then all of a sudden break out into a whole new language – and LATIN at that! So neat!

I discovered last year that Latin is not the only language that we need to talk about when we talk about this carol. Because 'Angels we have heard on high' is actually a loose translation of an older French carol called 'Les anges dans nos campagnes.' A lot of carols that we sing were first written in English – 'O little town of Bethlehem,' 'Hark the herald angels sing,' 'Come Thou long expected Jesus' – but 'Angels we have heard on high' was originally written in French.

And since I have a French degree and since I spent a summer living in France, I thought it would be neat to look with you at the song that became 'Angels we have heard on high' because the original song emphasizes different things and has a different message I think. So what I'd like to do today is look at that earlier French version – one – so that we can sing 'Angels we have heard on high' with a new appreciation and two – so that we can hear what the earlier version has to say.

So here's what I've done – I've given you a chart today with the original French version and then my literal translation. And then I've put the translation into verse so that we can actually sing it. And then there's our 'Angels we have heard on high' just for comparison. As you can see, we only get 3/5 of the song with 'Angels we have heard on high,' so let's dig in and see what the original has to say.

Before we do that though, I want to read to you the passage of Scripture that lies behind both of these songs. So here's the Scripture – Luke 2:8-16. We've read this passage many times, but this carol gives us a new way to look at it. Luke 2:8-16.

8 And there were shepherds living out in the fields nearby, keeping watch over their flocks at night.
9 An angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified.
10 But the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid. I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people.
11 Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is Christ the Lord.
12 This will be a sign to you: You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger."
13 Suddenly a great company of the heavenly host appeared with the angel, praising God and saying,
14 "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace to men on whom his favor rests."
15 When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, "Let's go to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has told us about."
16 So they hurried off and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby, who was lying in the manger.
(Luk 2:8-16 NIV).

I want you to imagine that you were there on the outskirts of Bethlehem the night Jesus was born. If you lived in that region, could you see the glory of God filling the sky? Could you hear the angels singing 'Glory to God in the highest'?

I don't know for sure, but 'Les anges dans nos campagnes' sure thinks so. This song puts us on the outskirts of Bethlehem that first Christmas Eve and imagines that the answer is 'yes.' The song imagines that we're there and that we could hear the angels and so the song imagines us saying 'What is going on that there are angels singing in the sky?' Here's what it says -

*Les anges dans nos campagnes / Ont entonné l'hymne des cieux.
The angels in our countryside have sung the hymn of the heavens.*

This carol imagines that we are there. That we are looking over the fields around Bethlehem and hearing an angel chorus. 'Angels we have heard on high' puts it well – we have heard angels singing! And there's a neat little detail in the French – we haven't just heard angels singing in the countryside; angels we have heard in OUR countryside. Imagine the shock of that – in OUR backyard! – angels are singing.

And what are they singing? The hymn of the Heaven, the song that the angels have sung from eternity: Glory to God in the highest, peace on earth, goodwill to men.

And the angels aren't the only ones singing; all of Creation joins in to sing with them. 'The echo of the mountains repeats their melodious song.' This is personification again – the carol imagines that we can hear the angels, singing the hymn of heaven, in our own backyard, and hearing all of Creation – the mountains and the hills echoing back what they are singing.

Now pause for a minute – if you were there in Bethlehem that first Christmas Eve and you heard angels singing and all creation singing back in reply – what's the first question you would ask? 'Why? Why are these angels singing? Why are these glorious wonders taking place?'

And that's what verse 2 is. The song takes us to the very first people on the scene, the shepherds, so that we can ask 'what on Earth – and in Heaven – is going on?!' Why is it that angels are singing and the mountains in reply echo back their sweet refrains? Verse 2 -

*Shepherds, for whom is this celebration? (Shepherds, who are you celebrating?)
Who is the object or recipient of these songs?
What conqueror, what conquest deserves such shouts of triumph?*

Here, I think, is where this French song catches something that our English translation misses. We sing:

Shepherds, why this jubilee?
Why your joyous strains prolong?
What the gladsome tidings be
Which inspire your heavenly song?

That's fine. You can see the original peeking through here but this misses something that would have been obvious to people in the first century. If there is a celebration as grand and glorious as this, it must mean that a conqueror has just returned from battle. It's not just 'gladsome tidings' / happy news - some king or some general has triumphed over their foe and now they're coming back to bask in the glory and adulation of their people. 'This triumphant praise means some conqueror or warrior has come.' Who is it and what have they done to deserve it?

That's a profound question, especially given that the answer is not what you'd expect.

Verse 3, the shepherds respond:

They announce the birth of the liberator of Israel and sing with gratitude this solemn day.

Now at first glance, it looks as though the answer is exactly what we expected in verse 2. 'These celebrations announce the birth of the liberator of Israel.' Oh, ok, well, that means some glorious Messiah has come to liberate His people; He's triumphed over the bad guys and now He's back to set them free.' That's what you might think if you take 'libérateur' in French and make it into 'liberator' in English.

But there's a nuance to the word in French that's really important. 'Libérateur' doesn't just mean 'liberator,' it means 'redeemer,' 'deliverer.' And just like our 'redeemer' and 'deliverer' words, it means that this redeemer doesn't deliver His people the way that worldly ones do.

It really jumped out to me this year reading Luke 2 that there's a huge oxymoron right in the middle of it. We've heard it so often that we often flow right over it. But look at verse 11:

11 Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is Christ the Lord.

Now if we skip over the 'born' part – this is an incredible statement – a Saviour, who will sit on David's eternal throne, has come to be the Messiah, the Liberator, the Lord. That's like King Arthur, Barak Obama, Nelson Mandela, Arnold Schwarzenegger in the 80's all rolled up into one. Just think of the hope, the excitement that they inspired.

And yet, verse 12: 12 This will be a sign to you: You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger."

I wonder if the shepherds heard that and then said – 'Ok, this will be a sign to us - we'll find this baby wrapped in swaddling cloths – that's the sign - and then we'll go next door to find the Messiah' – and then the angels said 'no, silly, the baby IS the Messiah.'

That's an incredible statement. A hundred years ago, the head of an Orthodox church wrote: "He comes not as a fierce man of war, threatening all things living with death, but as a newly born babe, bringing the hope of rebirth and life into the entire realm of death."ⁱ

This newborn liberator is not the kind of liberator that the world produces; He is humble and vulnerable. You'd think a baby born to be the Saviour would be born under more auspicious circumstances, but no, He's born as a nobody with no place to lay His head, in a little manger where people feed their livestock. And yet the liberation that He accomplishes is greater than any victory a conqueror could win. He will deliver His people from the power of sin and death and give them eternal life in His Kingdom! The Deliverer has come!

Well, if that's the case, He deserves our highest praise! A great Deliverer deserves great praise! And that's where the song goes next. Verse 4 –

Shepherds, who are far from home, Join in with the chorus

And may the sound of your dear musettes ring out through the air

The song now has us saying ‘Well if that’s the case – if Jesus is the glorious Messiah – then what are you doing just standing there, shepherds?’ ‘Go join in the chorus.’ And here we get a little local flavour – a musette is a typically French instrument that’s essentially a bagpipe. The song says – ‘let the sound of your tender musettes fill the air with song.’ I’ll be honest, I can’t exactly imagine calling bagpipes ‘tender’ and I have a hard time picturing bagpipes at the manger. But it’s a neat way of saying ‘Whatever you’re good at, whatever your culture values, put it to use to praise the Lord!’

And that’s essentially where verse 5 goes. It says –

Let us look for this fortunate village who has seen Him born beneath her roofs.
Let us give to Him our tender praises and our hearts and our voices.

Our verse 3 is a pretty good direction translation of that -

Come to Bethlehem and see
Him whose birth the angels sing,
Come, adore on bended knee,
Christ the Lord, the newborn King.

That’s good – BUT – I think the French has a further nuance that’s important for us to see. The song looks at the situation – the circumstances of Jesus’ birth, the saving implications of Jesus’ birth – and says ‘Let us go to worship Him.’ And not just ‘on bended knee’ but with all our hearts and voices – with all that we are.

Because even within the Christmas story we see it’s possible to worship Jesus without really honouring Him. Herod wanted to worship Jesus ‘with bended knee’ and yet wanted nothing more in his heart than to kill Him. This song says ‘Honouring Him with your lips alone is useless. Honour Him with your lips and your life. Honour Him with all your hearts and voices.’

And this I think is where the French version of this song is helpful. If I asked you to tell me the message of ‘Angels we have heard on high,’ what would you say? If someone stopped me on the street and said ‘what’s the message of Angels we have heard on high,’ I’d probably say ‘Angels we have heard on high.’ The message is ‘There are angels on high and we have heard them.’

But the message of the French original and the message that I want you to take away today is this: ‘The lowborn King deserves our highest praise.’ The lowborn king deserves our highest praise.

Think about when William and Kate’s firstborn was born – Prince George. They had this formal procedure where they brought the news out of the palace on a royal easel and then moments later, people all around the world knew. The front page of every newspaper had the news,ⁱⁱ you could buy commemorative china to celebrate his birth.ⁱⁱⁱ

Now compare that to Jesus, born in a stable, swaddled in rags. A makeshift cradle for the Son of God on earth. You can’t get much lower than that...

But this lowborn king deserves the highest praise! I don't know what Prince George will accomplish in his lifetime, but I know for sure that he won't conquer death and Hell. Jesus did though and so He deserves our highest praise. Praise that stretches to the heavens, praise that's rooted deep within our hearts.

I don't know if you noticed this, but there's something really neat going on in this song. It's a chiasm, it's symmetrical - like a sandwich with two pieces of bread, two pieces of cheese and the meat right in the middle.

Verse 1 – We hear the angels sing.

Verse 2 – We ask the shepherds why?

Verse 3 – The *Redeemer* is *born*! (well if that's the case,)

Verse 4 – Shepherds, join the song!

Verse 5 – Let US worship too.

When somebody sets up a symmetry like this, the central idea is usually the CENTRAL idea! The songwriter wants us to know that this is a BIG deal! This baby born under humble circumstances is the Redeemer of all people! And not just a worldly Redeemer, a Heavenly Redeemer and an eternal one.

That's the big idea and then it works out the implications. If this baby is the Messiah, then He deserves the praise of all people. We hear the angels' song and join in with the hills and mountains to sing it back. And not just with our lips, but with our hearts and lives. With all that we are. Not holding anything back. Not our thoughts, not our wallets, not our will. Not just our voices but our hearts, tuned to sing His praise and honour Him with all that we are. The lowborn King deserves the HIGHEST praise.

That's an idea that that song 'Joy has dawned' that we sang last week opens with –
Not with fanfares from above,
Not with scenes of glory. (Not earthly ones anyways)
But a humble gift of love:
Jesus born of Mary.

And that's the idea of our original 'Les anges dans nos compagnes.' The lowborn king deserves the highest praise.

As we close, I want to direct you the rhyming version that I worked out. I did the literal translation but you can't sing that! So I wanted to try to capture the themes of the original but also make it work with the music that we know from our 'Angels we have heard on high.' So here it is, just so that you can see the words before we sing them:

*Angels in the countryside
sing the heaven's highest song
and the mountains in reply
sing it back with voices strong:*

*Shepherds why this jubilee?
Who deserves such glorious praise?
What triumphant deed unites
all the earth with voices raised?*

*They announce the wondrous birth
of the world's redeeming king
and with solemn gratitude
join their voices now to sing:*

*Shepherds, far from hearth and home,
join the chorus of the skies.
May your tender tunes unite
with creation's joyous cries.*

*Let us go to Jesus' side.
Let us worship and rejoice.
Let us offer all our praise,
honour Him with heart and voice.*

The lowborn king deserves the highest praise.

BENEDICTION

2 Peter 3:18 - (May you) grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. To him be the glory both now and to the day of eternity. Amen.

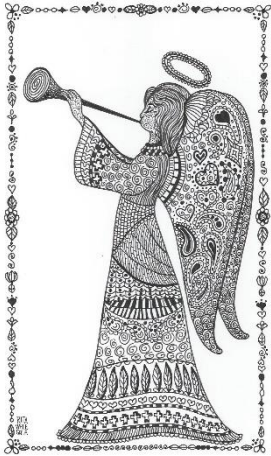
¹ Metropolitan Philaret of Moscow <https://www.christianity.com/wiki/holidays/top-advent-quotes-jesus-christ.html>

² <https://www.paimages.co.uk/collections/6863>

³ <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2013/jul/24/commemorative-royal-china-prince-george>

Les anges dans nos campagnes

French	Literal translation
<p>1. <i>Les anges dans nos campagnes Ont entonné l'hymne des cieux; Et l'écho de nos montagnes Redit ce chant mélodieux. Gloria, in excelsis Deo...</i></p>	<p>1. Angels in the/our countryside have sung the hymn of the heaven And the echo of the mountains repeats their melodious song</p>
<p>2. <i>Bergers, pour qui cette fête? Quel est l'objet de tous ces chants? Quel vainqueur, quelle conquête Mérite ces cris triomphants? Gloria, in excelsis Deo...</i></p>	<p>2. Shepherds, for whom is this celebration? Who is the object of these songs? What conqueror, what conquest deserves such shouts of triumph?</p>
<p>3. <i>Ils annoncent la naissance Du libérateur d'Israël, Et pleins de reconnaissance Chantent en ce jour solennel. Gloria, in excelsis Deo...</i></p>	<p>3. They announce the birth of the liberator/redeemer of Israel and sing with gratitude this solemn day.</p>
<p>4. <i>Bergers, loin de vos retraites Unissez-vous à leurs concerts Et que vos tendres musettes Fassent retentir dans les airs: Gloria, in excelsis Deo...</i></p>	<p>4. Shepherds, who are far from home, Join in with the chorus And may the sound of your dear musettes ring out through the air</p>
<p>5. <i>Cherchons tous l'heureux village Qui l'a vu naître sous ses toits, Offrons-lui le tendre hommage Et de nos coeurs et de nos voix! Gloria, in excelsis Deo...</i></p>	<p>5. Let us look for this fortunate village who has seen Him born beneath her roofs. Let us give to Him our tender praises and our hearts and our voices.</p>

For singing	'Angels we have heard on high'
<p>1. Angels in the countryside Singing heaven's highest song And the mountains in reply Sing it back with voices strong <i>Gloria, in excelsis Deo</i></p>	<p>1. Angels we have heard on high Singing sweetly o'er the plains And the mountains in reply Echoing their joyous strains Gloria, in excelsis Deo...</p>
<p>2. Shepherds why this jubilee? Who deserves such glorious praise? What triumphant deed unites all the earth with voices raised? <i>Gloria, in excelsis Deo</i></p>	<p>2. Shepherds, why this jubilee? Why your joyous strains prolong? What the gladsome tidings be Which inspire your heavenly song? Gloria, in excelsis Deo</p>
<p>3. They announce the wondrous birth of the world's redeeming king And with solemn gratitude Join their voices now to sing <i>Gloria, in excelsis Deo</i></p>	
<p>4. Shepherds, far from hearth and home, Join the chorus of the skies May your tender tunes unite With creation's joyous cries <i>Gloria, in excelsis Deo</i></p>	
<p>5. Let us go to Jesus' side Let us worship and rejoice Let us offer all our praise, Honour Him with heart and voice. <i>Gloria, in excelsis Deo</i></p>	<p>3. Come to Bethlehem and see Him whose birth the angels sing, Come, adore on bended knee, Christ the Lord, the newborn King.</p>