

The Songs of Christmas

ADVENT: Day 1

"WHAT CHILD IS THIS?"

*What Child is this who, laid to rest On Mary's lap, is sleeping?
Whom angels greet with anthems sweet While shepherds watch are keeping?
This, this is Christ the King,
Whom shepherds guard and angels sing,
Haste, haste, to bring Him laud, The Babe, the Son of Mary!*

Imagine yourself as a first-century shepherd tending your flock in the dark Judean wilderness. Another night has fallen, and the night will likely be the same as every other mundane night: keeping watch, fending off would-be predators, and listening to the bleating of sheep who've yet to fall asleep. Your eyelids begin to droop. The sleep you crave washes over you. The crook you hold close by falls from your grasp. But then. Something appears out of nothing. Bright lights dazzle you. And a voice speaks. Would you be afraid?

Luke tells us that the shepherds who were visited by an angel of the Lord on the night of Jesus' birth "were filled with great fear" (Luke 2:9).

Given what their every other night had always been like, is that any wonder? Then, once their shock had worn away at just the sight and sound of the angel's visit, the words they heard must have shocked them even more. "A savior? Here? The Christ? As a *baby*?"

Woken from their late-night shepherding, these men must have been incredulous. Instead, they believed the incredible news they'd just heard, telling each other, "Let us go over to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has made known to us" (Luke 2:15).

This is the scene William Chatterton Dix was thinking about when he wrote "What Child is This?"

The story behind the song

Dix was born in 1837 in Bristol, England, and moved to Glasgow, Scotland, as a young man. While there, he worked in insurance, but his favorite pastime was writing poetry. (In fact, Dix's middle name was given to him by his father in honor of poet Thomas Chatterton.)

When he was twenty-nine, he contracted a near-fatal illness that forced him to stay in bed for months. Dix became discouraged and depressed during this time and began to question if God were real. Consequently, he began to read a number of Christian books. He also began spending ample time in prayer.

And, of course, he wrote poetry. Many of the lyrics to his hymns were written during this time of his life, including *The Manger Song*, the longer poem in which "What Child Is This?" first appeared in 1865.

The poem was set to the melody of "Greensleeves," a famous tune of his day, and "What Child of This?" became a Christmas classic.

Eventually, Dix recovered from his illness and became a man of great faith—something his poetry evidences.

The reason for the question

Dix didn't ask "What child is this?" because he didn't know the answer. I don't think those first shepherds asked out of ignorance either. After all, the angel had *just* told them who the child was.

Rather, they may have asked such a question out of amazement: "What child *is* this?" The Jewish people expected a reigning King, not a wailing child. They longed for one who would conquer, not one who needed swaddling. Yet this was the Savior whom God saw fit to send to earth.

When you realize Who this child really is, you can know that the answers to life's toughest questions are true:

Is God real? Absolutely.

Does he love me? More than you can know.

I hope this book will help you remember the great truth about Christmas and Christ—the same truth that Mary and the shepherds knew about the baby born in a Bethlehem stable.

The baby sleeping in Mary's lap was Jesus, and he was—and is—Christ the King. This Christmas season, let's all "make haste to bring him laud (honor)."

The Babe, the Son of Mary, is our Lord and Savior. What child is this indeed.