

from *Paradise Lost*, Book 3*John Milton (1608–1674)*

Father, thy word is past, man shall find grace;
 And shall grace not find means, that finds her way,
 The speediest of thy winged messengers,
 To visit all thy creatures, and to all
 Comes unprevented, unimplor'd, unsought,
 Happie for man, so coming; he her aide
 Can never seek, once dead in sins and lost;
 Attonement for himself or offering meet,
 Indebted and undon, hath none to bring:
 Behold mee then, mee for him, life for life
 I offer, on mee let thine anger fall;
 Account mee man; I for his sake will leave
 Thy bosom, and this glorie next to thee
 Freely put off, and for him lastly dye
 Well pleas'd, on me let Death wreck all his rage;
 Under his gloomie power I shall not long
 Lie vanquisht; thou hast givn me to possess
 Life in my self for ever, by thee I live,
 Though now to Death I yield, and am his due
 All that of me can die, yet that debt paid,
 Thou wilt not leave me in the loathsom grave
 His prey, nor suffer my unspotted Soule
 For ever with corruption there to dwell;
 But I shall rise Victorious, and subdue
 My Vanquisher, spoild of his vanted spoile;
 Death his deaths wound shall then receive, and stoop
 Inglorious, of his mortal sting disarm'd.

ΤΩ ΚΡΟΝΟΥ ΚΑΙΡΩ

*In the Nick of Time***In the Bleak Midwinter***Kevin T. Bauder*

In one of the courses that I used to teach, I spent part of the semester discussing how hymns work. Hymns are poems, and poems are works of art. One of the principal ways in which art communicates is through analogy. A work of art sets up an analogy by drawing a comparison: *this* (something known) is like *that* (something unknown). To understand the art one must identify both the *this* and the *that*, and then locate the point of comparison.

Identifying these elements takes some degree of sensitivity and skill. To assist students in developing the necessary skill, I would ask them to analyze several hymns. Not all of these hymns would function on the principle of analogy (there are other ways to write hymns), but some would. Grading the results was always interesting and sometimes amusing.

One of the hymns that seemed to give many students trouble was Christina Rossetti's *In the Bleak Midwinter*. The first stanza especially would stop many of them.

In the bleak midwinter, frosty wind made moan,
 earth stood hard as iron, water like a stone;
 snow had fallen, snow on snow, snow on snow,
 in the bleak midwinter, long ago.

Students often couldn't get past the description of what looked, to them, like deep winter in the English countryside. They would object that Bethlehem rarely or never experienced deep snow. They would insist that the Holy Land was never or hardly ever frozen over. Many of them would accuse this hymn of a kind of geographical and cultural myopia, and some would go so far as to level the charge of cultural imperialism.

The problem was that these students were trying to read Rossetti's work as if it were a travel brochure instead of a hymn. They took it at surface level, as a description of the meteorological conditions at the time of Jesus' birth. They entirely missed the analogical dimension, hardly pondering how *this* was like *that*—or, for that matter, whether the poem even contained a *this* and a *that*.



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Rosetti's point was not about the weather of Judea. Instead, she was saying something about the condition of the human heart, which without Christ is iron hard and stone cold. Christ became incarnate to redeem a world of such hearts, and to provide that redemption He had to endure the winter that they had made.

The second stanza emphasizes the infinite gulf that the Second Person had to traverse:

Our God, heaven cannot hold him, nor earth sustain;
heaven and earth shall flee away when he comes to reign.
In the bleak midwinter a stable place sufficed
the Lord God Almighty, Jesus Christ.

Here is the paradox of the incarnation. Infinite God assumed human flesh. The mighty judge of all humbled Himself to be born in a manger. This was not His coming to reign, but His coming to save. To accomplish our salvation, He left the splendors of heaven and made His home within the frozen tundra of human rebellion. There in that wasteland He would be crucified for our sins.

In her penultimate stanza, Rosetti shifts the focus a bit. She considers the worship that that was offered to the incarnation of God the Son. He was adored by multitudes of the heavenly host, but in the midst of this outpouring the worship offered by Mary was unique.

Angels and archangels may have gathered there,
cherubim and seraphim thronged the air;
but his mother only, in her maiden bliss,
worshipped the beloved with a kiss.

Here is another paradox. All the mighty heavenly army worshipped Jesus as God the Son, now incarnate. By virtue of that same incarnation, however, Mary was in an unprecedented position. She, too, could direct her adoration to God the Son—but He was now also *her* son, born of *her* body. For Mary, fear of the Almighty merged with tender, motherly affection. She was indeed *theotokos*.

For her final stanza Rosetti moves to the problem of response: how does one meet the incarnate God, born into a sin-cold world, lying in a manger? She notes that shepherds and wise men had their offerings for the Christ-child. But what is really required? Her answer echoes Psalm 51:17, "The sacrifices of God *are* a broken spirit: a broken and a contrite heart, O God, thou wilt not despise." This insight gives her the answer:

What can I give him, poor as I am?
If I were a shepherd, I would bring a lamb;
if I were a Wise Man, I would do my part;
yet what I can I give him: give my heart.

This stanza contains irony: the heart that we now offer to the Lord Jesus Christ is the very heart that was stone cold and iron hard. This heart can be a suitable offering only because Christ has Himself made it suitable. He has redeemed us so that we may offer Him our devotion. We can give Him nothing that He has not first bought back from sin.

Rosetti's *In the Bleak Midwinter* is a good hymn because it is good art. It teaches us a lesson, but it teaches obliquely, reaching our affections through our imaginations. It teaches us not only what to believe, but how to feel. Granted, it would not be a trustworthy chapter in a travel guide to Israel, but it accurately projects the real topography of human sin and divine condescension. It deserves a place in our celebrations of the incarnation.



This essay is by Kevin T. Bauder, Research Professor of Systematic Theology at Central Baptist Theological Seminary. Not every one of the professors, students, or alumni of Central Seminary necessarily agrees with every opinion that it expresses.
