

## The Story Behind “What Child is This?”

**Scripture** -- Luke 2:15-20 KJV

“And it came to pass, as the angels were gone away from them into heaven, the shepherds said one to another, ‘Let us now go even unto Bethlehem, and see this thing which is come to pass, which the Lord hath made known unto us.’ And they came with haste, and found Mary, and Joseph, and the babe lying in a manger. And when they had seen it, they made known abroad the saying which was told them concerning this child. And all they that heard it wondered at those things which were told them by the shepherds. But Mary kept all these things, and pondered them in her heart. And the shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all the things that they had heard and seen, as it was told unto them.”

The Adoration of the Shepherds by Gerard van Honthorst



### Background



William Chatterton Dix

**William Chatterton Dix** (1837-1898) was an Anglican layman and a writer of hymns and carols. He was born in Bristol, England, the son of John Dix, a local surgeon. His father gave William his middle name in honor of the poet Thomas Chatterton, a poet about whom he had written a biography. William was educated at the Grammar School, Bristol, for a mercantile career, and became manager of a maritime insurance company in Glasgow where he spent most of his life. (Ref 1)

Dix was an insurance man by trade but a poet at heart. (Ref 2) His greatest love was his prose and poetry for Christ. He wrote two devotional books, a book for children, and scores of hymns, two of which remain popular Christmas carols: “What Child is This?” and “As with Gladness Men of Old.” (Ref 3)

At the age of 29 he was struck with a near fatal illness and consequently suffered months confined to his bed. During this time he became severely depressed. (Ref 1) While recovering, he underwent a spiritual renewal that led him to write several hymns, including lyrics to this carol that was subsequently set to the tune of "Greensleeves," a traditional English folk song. Although it was written in England, the carol is more popular in the United States than in its country of origin today. (Ref 4)

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The lyrics of “What Child is This?” are taken from a poem written by Dix called "The Manger Throne". The part of the poem that was utilized as the song's lyrics consists of three stanzas in total. The first verse poses a rhetorical question in the first half, with the response coming in the second half. The second verse contains another question that is answered, while the final verse is a universal appeal to everyone urging them to accept Christ. (Ref 4)

The Timeless Truths website (Ref 5) provided the lyrics and score for “What Child is This?”

**References:**

1. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/William\\_Chatterton\\_Dix](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/William_Chatterton_Dix)
2. Ace Collins, “Stories Behind the Best-Loved Songs of Christmas,” Zondervan, 2001
3. Robert J. Morgan, “Then Sings My Soul,” Thomas Nelson, 2003.
4. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/What\\_Child\\_Is\\_This%3F](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/What_Child_Is_This%3F)
5. [http://library.timelesstruths.org/music/What\\_Child\\_Is\\_This/](http://library.timelesstruths.org/music/What_Child_Is_This/)

## Lyrics for “What Child is This?”

Verse 1:

**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.**

Verse 2:

**Why lies He in such mean estate,  
Where ox and ass are feeding?  
Good Christians, fear, for sinners here  
The silent Word is pleading.  
Nails, spear shall pierce Him through,  
The cross be borne for me, for you;  
Hail, hail the Word made flesh,  
The Babe, the Son of Mary.**

Verse 3:

**So bring Him incense, gold, and myrrh,  
Come peasant, king to own Him;  
The King of kings salvation brings,  
Let loving hearts enthrone Him.  
Raise, raise a song on high,  
The virgin sings her lullaby;  
Joy, joy for Christ is born,  
The Babe, the Son of Mary.**

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# What Child Is This?

*...And she brought forth her firstborn son, and wrapped him in swaddling clothes, and laid him in a manger; because there was no room for them in the inn. Lk. 2:7*

1. What Child is this who, laid to rest On Ma - ry's lap is sleep - ing?  
2. Why lies He in such mean es - tate, Where ox and ass are feed - ing?  
3. So bring Him in - cense, gold, and myrrh, Come peas - ant, king to own Him;

Whom an - gels greet with an - thems sweet, While shep - herds watch are keep - ing?  
Good Chris - tians, fear, for sin - ners here The si - lent Word is plead - ing.  
The King of kings sal - va - tion brings, Let lov - ing hearts en - throne Him.

This, this is Christ the King, Whom shep - herds guard and an - gels sing;  
Nails, spear shall pierce Him through, The cross be borne for me, for you;  
Raise, raise a song on high, The vir - gin sings her lul - la - by;

Haste, haste, to bring Him laud, The Babe, the Son of Ma - ry.  
Hail, hail the Word made flesh, The Babe, the Son of Ma - ry.  
Joy, joy for Christ is born, The Babe, the Son of Ma - ry.