

A photograph of a bonfire at night. The fire is bright and intense, with yellow and orange flames rising from a pile of logs and branches. The background is a dark blue night sky filled with numerous small, white stars. The overall scene is peaceful and evocative of a winter night.

# *cristesmæsse*

*A Christmas poem by David Allem*

## Foreword

Popular poems for the majority of the last 600 years consist of counted syllables and rhyming ends. Robert Frost and Dr. Suess follow these patterns - for diverse audiences, of course.

However, from as long ago as the 5th century onward to the 15th century, the Old English poem was crafted differently.

Old English verse, according to J.R.R. Tolkien, used a metre and method almost identical to the old Norse poems. This style was already old in King Alfred's day (900's AD). Extant copies are few - so how ancient this Old English verse might be, no one knows for certain.

I discovered the Old English verse while reading Tolkien's "The Fall of King Arthur" and his translation of "Beowulf". He calls the technique a sort of "alliterative verse" which is quite a bit more than what our English teachers call "alliteration".

Each line has two main stresses: "Glory dims / to glowing grace". They are balanced and linked by the same letter, sound or syllable in the dominant syllable of each phrase ("glory" and "glowing" above).

Another characteristic of Old English verse is the harsh manner in which they use metaphors and similes. Modern writers typically use "like" and "as" to paint poetic pictures.

Old English paints in sudden and compact ways that require the reader to unpack them quickly as in, “darkness thawing,” or “ominous cheer”.

To quote the son of Tolkien, “Our language now has become quick-moving (in syllables), and may be very supple and nimble, but it is rather thin in sound and in a sense too often diffuse and vague. The language of our forefathers, especially in verse, was slow, not very nimble, but very sonorous, and was intensely packed and concentrated – or could be in a good poet.”<sup>1</sup>

My enjoyment of Old English verse affected my longtime desire to write a poem of the first Christmas. The reader might find an urge to slow down to catch the story’s emotions, pictures and meanings - if the Old English still works its ancient magic.

However, I’ve also fallen into the temptation of including some “modern” rhythm and rhyme, for which the reader might be grateful after consuming stanzas of Old English patterns.

In addition, I should tell you that this poem is part of a larger poem-epic beginning in Mesopotamia with the Wise Men when the star first appeared. Other characters to appear in that future larger work are Simeon the Temple priest who blessed the infant Jesus, Anna the widow who prophesied over baby Jesus, King Herod and his sister Salome (who freed Jewish elite slated for execution upon Herod’s death).

For now, though, I hope you enjoy this version of our Savior's journey from Heaven to earth. May His journey continue into your heart and through your life until we meet Him in glory.



## Prologue

A town between a Caesar's throne  
And Wisdom, westward seeking,  
holds hope in huddled swaddling clothes  
mild by his mother, sleeping

"I see the Sovereign not in the now,  
behold his banner, but not so near."  
In wonder, awake! In worship, bow!  
His kingdom comes with calling clear.

A star will shine, o'er Jacob soar  
a ruler rise from Israel's sons  
Lasting Ever, our Counselor,  
God-begotten, the Promised One.

We see His scepter, strong and righteous  
Prince of Peace, proclaiming Gladness.  
"Winds, blow and wave the flags of justice!"  
His light has loosed the bonds of darkness.

## Story

Shepherds peer o'er shadowed hills,  
howlish evil hearing faintly.  
Two awake and ten asleep  
groggy watchmen guarding sheep.

Sky their ceiling, sod their floor,  
homes bound only by hill and dale.  
Grass growing barely ground unforgiving  
laboring alone long wearying.

Unwelcome watchmen long they wandered,  
dry country-confined corralling selves,  
away and apart, animal befriended  
God's unnoticed, forgotten nearly.

For skins and butcher, supply they, nameless.  
For priest and parish, provide they, friendless.  
For wool and yarn, wondering countless  
despairing dawns, "Do I matter?"

The frost lay down. Its frigid sleep  
on grasses glow in glistening peace.  
Lantern-lit, few lonely flames  
dancing dimly on darkened plains.

On farthest ridge, horizon's edge  
moon unmask a movement faint,  
so small a shepherd squints to wonder,  
"Poaching thieves or prowling beast?"

In alarming silence a herdsman starts,  
awakening comrades, weapons checked.

Deathly still gaze sentries far  
on growing mists and growling fog.

Numb, unnerved, "No earthly thing,"  
from quivering lips fear comes unleashed.  
Black and fearsome the billowing cloud,  
thundering peals, ethereal blasts,  
roll and race rising never,  
like chariots churning its trail to dust.

Calming slumber and quiet cease.  
Silence pierced. Celestial light  
surrounds the shepherd's circle quaking.  
God's glory dons a holy night.

Billows brew a brilliant shaft,  
firmament to field ignites.  
An angel passage, like ancient past  
when holy heralds unhide His might.

Smoke and dread, a sword divides,  
shaft of glory sheds Heaven's guise.  
A Pillar of peace and light descends  
and fades to face the frightened men.

A man-like frame, magnificent  
stood dazzling, darkness thawing.  
One hand held high, he hails his Lord  
the other outstretched drawing  
herdsman helpless, clueless cowering,  
entranced and trembling, troubled bowing.

Glory dims to glowing grace.  
Might and mirth mingle the face.  
A Voice reverbs in heart and ear  
with oracles full of ominous cheer.

“Peace!” he shouts and a promise he bears,  
good news, great joy and gladness.  
“For all, a Prince, God has prepared:  
A Savior, His Son incarnate!”

“Dash now to David’s town to find  
unfolding faith, a family sign!  
A barn holds babe in outcast birth,  
the Swaddled Son, Sovereign on earth!”

Billows dread-full, skies are sliced  
a billion doorways dawning,  
bursting forth in festive fright  
Jehovah’s host in joyful haunting.

Heav’n meets hill, as dew on the dale  
Breath Divine blows down.  
The Pillar of peace in power retreats  
as Heav’n’s host resound:  
“Glory to God in highest heaven.  
Peace on earth, goodwill toward men!”

Praise and applause in waterfalls  
drench the darkless vault.  
Shepherds soaked in shadows bright  
jubilate in joyous awe.

From field swiftly fleet they run  
barns and alleys the band scouring.  
Angelic decree drives them frantic  
toward miracle waiting, Immanuel nigh.

Burrowed babe in borrowed hay  
Mother sleeping, Father keeping  
family fire lit, affirming  
prophet's word and promise kept.

Remembers Joseph his wrenching dreams  
to believe a lingering prophecy.  
Betrothed in truth though dreading scandal  
marries his Mary in divine pregnancy.

Season fashions her sanctuaries:  
a womb for Wisdom weaving,  
a refuge of Spirit offered unwilling,  
a stable of stone for safekeeping.

“House of Bread”, haven Bethlehem!  
Behold, the honor bestowed:  
Decree supreme may crowd your streets  
while King and Kingdom come veiled.

Joseph draws in gentle sweep  
burly-handed, clutching close  
Word-made-flesh, Lord made little  
soundly sleeping, secluded peace.

Hands he Messiah, helpless son  
warm in Mary's arms now resting  
bound in love, babe unknowing  
wears her whispered worship-kiss

Marvel they on manger bed,  
on cradle crude. How could the Maker  
of sky and sea and human heart  
unfold his own two infant hands?

Father and Mother find they with Babe  
astonished all of angels! Their tales  
of encounters enjoin them in joy – their bond  
as vagabonds chosen invaded by God.

This night lays still nigh to Mary  
Hope of the world in huddled shroud  
of worshipping few, wonderment new  
that chosen were they to cherish His dawn.

Wooden plank-roof and worn floor-stone  
house the homeless Holy One.  
Christ and Spirit the cradle make  
an altar humble for awe-filled hearts

No gloom abiding, glad tidings instead.  
Burden of bondage broke He their yoke.  
In the land of the living liberty holds  
power o'er the shadows and peace o'er the soul.

Shadow of sin enshrined in each heart  
chased away by this Child of the Sun  
whose holiness burns with heavenly fire  
and forever dawns in forgiving light.

## Epilogue

Compassion Eternal, fashioned of dust,  
Radiant Image of rescuing God.  
From manger to mountain, manifest Truth  
challenging temple with troubling Grace.  
The path of prophet and priest he treads  
relinquishing life as Lamb's sacrifice.

From tragic tomb to triumphant throne,  
Christ of the cradle, now King, reborns  
each person despairing, perfection desiring,  
who bows devoted on bended-knee,  
embracing Prophet Priest and King.  
Immanuel's image, imparts He eternal.



<sup>1</sup> Tolkien, J.R.R. (1993). "The Fall of Arthur." Edited by Christopher Tolkien. London. HarperCollins. p 231.

### Scriptures referenced:

|         |                                                                                    |
|---------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Page 4  | Numbers 24:17; Isaiah 9:2-7;<br>Psalm 45:6; Isaiah 62:10-12                        |
| Page 5  | Luke 2:8                                                                           |
| Page 6  | Luke 2:9; Exodus 19:18; 40:34;<br>Ezekiel 1:4; 8:2                                 |
| Page 7  | Luke 2:10-14                                                                       |
| Page 8  | Luke 2:15-18; Matthew 1:18-25;<br>John 1:14                                        |
| Page 9  | John 1:1-4; Revelation 1:17-18;<br>Matthew 1:21                                    |
| Page 10 | Hebrews 1:1-3,8-12; John 3:3-17;<br>Colossians 1:13-15, 3:10; Revelation<br>21:3-5 |

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