



The French word **Noel** is used during the Christmas Season.
What was its original meaning in Latin?

Question: What is the meaning of Noel?

Answer:

Noels were being sung in Latin or French for centuries before the word found its formal way into our hymn book language in the 1800s. The earliest known musical use of **noel** occurred in the text of a Christmas motet (a short piece of sacred choral music) called "Nova vobis gaudia," which was written in the 1400s.

Every year, people sing songs like "The First Noel" at Christmas, and some may wonder what a "noel" is. In French, **joyeux noel** means "Merry Christmas."

In centuries past, English speakers borrowed the word **noel** from the French language. It can be traced further back to the Latin word *natalis*, which can mean "birthday" as a noun or "of or relating to birth" as an adjective.

Another possible root for noel, also from the French, is the word **nouvelles**, meaning "news."

As the popular Christmas season carol says, "The first noel the angels did say / Was to certain poor shepherds. . . ." The meaning of "news" certainly makes sense in that context; however, the early usage and definition of noel seem to focus more on the idea of birth [or perhaps in the hymnal context, it relates to a combination of the two: news of the birth (of the Christ child)].

There are very few records giving the details of the earliest Christmas practices, but at least as early as the 4th century, some Christian groups were celebrating **natus Christus** on December 25. Since their almanac referred to the day as "the birth of Christ," it would be natural to see derivative words like nael and noel used in the same way to celebrate the joyous season.

In the Middle Ages, several English carols began with *nowell*, and French carols similarly used *noel*. Since early songs often used the first word as the title, a "noel" came to refer to any song about the birth of Christ. Because of this, the word now carries the dual general and inferred meaning of a Christmas song and the Christmas celebration itself.

In fact, our English-derived Christmas carol "**The First Noel**" was first published in a book titled *Carols Ancient and Modern*, edited by William Sandys in 1823. The message of the song is the joyous pronouncement that the King of Israel has been born. When we sing the song or wish someone a joyous noel, we are following the example of the Angels, announcing the good news that Jesus Christ was born, not just for Israel, but for all [human]kind, so we could receive forgiveness of sins through Him.

(SR: <https://www.gotquestions.org/Noel-meaning.html>)