

# biblical RESOURCES

*And the Word was made flesh and lived among us*



**Epiphany 6 January 2014** *A star shall come out of Jacob*

**Isaiah 60:1-6; Psalm 72 (71); Ephesians 3:2-3,5-6; Matthew 2:1-12**

## Wise men from the East came

Matt 2:1 In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem, 2 asking, "Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews? For we observed his star at its rising, and have come to pay him homage." 3 When King Herod heard this, he was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him; 4 and calling together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Messiah was to be born. 5 They told him, "In Bethlehem of Judea; for so it has been written by the prophet:

6 'And you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for from you shall come a ruler who is to shepherd my people Israel.'"

Matt 2:7 Then Herod secretly called for the wise men and learned from them the exact time when the star had appeared. 8 Then he sent them to Bethlehem, saying, "Go and search diligently for the child; and when you have found him, bring me word so that I may also go and pay him homage." 9 When they had heard the king, they set out; and there, ahead of them, went the star that they had seen at its rising, until it stopped over the place where the child was. 10 When they saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy. 11 On entering the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother; and they knelt down and paid him homage. Then, opening their treasure chests, they offered him gifts of gold, frankincense,

and myrrh. 12 And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road.

### Initial Observations

The readings from the Infancy Gospels bear an unusually close link to narratives in the Old Testament. Again, the writer is exploring the identity of Jesus, using citations and re-written narratives. It all may seem strange to us, but the original hearers—Jewish Christians—would have had no trouble picking up the resonances and getting at the meaning expressed in the stories.

### Old Testament Background

(i) Behind the story of the magi—wise men—lies the story of Balaam from Numbers 22-24. In the Book of Numbers, an evil king of Moab tries to use the seer/magus Balaam to bring disaster on the people of Israel "because they were so numerous". Against God's will, Balaam obeys the king, but at the point of cursing Israel, Balaam utters an oracle of future hope. This oracle was read in later times as a Messianic promise.

"I see him, but not now; I behold him, but not near—a star shall come out of Jacob, and a sceptre shall rise out of Israel;" (Num 24:17)

The author takes from this story the narrative of an evil King (*Balak / Herod*), trying to bring disaster (*on Israel / on the Messiah*), by means of Balaam (*a seer / the Magi*). The star in the story comes from Numbers 24 and alerts the reader this time to Messianic fulfilment.

(ii) The gifts offered by the magi call to mind a universalist text in Isaiah:

"A multitude of camels shall cover you, the young camels of Midian and Ephah; all those from Sheba shall come. They shall bring gold and frankincense, and

### Thought for the day

In our deepest selves, each of us is a mystery: Where do I come from? Where am I going? Why am I here? How should I live? The risk in our present culture is to sleepwalk through life, to be satisfied with a merely material existence. But the human "project" is much greater. Each of us is really on a pilgrimage, or better on a quest—a quest to become my true self, in image and likeness of God. My truest self is found by being open to God, in whom we live and move and have our being. By following that star, by listening to our conscience and our inner selves, we come home to God.

### Prayer

You are the mystery at the heart all that exists: draw us to yourself, O Lord, that knowing you we find our true selves, and finding our true selves, we may come to know you.

shall proclaim the praise of the LORD." (Is 60:6)

It was concluded from this text as well that the mode of transport of the magi was camels, although Matt supplies no such detail.

(iii) The Magi as a symbol of the Gentiles comes from an echo in Psalm 72:

"May the kings of Tarshish and of the isles render him tribute, may the kings of Sheba and Seba bring gifts.

May all kings fall down before him, all nations give him service." (Psa 72:10-11)

From this reference, quite early on it was deduced that the magi were kings, as in all representations since. Eventually they were given names—Balthasar,

Melchior and Gasper.

(iv) Bethlehem, the city of David, is mentioned frequently in the Old Testament, unlike Nazareth. The proof text provided was, at the time, read as a messianic prophecy.

“But you, O Bethlehem of Ephrathah, who are one of the little clans of Judah, from you shall come forth for me one who is to rule in Israel, whose origin is from of old, from ancient days.” (Mic 5:2)

### What kind of writing is this?

This is a kind of midrash, a Rabbinic style of writing which explores and exposes meaning by a resonant acoustic of echoes. Everything is in some way symbolic, the star, the magi, the king, Bethlehem and the gifts, pointing to the identity of Jesus and the inclusion of the Gentiles in salvation.

Story	Verses	Citation
Joseph’s dreams	1:18-25	Is 7:24
The Magi	2:1-12	Mic 5:1, 3 2 Sam 5:2
Flight into Egypt	2:13-15	Hos 11:1
Massacre	2:16-18	Jer 31:15
Return to Nazareth	2:19-23	?Jdg 13:5-7; ?Is 11:1

### New Testament Foreground

(i) Matthew’s Gospel reflects the historical memory that Jesus did not himself directly evangelize the Gentiles, at least initially.

“These twelve Jesus sent out with the following instructions: “Go nowhere among the Gentiles, and enter no town of the Samaritans, but go rather to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.” (Matt 10:5-7)

(ii) Nevertheless, in Matthew’s Gospel and community, the Gentiles are an important audience of the Good News (15-6-13-5).

[a] *At the start of the ministry:* “Now when Jesus heard that John had been arrested, he withdrew to Galilee. He left Nazareth and made his home in Capernaum by the sea, in the territory of Zebulun and Naphtali, so that what had been spoken through the prophet Isaiah might be fulfilled: “Land of Zebulun, land of Naphtali, on the road by the sea, across the Jordan, Galilee of the Gentiles—the people who sat in darkness have seen a great light, and for those who sat

in the region and shadow of death light has dawned.” From that time Jesus began to proclaim, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.”” (Matt 4:12-17)

[b] *During the ministry:* “When Jesus became aware of this, he departed. Many crowds followed him, and he cured all of them, and he ordered them not to make him known. This was to fulfill what had been spoken through the prophet Isaiah: “Here is my servant, whom I have chosen, my beloved, with whom my soul is well pleased. I will put my Spirit upon him, and he will proclaim justice to the Gentiles. He will not wrangle or cry aloud, nor will anyone hear his voice in the streets. He will not break a bruised reed or quench a smouldering wick until he brings justice to victory. And in his name the Gentiles will hope.”” (Matt 12:15-21)

[c] *At the close of the Gospel:* “Now the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain to which Jesus had directed them. When they saw him, they worshiped him; but some doubted. And Jesus came and said to them, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.”” (Matt 28:16-20)

### St Paul

Now to God who is able to strengthen you according to my gospel and the proclamation of Jesus Christ, according to the revelation of the mystery that was kept secret for long ages but is now disclosed, and through the prophetic writings is made known to all the Gentiles, according to the command of the eternal God, to bring about the obedience of faith—to the only wise God, through Jesus Christ, to whom be the glory forever! Amen. (Romans 16:25–27)

### Brief Commentary

Once the Old Testament correspondences and the Gospel anticipations have been uncovered the text practically comments itself. Nevertheless (!):

**Verse 1** This is King Herod the Great, who died in 4 BC. The “wise men” are literally “magi”. Magus, a Persian loan word, covers a range of meanings: wise

man and priest, who was expert in astrology, interpretation of dreams and various other occult arts. From the East: traditionally a source of wisdom.

**Verse 2** The Gentiles identify universal hope in the Jewish Messiah and king.

**Verse 3** The historical Herod was quite paranoid about usurpers and even had some of his sons killed. Augustus said of him: I would prefer to be his pig (*hus*) than his son (*huios*).

**Verse 5** Matthew has Bible experts (like himself) identify the birth-place of the Messiah, with a proof-text from Micah. “Shepherd” = David.

**Verse 7** The hypocrisy of Herod links this symbolic tale with the massacre of the innocents to follow.

**Verse 10** Joy comes back in Matthew 28:8 at the empty tomb.

**Verse 11** Fulfilling Ps 72 and Isa 60, as noted above.

**Verse 12** With no further narrative use for them, the Magi are taken “off stage”.

### Pointers for Prayer

1. What is the star (the vision, hope or purpose) which lights up your journey?
2. Like the wise men, our life journey is not one we travel alone. Who are the people who share your life journey now?
3. The wise men travelled bearing gifts. What gift do you bring with you on the journey?
4. At times the wise men lost sight of the star. What clouds have obscured your star?
5. Who, or what, might be Herod for you now? What forces, within or without, could subvert the dream or goal?

### Prayer

Lord God of the nations, we have seen the star of your glory rising in splendour. The radiance of your incarnate Word pierces the darkness that covers the earth and signals the dawn of peace and justice.

Make radiant the lives of your people with that same brightness, and beckon all the nations to walk as one in your light.

We ask this through Jesus Christ, your Word made flesh, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, in the splendour of eternal light, God for ever and ever. Amen.

# Arise, shine, for your light has come!

Isa 60:1 Arise, shine; for your light has come,  
and the glory of the LORD has risen upon you.

2 For darkness shall cover the earth,  
and thick darkness the peoples;  
but the LORD will arise upon you,  
and his glory will appear over you.

3 Nations shall come to your light,  
and kings to the brightness of your dawn.

4 Lift up your eyes and look around;  
they all gather together, they come to you;  
your sons shall come from far away,  
and your daughters shall be carried on their nurses' arms.

5 Then you shall see and be radiant;  
your heart shall thrill and rejoice,  
because the abundance of the sea shall be brought to you,  
the wealth of the nations shall come to you.

6 A multitude of camels shall cover you,  
the young camels of Midian and Ephah;  
all those from Sheba shall come.  
They shall bring gold and frankincense,  
and shall proclaim the praise of the LORD.

## Initial Observations

As even a cursory glance will reveal, the reading is extremely well chosen. Firstly, because of the symbolism of light (more below). Secondly, because of the gathering / coming together of all the faithful. Following a very early intuition based on this text and Ps 72, the reading adds pictorially both the *royal* status of the Magi and their mode of *transport*. The mention of gold and frankincense probably inspired the imaginative filling in of these details.

## Where does the reading come from?

Isaiah 60 comes from *Third Isaiah*, a prophet or prophets writing in the tradition of Isaiah of Jerusalem, but reflecting a much later situation after the return from the exile in Babylon.

## What kind of writing is this?

The writing is poetry and in this case it is almost a textbook example of "parallelism", whereby the second line repeats the first, but in more concrete, sometimes more elaborate vocabulary. For example, vv. 1 and 2 or v.5.

Our excerpt comes from a longer section (60:1-62:12) and even within that subsection 60:1-22 offers a poem on the

light of the Lord. This is in response to Is 59:9-10, which reads: *Therefore justice is far from us, and righteousness does not reach us; we wait for light, and lo! there is darkness; and for brightness, but we walk in gloom. We grope like the blind along a wall, groping like those who have no eyes; we stumble at noon as in the twilight, among the vigorous as though we were dead.* (Isaiah 59:9-10)

## Old Testament Background

Then your light shall break forth like the dawn, and your healing shall spring up quickly; your vindicator shall go before you, the glory of the LORD shall be your rear guard. Then you shall call, and the LORD will answer; you shall cry for help, and he will say, Here I am.

If you remove the yoke from among you, the pointing of the finger, the speaking of evil, if you offer your food to the hungry and satisfy the needs of the afflicted, then your light shall rise in the darkness and your gloom be like the noonday. (Isaiah 58:8-10)

The sun shall no longer be your light by day, nor for brightness shall the moon give light to you by night; but the LORD will be your everlasting light, and your God will be your glory. Your sun shall no more go down, or your moon withdraw itself; for the LORD will be your everlasting light, and your days of mourning shall be ended. (Isaiah 60:19-20)

## How does the Responsorial Psalm relate to this reading?

For intertextual reasons, the psalm is a perfect match for the first reading and also a good preparation for the Gospel. In particular, these lines "fit": *The kings of Tarshish and the sea coasts shall pay him tribute. The kings of Sheba and Seba shall bring him gifts. Before him all kings shall fall prostrate, all nations shall serve him.*

## How does the first reading prepare for the Gospel?

Is 60 and Ps 72 both prepare extremely well for the Gospel reading. The imagery of light (the star), the notion of quest / home-coming, all this helps to enrich our reading of Mt 2:1-12.



## Brief Commentary

To illustrate the theological integrity of this composite book, it may be sufficient to observe that there are many echoes, in the whole of 60:1-22, of earlier passages in Isaiah.

**Verse 1** This text presumes that the Temple has been rebuilt and that all peoples will come there to worship. Here it is no longer God who will be their light: they themselves are light and they should shine. Cf. Mt 5:14-15.

**Verse 2** After 2a, the repetition in 2b refers the shadow of death or deadly darkness. The Lord's glory is not so much his splendour as the full presence of God.

**Verse 3** Notice the delightful evolution of the poetry: not just *nations* but *kings*; not just *light* but the brightness of your *dawn*.

**Verse 4** Cf. Is 40:10-11. At this point, the addressees seem to be at home in Jerusalem, perhaps in the Temple. Very young children are envisaged.

**Verse 5** V. 5ab expresses the spontaneous joy, even exhilaration, at the prospect of salvation. V. 5cd might seem rather

greedy, but it is an echo from the book of Exodus, reflecting the despoilment of the Egyptians before departure (Ex 12:13-36). In any case, the bringing of gifts fits the feast. Midian is associated with the Gulf of Aqaba, as is Ephah. Sheba is in south west of (modern) Arabia. In any case, a substantial distance is imagined.

**Verse 6** Cf. Is 40:5. This is where we get the idea that camels are part of the story! The gold and frankincense of 6c are intended for worship, as 6d makes clear. Frankincense is a resin, mentioned in both the OT and NT as a highly desired and esteemed product. The trade collapsed in the 5th century, after the Moslems forbade its use at funerals.

## Pointers for Prayer

1. Although the passage is indeed about light, it does acknowledge the *need* of light as we experience darkness. Not only do we need light, we are to be light as Matthew 5 puts it.
2. The reading is exuberant, to a degree we might find hard to rise to, and yet, joy is truly part of our faith experience.
3. It all culminates in praise of the Lord, that spontaneous gratitude towards God who has loved us so much as to be one of us, the great mystery of Christmas.
4. The sense of pilgrimage, homecoming is very much part of the reading and, of course, part of Christian imagination. Think only of *Pilgrim's Progress*. Reflect on your one journey of faith, until today.

## Prayer

We praise you, God, for the gift of light in creation, sunlight and moonlight, illuminating all you have made. Above all we thank you for the light of Christ, that you have shone in our hearts. May we welcome this light and become bearers of you light to all around us. We make our prayer through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, God for ever and ever. Amen.

## Sunday Introductions

### First Reading

*Isaiah 60:1-6*

"The Gathering" has been a government topic, but here is a gathering bringing together all those who search for God. It is a thrilling reading, which has enriched how we imagine the Magi.

### Second Reading

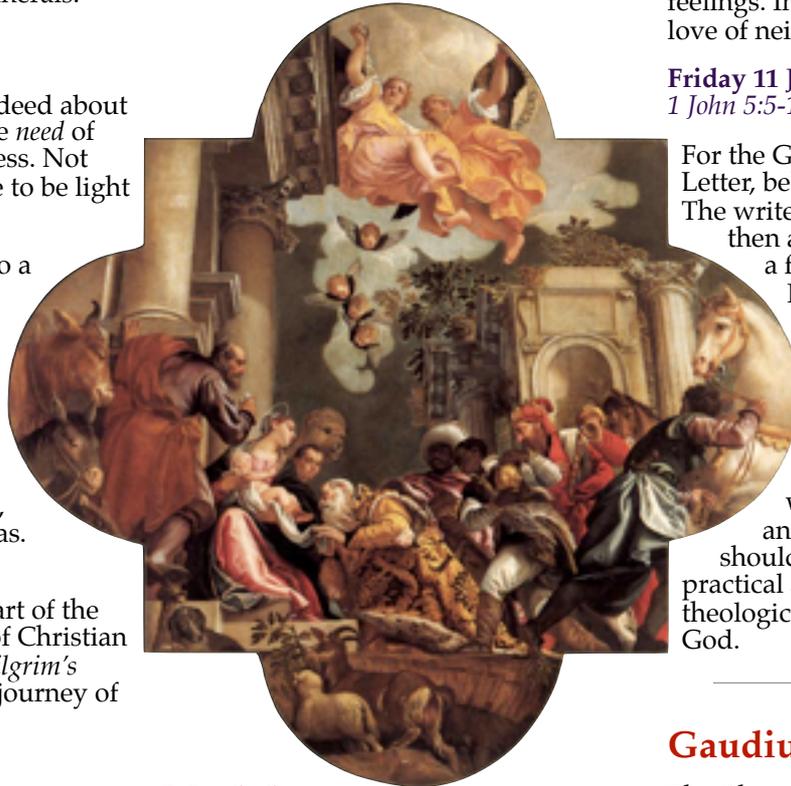
*Ephesians 3:2-3,5-6*

Who is called into relationship with God? All of us, every human being without distinction. The revelation in Christ is an unveiling of God's longing for us.

### Gospel

*Matthew 2:1-12*

How can we discover or rediscover God and Christ? Only by recognizing that "you have made us for yourself and our hearts are restless until they come to rest in God." The human condition may be summarized as "the heart in pilgrimage."



## Weekday Introductions

The first letter of John, while full of inspired teaching, also reflects a situation of conflict and division within the Christian community. As a result, the tone is sometimes jarring, not to say puzzling. But, it is at least realistic: such is the Christian condition in every time and place.

### Monday 7 January

*1 John 3:22-4:6*

What is it that God wants from us? Two things according to this reading, two very simple things which are also quite challenging: love of God and love of neighbour.

### Tuesday 8 January

*1 John 4:7-10*

Did you ever try to put the Christian

vision in a few helpful words? This is what comes across in today's short, brilliant passage.

### Wednesday 9 January

*1 John 4:11-18*

Our reading today echoes something from the Fourth Gospel, something also true to our experience: no one has ever seen God! And yet, there is good news: anyone who lives in love lives in God, and God lives in him

### Thursday 10 January

*1 John 4:19-5:4*

How do we really know we love God? Certainly not by "checking" our feelings. Instead, we must look to our love of neighbour.

### Friday 11 January

*1 John 5:5-13*

For the Gospel of John and the first Letter, belief in Jesus Christ is essential. The writer realises this is a challenge, then and now. We are reminded of a famous phrase of Bishop John Robinson: *the scandalous particularity of the incarnation*. Precisely!

### Saturday 12 January

*1 John 5:14-21*

As part of his realism, the writer does not ignore the fact and danger of sin. So what should we do? The advice is practical and at the same time theological: we are all the children of God.

## Gaudium et Spes §10

The Church firmly believes that Christ, who died and was raised up for all, can through His Spirit offer us the light and the strength to measure up to our supreme destiny. Nor has any other name under the heaven been given to us by which it is fitting for us to be saved. She likewise holds that in her most benign Lord and Master can be found the key, the focal point and the goal of us all, as well as of all human history.

The Church also maintains that beneath all changes there are many realities which do not change and which have their ultimate foundation in Christ, Who is the same yesterday and today, yes and forever. Hence under the light of Christ, the image of the unseen God, the firstborn of every creature, the council wishes to speak to all men and women in order to shed light on the mystery of humanity and to cooperate in finding the solution to the outstanding problems of our time.