

The Great O Antiphons of Advent
Reflections and Bible Study



Benefice of All Saints' & St Mary the Virgin
Cambridgeshire

Table of Contents

Introduction	3
O Wisdom	7
O Lord	9
O Root of Jesse	11
O Key of David	13
O Dayspring	15
O King of Nations	17
O Immanuel (Emmanuel)	19
Appendix	21
Notes	36

Introduction

For anyone, accustomed to attend church services during the weeks that amount to Christmas, they may be familiar with the concept of the Great O antiphons. Some churches would even have a service of the Word where these antiphons are the protagonists.

Generally speaking, an antiphon is a variable text (also known as Proper in liturgical jargon) often sung before and, though not always, after a psalm or a canticle. Some of these antiphons (such as the famous Minor Proper at the offertory and Communion at Mass, the ones during processions and those in honour of the Blessed Virgin Mary after an office) are recited or sung with a psalm or canticle along with a versicle, a response and a collect as a way to commemorate a feast or any particular reason.

The word antiphon comes from Greek (αντιφωνος) which means *responsive* or *to reply in a raised voice* from where the Latin Church took it literally and without translation.¹ From this word, the Church in the West also had the word antiphony, which was a type of psalmody recited or sung in alternation.²

Some antiphons derive from Scriptural texts. Others do not take their source from Scripture, but they equally influence the mode of the service. A good example of these are the Marian antiphons such as *Salve Regina*, *Alma Redemptoris*, *Ave Regina Caelorum* and *Regina Caeli* as well as the Greek *Sub tuum praesitium*.³ Another group of antiphons include the ones sung for Palm Sunday and Major Litanies (*Litaniae maiores*) connected to Rogation Day on 25th April.⁴ When Scriptural antiphons are sung, however, these exercise two functionalities, namely, to denote a mood or a tone, with

the plain chant and to enforce the evangelical and prophetic meaning of the text that proceeds it.⁵

The 'O' Antiphons concretely refer to the seven antiphons that are recited before the Magnificat during the service of Evening Prayer in the Octave (eight days before a feast) that leads to Christmas (17th to 23rd December). The date when these antiphons were conceived are not certain. However, it is known that Boethius (c. 480-524) made a slight reference to them, thereby suggesting their presence at that time. At the Benedictine Abbey of Fleury (now Saint-Benoit-sur-Loire), these antiphons were recited by the Abbot and other monks in descending rank, and then a gift was given to each member of the community. By the eighth century, they were in use in the liturgical celebrations in Rome.⁶

The content of the Great 'O' Antiphons relates to Messianic declarations. Each antiphon focuses on Scriptural truths, found in the book of Isaiah and elsewhere regarding the ontological nature of the Christ, of whose Incarnation anticipate. Thus, the seven 'O's highlight that Jesus is: Wisdom and Lord. They remark that he comes from the descendants of Jesse (the root of Jesse), through King David, who validates him to be the King of Israel *par excellence*. Thus he is also considered the Key of David. His eschatological nature is emphasised by the imagery of the light (he is also the Dayspring). His supreme authority over all the earth is collated in the O King of Nations. Finally, as Christmas approaches ever upon the calendar, the antiphons resound what these compositions are all about; the doctrine of the Incarnation and the nativity of God on earth with us (Emmanuel).

The O Antiphons point us to deep meaningful realities of the Christian faith and they join us to the same hope found in Scripture. First, the antiphons point us to Christological truths for the season of waiting; not just during Advent but beyond. Using a great deal of the inspiration from the book of Isaiah they announce the coming of Messiah as it happened two millennia

ago. However, the references to apocalyptic scripture – as from the book of the Revelation of St John – point us to the Second coming. Advent is just a shorthand for the hopeful expectancy of the Christian life. As post-resurrection Christians we are called to live in a hopeful state of joyful suspense in which we do not know when the Lord will come, while we celebrate the fact that he has come through a virgin's womb. Such blissful and expectant state is what some theologians refer to the already-not-yet. The antiphons, along with the Magnificat (Lk 1:46-55), become thus signposts of God's faithfulness. Catholic priest Oliver Treanor said:

Even as we celebrate the triumph of Christ's first coming at Bethlehem we are preparing [ourselves] for his ultimate victory at the eschaton. The Advent antiphons express this tension in the way they are [constructed]. Each consists of an invocation followed by an acclamation and then a supplication...This is why the 'O' is repeated at the end of the antiphon – this time as an urgent supplication. 'O come to teach us', 'O come and save', 'O come to deliver us', 'O come to free the captive'. 'O come and enlighten us', 'O come and save man'. 'O come and save us'. We who make these appeals may well be redeemed, but we labour under the shadow of original sin. Until he comes to be fully formed in us, as once he was in Mary, we cannot grow 'to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fulness of Christ' (Eph. 4: 13). Each exclamation consequently signifies desperate need and desperate hope. Upon his save delivery depends our safe deliverance.⁷

This small work will navigate along the Great 'O's to concentrate on their biblical references. Through the lenses of the 'O' Antiphons those pieces of Scripture would elucidate how the tradition of the Church has seen these texts from the Middle Ages – and even earlier – as well as onwards. This tradition found inspiration in 'Holy Writ', and the result was these beautiful Antiphons which, unlike other antiphons, suffered no alteration due to their

beautiful and creative nature. They highlight strong senses of hope and anguish, excitement and expectancy, hope and resignation of a time not arrived. These are also strong emotions present in the Bible, which is why this book aspired to combine Scripture in the Antiphons, as a source of investigation. Together, the reader can achieve a greater understanding of both the Bible and of the tradition of the Church. These O Antiphons help the Church to sing to the Lord with shouts of joy (Psalm 95); to sing the God revealed in the Bible and inspired by his Holy Spirit (Tim. 3:16-17); and to worship God in his Church in a fitting way (Eph. 5:19).

The content of this book is not exhaustive by any means. It is recommended to be read with a Bible along the way. Ideally, the Bible references in each section will prompt the reader to investigate deeper in Scriptures where the passage come from, its contextual relevance and its extrapolation to our Christian reality in the twenty-first century. There will be further consideration for reflection both in each antiphon theme as well as in the appendix at the end. The questions are generally designed for introspection, but they can be very suitable for group discussions; in which case, an atmosphere of honest intimacy and vulnerability might be required. It therefore becomes a suitable resource of any church community to go deeper in the faith and deeper in their Anglican tradition during a special time of the year such as Advent.



Wisdom | Sapientia

17th December

Antiphon

O Wisdom, you came forth from the mouth of the Most High, and reaching from beginning to end, you ordered all things mightily and sweetly. Come and teach us the way of prudence.

While there is a book in the Anglican Bible called Wisdom⁸, there are many other references to *wisdom* elsewhere. For example wisdom is personified in the book of Proverbs. In Proverbs 8:12, wisdom says:

*I, wisdom, live with prudence,
and I attain knowledge and discretion.*

It is in this spirit of personification of wisdom as an attribute of God that the antiphon makes its plea. Jesus is this wisdom. God is the ultimate source of wisdom and only him can grant the grace of prudence.

In Isaiah 11:2 we can read :

*The spirit of the Lord shall rest on him,
the spirit of wisdom and understanding,
the spirit of counsel and might,
the spirit of knowledge and the fear of the Lord.*

The Most High spoke, the antiphon goes, and wisdom came forth. The connections to John 1 are remarkable, but also in Isaiah we can see how this description can be applied to our Lord Jesus as well. In fact, during this season of advent, we remember numerous times and in numerous forms

how the fruit of the Spirit, as Isaiah describes it, rest on the Messiah. John 1:14 says that the Word of God came full of grace and truth. One way of identifying wisdom is contemplating the truth that carries with it, and when one sees truth in wisdom, it becomes very easy to identify the grace that has been given to find it.

The Word of God is Jesus. Our Creed articulates very clearly that it is through the Father that the Son is begotten. It is the trinitarian unity of mutual union or interpenetration. Jesus is this wisdom that the Father has given us. In Jesus we find a perfect use of prudence; that is, practical wisdom that empowers one to be good and to act well in ordinary and extraordinary affairs.

Pray with the antiphon

O Wisdom, you came forth from the mouth of the Most High, and reaching from beginning to end, you ordered all things mightily and sweetly. Come and teach us the way of prudence.

For Reflection

What is the difference between wisdom and knowledge?

How do you feel about seeing Jesus Christ as wisdom?

In what ways do you seek wisdom?

How regular do you ask God for the spirit of wisdom in your life?

What is one thing you did not get from this antiphon?



Lord | Adonai

18th December

Antiphon

O Adonai and Ruler of the house of Israel, you appeared to Moses in the fire of the burning bush, and on Mount Sinai gave him your Law: Come, and with an outstretched arm redeem us!

The attentive heart can find in the Gospels (Matthew, Mark, Luke and John) of the New Testament some parallelism between the Exodus narrative in the Old Testament and the ministry of Jesus in the New.

Two key events in the life of Moses are present in this antiphon; the first is his calling from the position of comfort to a position of self-sacrifice in order that God may save his people (cf. Exodus 3). The second event takes place after God has save the people from the political – and spiritual – power of Egypt. God then gives Moses the Decalogue⁹ and with it, he establishes a covenant with his people (cf. Exodus 20).

Moses was presented with God's plans for freedom and was baffled by it:

If I come to the Israelites and say to them, "The God of your ancestors has sent me to you", and they ask me, "What is his name?" what shall I say to them?' God said to Moses, 'I am who I am.' He said further, "Thus you shall say to the Israelites, 'I am has sent me to you. (Ex. 3:14b)

The proper name for God is *I am*. Such unique name belongs to no other and the Jewish faith consider this name so full of meaning, reverence and holiness. It is ethically inappropriate to even utter it. So, instead of using the *Holy Name*, they choose to address God with his status of Lord (*Adonai*).

Every time the *Holy Name* of God is present in Scripture, the Jewish people would substitute it for *Adonai*. Semantically speaking, this *Adonai* functions very much as a proper name; an intimate name to talk to God.

Jesus, as Lord (*Adonai*) and as the new Moses, he creates and gives us a new commandment in John 13:34:

A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another.

Like Moses, he delivers us from the slavery state of any chains that keep us from being free to love God. Like Moses he intercedes for us to God (cf. Rom. 8:34). Moses casts Nehushtan¹⁰ on a pole so that the people of Israel may look at it and be saved (cf. Num. 21.4-9). Jesus is stuck on a cross with outstretched arms, as the antiphon prays, and through him, we are saved.

Pray with the antiphon

O Adonai and Ruler of the house of Israel, you appeared to Moses in the fire of the burning bush, and on Mount Sinai gave him your Law: Come, and with an outstretched arm redeem us!

For Reflection

The liberation of the people of Israel from Egypt by the hand of Moses was such a crucial event in the history of God's people that Judaism bases a great deal of its identity on this historical event. As Christians, how has the 'new Exodus' by Jesus affected our identity?

How do you address God in your life? What sentiment does it convey?

Can you think of any art where God's arm is outstretched significant to you?



Root of Jesse | Radix Jesse

19th December

Antiphon

**O Root of Jesse, You stand for an ensign of mankind;
before You kings shall keep silence, and to You all nations
shall have recourse. Come and save us and do not delay.**

Poet Malcolm Guite shares the following about this antiphon:

The third Antiphon, 'O Radix', is a prayer that calls on Christ as the Root, an image I find particularly compelling and helpful. The antiphon refers to the image of the 'tree of Jesse', the family tree that leads to David and ultimately to Christ as the 'Son of David'... for me the title 'Radix' goes deeper, as a good root should, deep down into the ground of our being, the good soil of creation. God in Christ is, I believe, the root of all goodness, wherever it is found and in whatsoever culture, or with whatever names it fruits and flowers. A sound tree cannot bear bad fruit, said Christ, who also said, 'O am the vine, you are the branches' (John 15.5).¹¹

We all come from a family tree. Some wishes they did not come from that particular tree. Others wished their branches had not become rotten. The Bible is full of lineage connections. In fact, the whole of the OT is a narrative based on the lineage of God's people, who made it out of Egypt, then who made it into Exile, who came from Babylonia, who qualified for worshipping at the Temple, etc. Tribes, family names, descendance and gene poles carries a very heavy load on Scriptures. The Gospel according to St. Matthew commences its narratives with Jesus' genealogy, which traces it

from Abraham to Josef, the son of Jacob, the son of Matthan (cf. Matt. 1: 1-17).

This antiphon refers particularly to the passage in Isaiah 11:1:

*A shoot shall come out from the stock of Jesse,
and a branch shall grow out of his roots.*

The prophet Micah also announces that the Christ will come as Jesse's descendance as Jesse was from the tribe of Judah in Micah 5:2:

*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.*

In Jesus all the promises of the patriarchs, St Paul says, are confirmed in Romans 15 and quoting Isaiah, he refers to the tree of Jesse as evidence for it (cf. Rom. 15:12). Jesus came and saved us, and he will come again. Hence our supplication at the end of the antiphon: come and do not delay.

Pray with the antiphon

**O Root of Jesse, You stand for an ensign of mankind;
before You kings shall keep silence, and to You all nations
shall have recourse. Come and save us and do not delay.**

For Reflection

The bestselling book *The Hidden life of Trees* suggests that the root of a tree should technically be considered its brain. The many duties that the roots exercise help the tree to defend itself from exterior threats. Roots allow a tree to transfer nutrients, not just to other parts of the tree but to other trees too. The different roots of the trees are interconnected in a web of communication and relation which ensure the survival of the whole ecosystem from all kinds of dangers. We could strongly argue that without the roots, trees would not survive. What are your roots?

Is the *Radix* of Jesse your personal root? How does Jesus maintain your livelihood both spiritually and physically?



Key of David | Clavis David

20th December

Antiphon

O Key of David and Sceptre of the house of Israel: You open and none may close, You close and none may open. Come and deliver from the chains of prison those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death.

The overarching story of the Bible can be seen through a lock. In Genesis 3 and onwards, paradise is locked out for humans due to their transgressions in it. Our human sinful freedom caused our hearts to think of ourselves more than God. In that manner, we could not be citizen of the kingdom of God. We were usurping his throne and we had to be locked out of it. Isaiah 22:22 reminds us that not all is lost. There will be a time when this paradise, this kingdom will be open for us again. God will make this happen through the key:

I will place on his shoulder the key of the house of David; he shall open, and no one shall shut; he shall shut, and no one shall open.

Such authority will be given to this member of the house of David, this key. Fast forwarding to Revelation, we can find the end-result:

After this I looked, and there in heaven a door stood open!
Revelation 4:1

This door would take St John to heaven and this time he would see that paradise is now a city with twelve doors or gates opened for us to come in. The key of David has opened it for all who believe (cf. Rev. 21:21). This key that has opened the gates of heaven for us is Jesus Christ through whom, Ephesians 2:18 tells us, 'we have now access in one Spirit to the Father.'

St Paul also says:

God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation; that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world

to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us.

2 Cor. 5:18-19

Jesus has literally become for us the access to an intimate relationship with God. We were in the prison of Adam's illusion¹² until God pitch his tent among us and became one of us.

This Key of David, however, also says in Revelation the following:

Listen! I am standing at the door, knocking; if you hear my voice and open the door, I will come in to you and eat with you, and you with me.

Revelation 3:20

Remember our human sinful freedom from Genesis 3? Jesus brings us an opportunity to come to terms with this. While he has gained for us what we could not attain for ourselves, we can cling to him and choose (will) to receive what he has obtained for us. At this time, the Holy Spirit will enable us to choose and to see what great gift this is for our lives.

And that is why the antiphon continues with the supplication akin to the song of Zechariah in Luke 1:

By the tender mercy of our God,
to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death,
to guide our feet into the way of peace.

Lk. 1. 78a, 79

This evangelistic prayer is the desire of all those who have found this joy and wants the whole world to participate in it. The key of David gives us access that we become ourselves helpers for others to find that key.

Pray with the antiphon

O Key of David and Sceptre of the house of Israel: You open and none may close, You close and none may open. Come and deliver from the chains of prison those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death.

For Reflection

In what ways can the concept of key be seen more than figuratively?



Dayspring | Oriens

21st December

Antiphon

**O Dayspring, Radiance of the Light eternal and Sun of Justice;
come and enlighten those who sit in darkness and the shadow of
death.**

Dayspring is the same as saying *dawn*. It is a phenomenon related to light. The Sun is what caused this dawn or dayspring to spring up from the horizon on the east (orient) and to bring light to night. In biology as well as during biblical times, light can be associated with restoration, and with life. In the Bible, particularly, what is in the light is something visible, and clear. Thus, Jesus is identified in liturgies with the Sun of Righteousness (light and good morality, cf. Malachi 4:2) who would radiate his righteous light upon us all. The concept of light as a good thing is particularly clear in Job 38.12, or in the Benedictus, the song of Zechariah, in the gospel of St Luke:

By the tender mercy of our God,
the dawn from on high will break upon us,

Lk 1:78

Psalm 23 also suggests darkness as a negative place:

Even though I walk through the darkest valley
I fear no evil;
for you are with me;
your rod and your staff—
they comfort me.

Ps. 23:4

Even when the psalmist finds a situation of chaos, horror and obscurity, the protection of God will be always available.

Moreover, picking up this luminous reference, the prophet Isaiah suggests that something has been brightened up in his time:

The people who walked in darkness
have seen a great light;
those who lived in a land of deep darkness—
on them light has shined.

Isaiah 9:2

The Christian faith picks up this Messianic overtone and locates such news in the person of Jesus Christ. Jesus is the Sun of Justice that puts everything to right. His restorative power brings people from darkness into the radiant light of which, truth, goodness, beauty and wisdom, emanate. By contrast, those who do not find life in the light, live in a shadow of death.

Pray with the antiphon

**O Dayspring, Radiance of the Light eternal and Sun of Justice;
come and enlighten those who sit in darkness and the shadow of
death.**

For Reflection

This antiphon has allusions to numerous biblical references. Perhaps you would like to consider going deeper into those passages and how they would relate in their context as well as to each other.

How does light affect you in your daily life? Some countries have problems with Vitamin D deficiency. In the UK 8.4% of UK white 19–64 years old people have vitamin D deficiency... in the summertime, which rises to 39.3% in the winter.¹⁴ In some cases, populations suffer from severe Seasonal Affective Disorder (SAD). If we consider the effects of the Sun in our bodies, in what ways can Jesus be the spiritual sun of our souls?

The three major monotheistic religions (Judaism, Christianity and Islam) use the East (*Oriens*) as a central focus in the structure of their temples. To what degree does the significance of the rising of the Sun affect our Christian understanding of eschatology?



King of Nations | Rex Gentium

22nd December

Antiphon

O King of the nations and Desired of all, you are the cornerstone that unites all people: Come, and save humankind whom you formed out of clay.

Fr Malcolm Guite says about this antiphon:

Today we read the sixth great 'O Antiphon', 'O Rex Gentium'. This antiphon calls on Christ as King, yet also calls him the cornerstone and pictures him getting his hands dirty and shaping us with clay: a wonderfully incongruous combination!¹⁵

Presbyterian Dr Bill Bright was a very famous evangeliser in the US during the 1950s who devoted his life to sharing the Gospel among university students all around the world. He was the founder of an organization called Campus Crusade for Christ. Very directly, we would engage with students asking them who was at the throne of their lives. If the self is on the throne, the results of it is a life full of legalistic attitudes, impure thoughts, jealousy, guilt, worry, discouragement, critical spirit, frustration, aimlessness, fear, ignorance of spiritual heritage, unbelief, disobedience, loss of love for God and others, poor prayer life, no desire for Bible study.

However, if Christ is at the throne of one's life, then such life becomes full of love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness and faithfulness. A life with Christ the king at the throne produces an effective prayer life, understands God's Word, trusts God, obeys God, is empowered by the Holy Spirit, introduces others to Christ, etc.¹⁶

All the wonderful things described by Dr Bright in a Christ-directed life are things desired by all, because all desire the King, as the antiphon says. This idea comes from the Bible too. Haggai 2:7 says that the Lord would do something to the earth and the treasure or the 'desire of all nations shall come'.

Being the king puts Jesus as the most important protector and leader. But the antiphon continues with another reference to Jesus to being a key member, the cornerstone. This allusion is clearly depicted in biblical texts as in Psalms 118:22:

The stone that the builders rejected
has become the chief cornerstone.

This passage is mentioned in the New Testament too (cf. Mat. 21:33–44; Mk 12:1–11; and Lk 20:9–18; Acts 4:11, 1 Peter 2:7). In Isaiah 28:16 the same concept of *cornerstone* is present:

therefore thus says the Lord God,
See, I am laying in Zion a foundation stone,
a tested stone,
a precious cornerstone, a sure foundation:
'One who trusts will not panic.'

This cornerstone and king of all nations is indeed the good God who formed us from the ground and gave us form out of clay, out of dust (cf. Genesis 2:7). It is through his incarnation and his calvary that he is the God who intimately reaches us, is crowned with thorns and who comes and saves humankind when we put him in the throne of our lives. When we do that, we can join our voices with Isaiah in saying:

Yet, O Lord, you are our Father;
we are the clay, and you are our potter;
we are all the work of your hand.

Isaiah 64:8

Pray with the antiphon

**O King of the nations and Desired of all, you are the
cornerstone that unites all people: Come, and save
humankind whom you formed out of clay.**

For Reflection

Picking up the allusions of St Peter in his first epistle about cornerstone, how do you see that Jesus' kingship can be a stumbling block (see 1 Peter 2:8)?



Immanuel | Emmanuel

23rd December

Antiphon

O Emmanuel, our King and Lawgiver, the Expected of Nations and their Saviour: come, and save us, O Lord our God!

Arguably the most important word in this final antiphon is the word Immanuel (Emmanuel in Latin), which means God with us. The ideal of this name is highly linked to the prophesy of the prophet Isaiah 7:14:

Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign. Look, the young woman is with child and shall bear a son and shall name him Immanuel.

This prophecy was written several centuries before Jesus' birth. In the times of Isaiah, it is probable that King Jehoahaz II of Judah (King Ahaz) received this message from the prophet with great encouragement because he saw it realised in his own lifetime; 'like the birth of a child to a maiden which guarantees a future event to the elderly who, though they themselves must die, know that their seed lives on. This young woman of Isaiah's time – was she perhaps giving birth to Ahaz's song? – would call her child 'God-with-us', to show her own firm belief in her country's future.'¹⁷ The Gospels pick up this Immanuel prophecy and give it a renewed and more powerful strength to it. Now, this hopeful prayer, this everlasting reality over eight centuries has become once more flesh and bone, although in a much truer reality. The presence of God has been with the people of Israel all along (cf. Ex. 33:15-16; Josh. 1:5, 9 and 17; Ps.20, 21; Jer. 1:7-8) and it is now in the person of Jesus Christ in whom this prophecy acquires a deeper meaning, a bigger continuation in the plan of God towards his relationship with his creation. The God who was intimate, comes now in a more tangible way, the closest he can get; that is, he comes to be among us and in us.

The idea that God is with us shed a great deal of light to God's trinitarian ontology. The Gospel of Matthew specifically starts with allusions to Isaiah's Immanuel prophecy and finishes with the same idea in chapter 28:

And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.

Matthew 28:20b

Jesus comes to be with us and, through the power of the Holy Spirit, he does not leave. He remains with us for eternity now. The trinitarian reality becomes therefore evident in that the Father is God, the Son is God and the Holy Spirit is God; three persons and one God. Having God the Spirit with us ensures that we also have God the Son with us, and through the Son, we can have access to God the Father as well. With his Incarnation, God fulfils his commitment to be in relationship with us. It also shows that He is faithful and does not go back on his word. It means that his covenantal love transcends our failures (cf. Matt. 26:40 and Mk. 14 37) and that our sins has no power against the love of God.

Like the painting of Michelangelo in the Sistine Chapel, God has been the one initiating. He has stretched out his divine and uncorrupted hand so that our reluctant, laid-back hearts may be able to reach to him. Once we yield our will to Jesus, the Holy Spirit then can move us to join the cry of the Church and say:

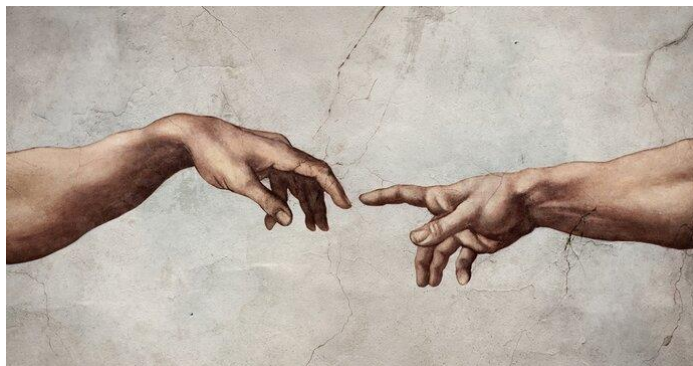
Amen, come Lord Jesus!

Revelation 22:20

Pray with the antiphon

O Emmanuel, our King and Lawgiver, the Expected of Nations and their Saviour: come, and save us, O Lord our God!

For Reflection



Appendix

There are some extra material below for further enrichment regarding each of the antiphons and their Scriptural references.¹



Rev. Malcolm Guite's sonnet on wisdom is particularly poignant and very thought-provoking:

O Sapientia

I cannot think unless I have been thought,
Nor can I speak unless I have been spoken.

I cannot teach except as I am taught,
Or break the bread except as I am broken.

O Mind behind the mind through which I seek,

¹ The antiphon graphics of this section is taken from St Matthew's Westminster's Church:
<https://www.stmw.org/o-antiphons.html>

O Light within the light by which I see,
O Word beneath the words with which I speak,
O founding, unfound Wisdom, finding me,
O sounding Song whose depth is sounding me,
O Memory of time, reminding me,
My Ground of Being, always grounding me,
My Maker's Bounding Line, defining me,
Come, hidden Wisdom, come with all you bring,
Come to me now, disguised as everything.

Taken from <https://malcolmguite.wordpress.com/tag/o-wisdom/>



Fr Treanor says in his book *Seven Bells to Bethlehem*:

‘Although invoked as ‘Leader of (the new) Israel’, [Jesus] is not addressed as ‘Moses’ but ‘O Adonai’. It is an acclamation shot through with the most sacred associations.’ (p.31)

While Jesus could be regarded as the new Moses, this title does not stick as much because he is much more than that. He surpasses the roles of Moses. He is also a new Adan, a new Moses, but also a new Isaac as well; a new Esther, a new David and a new Isaac. He is God almighty, so he requires a deeper name than any of these important figures. Hence, he receives the name above all names (cf. Phil. 2:9).

Names in the Hebrew culture of testamental times were remarkably important. Their connections to the identity of the whole being was inseparable. To refer to a name was to conceptually refer to the whole individual. By extension the treatment of a name also meant automatic treatment to the whole person. God gives the people of God his name and this sets the relationship between God and Israel at a new level, Fr Treanor suggests. It is a level of intimacy which was not present before. To put them in terms of philosopher Martin Buber, the relation was formerly that of

creator and creature (I-it). However, with the revealing of God's personal name, God is giving much more than an identity recognition; this opening up of offering creation the possibility to enter into the realm of God's reality, it no longer functions as a I-it relationship but as a I-you relationship. This real connection is remarkably significant for the people of Israel as the chosen people. It is a step deeper in identity. Thus, the chosen people has become God's people through God's revelation of the *Holy Name*.

Furthermore, the name becomes the epitome of the being, as previously mentioned. Thus, using God's *Holy Name* must be meticulously handled with care. The Hebrew people gets this point particularly clear from the Decalogue; especially the third commandment: *Thou shall not take the name of God in vain* (cf. Ex. 20:7), '[w]hich is why they developed the custom of never using the name at all. In their moral code the command against doing so was second only to the prohibition on idolatry. The two precepts were akin: first, respect for the Person, then respect for his name. In the Semitic mentality the name and the person were one reality. The name *was* the person. To defile the personal name was to defile the one who bore it.'

2 Treanor O. (1995) *Seven Bells to Bethlehem. The O Antiphons*. Gracewing. Herefordshire. p.33.

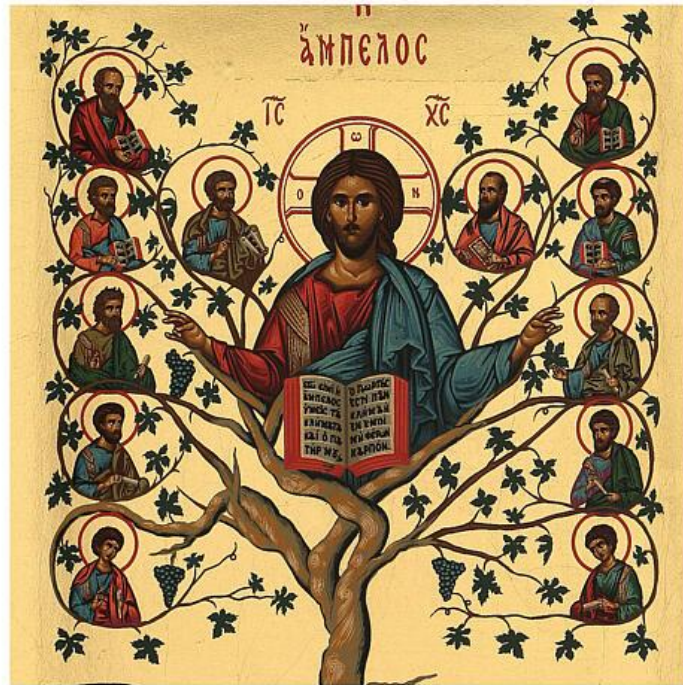


The concept of the tree of Jesse was preserved throughout the ages in Christianity and continued developing. Such development is due to iconography in the history of Christianity, especially guided by the hand of the Orthodox Church. Some of the most known trees in popular devotion can be found in two icons concretely.

The Orthodox icon of the Rod of Jesse with the mystic flower (the Blessed Virgin Mary) blooming from the stem was written between the twelfth century to the sixteenth century. The Greek Orthodox Church knows it by the Root of Jesse (Ρίζα Ιεσσαί). The Russian Orthodox Church calls it the Tree of Jesse (Древо Иессеево). Perhaps, this icon is the most accurate depiction in image (icon) of the Scriptural references of Is. 11:1-4, Matt. 1: 1-17, Lk. 3:34.



Other iconography that popularised the concept of a tree that shoots forth Messianic 'descendance' or family linkage is the Greek Orthodox Tree of life/ True Vine:



This icon alludes to John 15:5 (depicted in the open bible of the icon), and the people around them are not Christ's biological family, but rather the twelve apostles, the vine (*ἀμπελος* in Greek) extends Jesus' family now to all believers through the apostolic succession of these twelve men and by the power of the Holy Spirit in baptism. An argument can be raised therefore about the true family of Jesus now; whereby, holding both icons together, as well as bearing Isaiah 11:1, and John 15:5 in mind, one could not escape landing at Matthew 12:48-50:

'But to the one who had told him this, Jesus replied, 'Who is my mother, and who are my brothers?' And pointing to his disciples, he said, 'Here are my mother and my brothers! For whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother.'

The family of Jesus transcends the blood of Jesse and is yet fulfilled in the Church through Jesus. The promises made in the Old Testament about the tree of Jesse are met in Jesus and continues forward to us through his interceding.



The Key of David and the Cross of Christ have more things in common than one can find at first glance. Fr Treanor says:

In the ancient Middle East such a key was a cumbersome affair, given the system of crossbars and bolts for securing the great doors of fortresses and strongholds. Constructed of solid wood nearly a foot in length, and spiked with metal pins at one end, it was best carried on the shoulder. Eventually it became a visible emblem of weighty office by the very manner in which was borne. The analogy between the steward's key and the cross of Christ hardly needs to be elucidated.³



<https://www.boydbuckingham.com/2020/02/man-of-sorrows-injuries-suffered-by-jim-caviezel-while-filming-the-passion-of-the-christ/>

Jesus carried the cross on his shoulder so that everything were put to right. It was the key that open the gates of heaven to us all and it is through him

³ Treanor O. (1995) Seven Bells to Bethlehem. The O Antiphons. Gracewing, Herefordshire. p.58.

that anyone can come to the Father. The incarnation of Christ is not just an important historical event. It transcends the event and looks into the future; it looks into calvary and the cross. It looks through the empty tomb to the second coming and beyond that. He will restore everything, and the garden (paradise) will be fully realised in the city of God, the new Jerusalem.

In his book *Advent for everyone*, Bishop Tom Wright refers to the concept what is going to be new through the appearance of Jesus in the picture. He also uses Revelation 21, and he explains:

[B]irth, marriage, full recovery from a long and [dangerous] illness, the experience of someone new coming to live with you. All these, interestingly, feature in the list of images John uses as he builds up this breathtaking picture of the new heaven and new earth. 'I will be his God and he shall be my son (verse 7): a final new birth. The holy city is like 'a bride dressed up for her husband': a wedding. There will be 'no more death, or mourning or weeping or pain any more': the great recovery. And, central to this whole joyful picture, and indeed explaining what it all means, is the great promise: 'God has come to dwell with humans.' The new, permanent guest.⁴

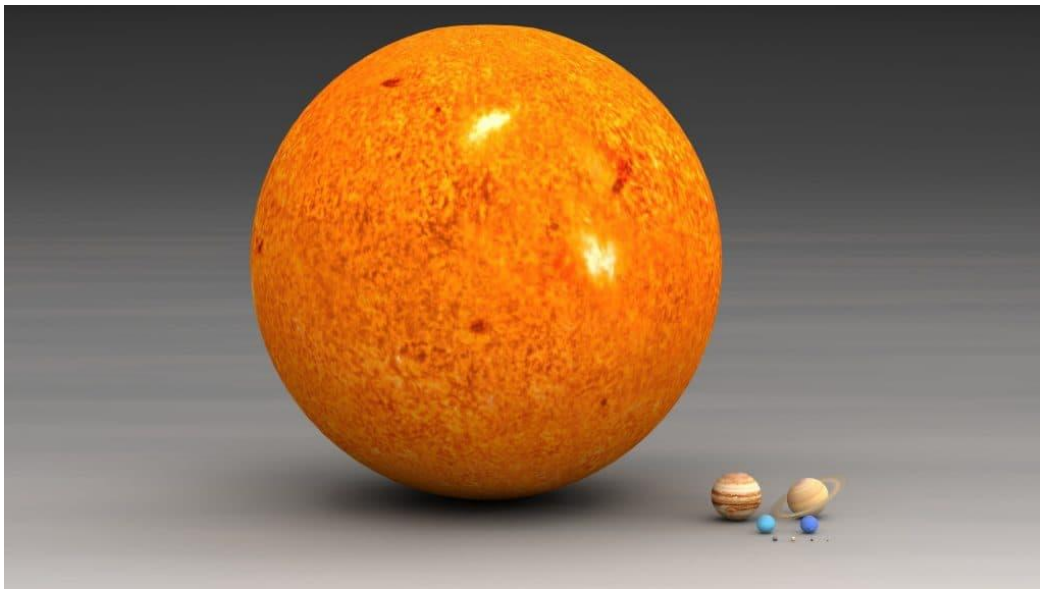
The Key of David is the access to a whole new world coming from the old and this love story increases in excitement as the chapters come along. In the end, the good guy kills the dragon, rescue the bride, and they all live happily ever after.

Too good to be true? Well, it is true, and we know it because the Son of God was born.

⁴ Wright T. (2017) *Advent for Everyone. A Journey with the Apostles*. SPCK. London. p.108.

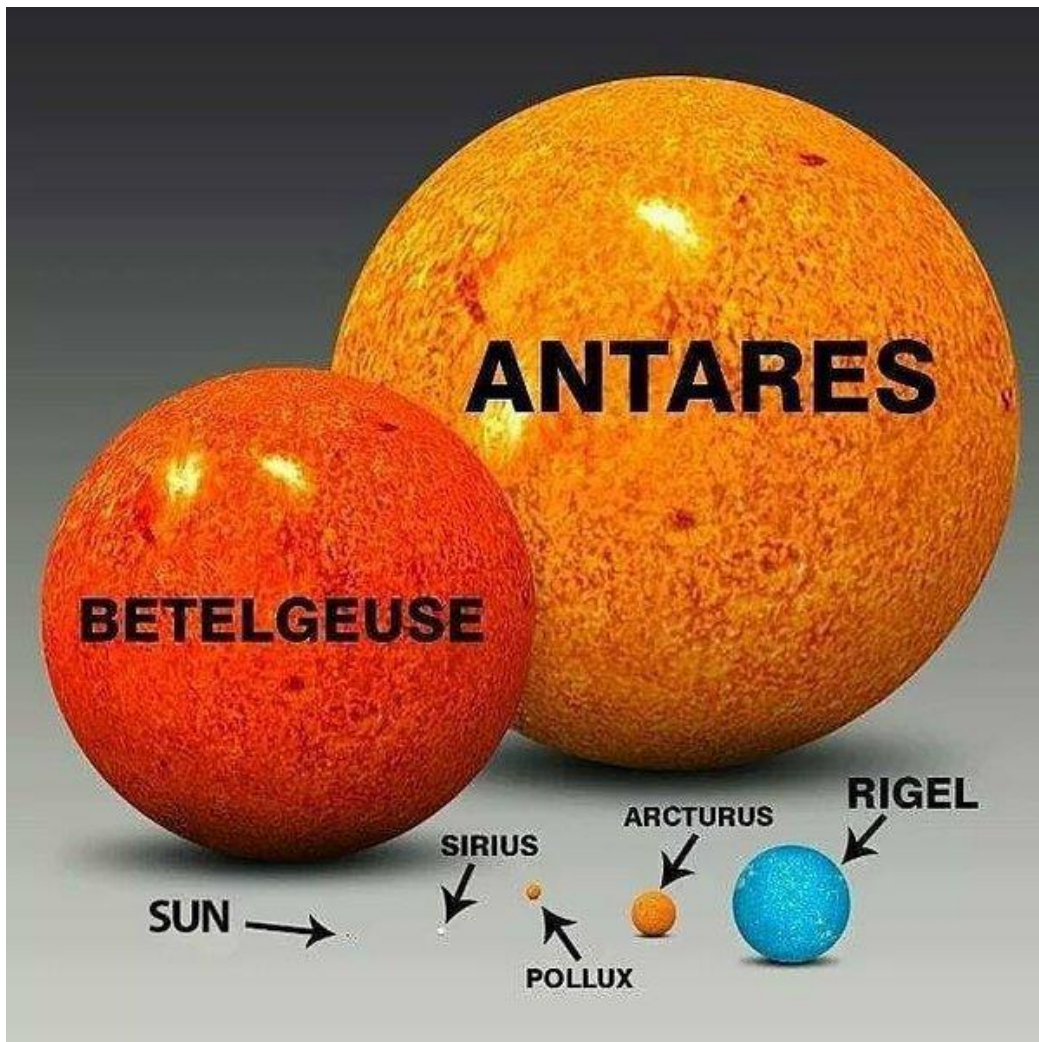


Sometimes, it is useful to look at a map to find where we are. Then we realise that places can be bigger than we originally thought, or indeed smaller. We therefore gain perspective. Thinking about the dawn, the dayspring and the amount of sunlight that radiates, one can notice that the Sun is indeed big:



(taken from <https://nineplanets.org/questions/how-big-is-the-sun/>)

We are not even one of the largest planets of the solar system. Our Sun is an incredibly big planet in comparison to us. And this is not the biggest star there is:



(taken from <https://www.quora.com/How-big-is-our-sun-compared-to-other-stars-our-solar-system-compared-to-others-and-our-galaxy-to-others>)

When we refer to God as the Sun, we are not fully aware of how much bigger he is to us. Any problem that we may have, he is above it. Any situation does not overwhelm him and when the Bible says that no one will snatch us out of the hand of God (cf. John 10:28b), it can become more realistic if we simply consider the anatomical dimensions of the Sun.

With such bulb, who can be in the dark?



In testamental times royalty would often ride on donkeys. In 2 Samuel 16:2 we are reminded that 'donkeys be for the king's household to ride on'. Zechariah 9:9 adverts the same:

Rejoice greatly, O daughter Zion!
Shout aloud, O daughter Jerusalem!
Lo, your king comes to you;
triumphant and victorious is he,
humble and riding on a donkey,
on a colt, the foal of a donkey.

When Jesus entered into Jerusalem (cf. Mt. 21:7, Mk 11:7, Lk 19.35, Jn 12:14-15) riding a donkey he was making a full declaration of his kingship. As it has been stated elsewhere, 'according to the *Dictionary of Biblical Imagery*, the riding of a donkey was a sign of royalty. From the archives dug up in the Babylonian city of Mari, it was learned that the riding of a donkey for entry into a city was an act of kingship. The donkey and the mule were a staple in the Near Eastern royal ceremonies as well.

Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem while riding on a donkey was not just an afterthought, using whatever beast was available. This was a well-considered part of God's plan for a specific purpose. Although the use of

the donkey was widespread in those times, Jesus' riding on the donkey did not show Him to be a poor or common man but a King'.⁵ This antiphon picks up many threads in the gospel narrative that place Jesus as the King of kings and Lord of lords. He is above all things and above anyone else from his birth. He is the King who will come on a donkey to bring shalom, peace, on earth and mercy mild; God and sinners reconciled.⁶ However, not everyone would recognise this; not even on our day and age.

J.R.R. Tolkien said that his epic books, *The Lord of the Rings*, were not allegorical of the Christian Gospel. In other words, Frodo was not a representation of Christ, Samwise Gamgee was not the help of the Holy Spirit, and so on. However, there are inevitable echoes to the Gospel narrative all through the trilogy. In this light, Aragorn, known as Strider, is depicted as the legitimate heir of the kingdom of Isildur. He finally ascends to the throne after having lingered around for a while unnoticed by many of his true identity. At Incarnation, Jesus is commencing his time of ascension to the throne, but not everyone notices who he truly is. The feast of epiphany (which we celebrate on the sixth of January) is an instance when some people notice Jesus' kingship from the outset of his life. And they become radically moved (cf. Mat. 2:1-12).

Do we recognise in this baby whom we celebrate in three days?

Perhaps the words of George Herbert's poem articulates the cry we ought to pray better:

Teach me, my God and King,
In all things thee to see,
And what I do in any thing,
To do it as for thee:

Not rudely, as a beast,
To runne into an action;
But still to make thee prepossest
And give it his perfection.

A man that looks on glasse,
On it may stay his eye;
Or if he pleaseth, through it passe,
And then the heav'n espie.

⁵ Taken from

<https://www.bibletools.org/index.cfm/fuseaction/topical.show/RTD/cgg/ID/20184/Riding-Donkey-as-Sign-Royalty.htm>

⁶ Hark! The herald angels sing.

All may of thee partake:
Nothing can be so mean,
Which with his tincture (for thy sake)
Will not grow bright and clean.

A servant with this clause
Makes drudgerie divine:
Who sweeps a room, as for thy laws,
Makes that and th' action fine.

This is the famous stone
That turneth all to gold:
For that which God doth touch and own
Cannot for lesse be told.⁷

⁷ “The Elixir” by George Herbert (1593-1633)



St Irenaeus thought that '[k]nowledge of God is given to us through the Word (the Logos), a revelation from the Father through love, from which all things are created.

The Word becomes incarnated when humans are born. Before the Incarnation of Jesus Christ, humans were made in the image of God, but this could not be proven, because the Word—the One in whose image humans were made—was not visible. The Incarnation made the Word visible, and the image and likeness of God as human being demonstrated our own similarity to the Father. Irenaeus sees the Holy Spirit as the conduit for humans to acquire the likeness of God. It is through the Son and the Holy Spirit that we ascend to the life of God, he taught.⁸

Roman Catholic professor Robert Greenberg says, "The Benedictine monks arranged these antiphons with a definite purpose. If one starts with the last title and takes the first letter of each once – Emmanuel, Rex, Oriens, Clavis, Radix, Adonai, Sapientia – Latin words *ero cras* are formed, meaning, "Tomorrow, I will come." Therefore the Lord Jesus, whose coming we have

⁸ From *Be Still and Know, Silence (Hesychia): A Method to Experiencing God*. p.8 taken from <https://ms.broadleafbooks.com/downloads/9781451470512Silence.pdf>

prepared for in Advent and whom we have addressed in these seven Messianic titles, now speaks to us, "Tomorrow, I will come."⁹

Scriptures have influenced these Antiphons that the Church has used. They still influence hymns and songs and poem:

O Emmanuel *Malcolm Guite*

O come, O come, and be our God-with-us
O long-sought With-ness for a world without,
O secret seed, O hidden spring of light.
Come to us Wisdom, come unspoken Name,
Come Root, and Key, and King, and holy Flame.
O quickened little wick so tightly curled,
Be folded with us into time and place,
Unfold for us the mystery of grace
And make a womb of all this wounded world.
O heart of heaven beating in the earth,
O tiny hope within our hopelessness
Come to be born, to bear us to our birth,
To touch a dying world with new-made hands
And make these rags of time our swaddling bands.¹⁰

The natural reaction to identifying our true image through the Son, in the Spirit, is to worship God who is lavished love for us. Scripture attests this, and we become more fully human when we ourselves exercise the truths that the Bible tells us about which the Church has developed into act of praise through the antiphons.

⁹ Slightly altered quote from Rutledge F. (2018) Advent. The Once and Future coming of Jesus Christ. Eerdmans. MI p. 402

¹⁰ Guite M. (2015) Waiting on the Word. A poem a day for Advent, Christmas and Epiphany. Canterbury Press. Norwich. p 87

Notes

1. Davies. J.G. (Ed.) (1986). A New Dictionary of Liturgy & Worship. SCM Press. London p. 25 ff.
2. *In antiphony* or *antiphonally* is often used in some offices when reciting the psalms which means the recitation is divided and said alternatively as a way to preach the psalm to one another. Such practise is influence of monasticism into secular ecclesiastical life, which continues to this day within the walls of monasteries.
3. This is the oldest Marian antiphon and prayer that we have on record. It dates the third century, and the text is as follows:

Greek Text	English Translation
Ὑπὸ τὴν σὴν εὐσπλαγχνίαν, καταφεύγομεν, Θεοτόκε. Τὰς ἡμῶν ἱκεσίας, μὴ παρίδῃς ἐν περιστάσει, ἀλλ' ἐκ κινδύνων λύτρωσαι ἡμᾶς, μόνη Ἄγνη, μόνη εὐλογημένη.	Beneath thy compassion, We take refuge, O Theotokos [God-bearer]: do not despise our petitions in time of trouble: but rescue us from dangers, only pure one, only blessed one.

4. Davies. J.G. (Ed.) (1986). A New Dictionary of Liturgy & Worship. SCM Press. London p.26.
5. Grove G. (Ed.) (1878). Dictionary of Music and Musicians. MacMillan. London. p.73.
6. Taken from the resources from the Parish Church of St Matthew's Westminster. <https://www.stmw.org/o-antiphons.html>
7. Rvd. Treanor O. (1995) Seven Bells to Bethlehem. The O Antiphons. Gracewing. Herefordshire. p.3-4.

8. As Anglicans we have this book as part of the apocrypha books, or deuterocanonical books. The 39 Articles of faith of the Anglican tradition states that these books are suitable for reading but not to withdraw doctrine out of them; in other words, it is fit for reading but not for getting theology that may affect our understanding of salvation and of God. The Roman Catholic Church includes this book as part of their canon of the Bible.
9. From Greek Deca- logos (10 words or 10 rules). This is the technical word for the Ten Commandments.
10. *Nehushtan* is the name given in 2 Kings 18:4 to the copper serpent that Moses cast out for the salvation of the people of Israel during the desert wandering (cf. Numbers 21:4-9).
11. Guite M. (2015) *Waiting on the Word. A poem a day for Advent, Christmas and Epiphany.* Canterbury Press. Norwich. p.74.
12. This is a term used by Fr Oliver Treanor in his book *Seven Bells of Bethlehem* p.62. (see note 7).
13. Taken from <https://blog.cph.org/study/the-scriptural-depth-of-the-great-o-antiphons>
14. Taken from <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC5946282/>
15. Guite M. (2015) *Waiting on the Word. A poem a day for Advent, Christmas and Epiphany.* Canterbury Press. Norwich. p.84
16. Taken from Campus Crusade for Christ's webpage, now called Cru/Agape: <https://www.cru.org/us/en/train-and-grow/10-basic-steps/1-the-christian-adventure.2.html>
17. Rvd. Treanor O. (1995) *Seven Bells to Bethlehem. The O Antiphons.* Gracewing. Herefordshire. p.115
18. The Gospel of St John is very big on the concept of abiding and remaining in God.

This work is for devotional usage only and not to be distributed in any way without the explicit permission of its author. The work serves as an aide for the ministerial labours of the Benefice of Hartford and Houghton with Wyton in Cambridgeshire and its publication does not seek any kind of remuneration. The author affirms that any material used in the production of this work has been handle with legality and for the comfortable readership of the parishioners of the aforementioned benefice. Any plagiarism or misrepresentation is unintentional.