

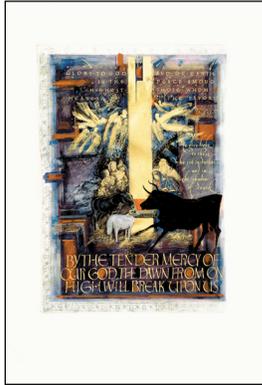


THE SAINT JOHN'S BIBLE

Poster Notes for *The Birth of Christ* from *The Saint John's Bible*

Artist and Scribe: Donald Jackson

Luke 1:5 and Luke 2:40



A full-page illumination of the *Birth of Christ* faces the opening text of the Gospel of Luke. This subject certainly must be the most frequently pictured biblical text, depicted for almost two millennia in styles of diverse cultures and eras. Although the subject matter is traditional, the Saint John's Bible *Nativity* is unique.

The main subject, the Christ Child, is the focal point--although not shown. There is an indication, just a suggestion, of a crib from which a brilliant shaft of light rises up and goes beyond the confines of the page. In gold leaf (used throughout the Bible to indicate the divine) this brilliant light dominates the illumination. Surrounding it are, at right, Mary and Joseph, at left, the shepherds, above, the angels and in front, the stable animals. Only the image of Mary is painted in refined, colored detail. She bends gently over the crib, her gaze tenderly fixed on the infant. Saint Joseph, behind her, and the shepherds to the left are monochromatic, generalized sketches with minimal delineation. The shepherds are women and girls as it is believed they were at the time of Jesus' birth. Above, the angelic choir soars, ethereal and free, with no details.

The animals form a protective barrier between the viewer and the unseen Infant. The ass and horned sheep face the large silhouette of the ox. This bull is a careful rendering the one of the great aurochs painted on the walls of the French neolithic cave at Lascaux. This well-known historic imagery makes the timelessness and global scope of the Nativity symbolically emphatic.

There is no attempt to indicate or suggest the structure of a stable. With the exception of the dominant shaft of gold light, the tone is muted and subdued, giving a quietude and peace to the scene. Cascading down the background is a series of three texts, all rendered in gold, each in a distinctive script. The upper is the song of the angels, the central one refers to the role this Child will play, “. . . a light to those who sit in darkness . . .”. The lower text anchors the entire illumination: BY THE TENDER MERCY OF OUR GOD, THE DAWN FROM ON HIGH WILL BREAK UPON US. ~Johanna Becker, OSB