

The Gifts of the Magi

Matthew 2:1-12
December 11, 2016

Introduction

One day as Jesus and His disciples were together he asked a question, “Whom do people say that I am”? This is still an important question today. Religions all over the world have answers to this question, both Christian and non-Christian alike. Interestingly we can find insight to this question by looking at the gifts presented by the Magi to the Christ Child at Bethlehem. The Bible itself is silent about the gifts, why they were chosen or that there is any connection to the life and mission of Christ. However, upon a closer look both historically and from scripture one can begin to make a connection of the gifts to the life of Christ: who He is and the purpose of His coming.

Before we look at the gifts let me take just a minute or so to review the Magi. The story of their journey has had much embellishment over the years since the journey was made 2000 years ago. We do know they came from a faraway land, likely the area of Iraq today. We learn this from where they said they saw the star, the sign of Jesus’ birth. These men were educated men and likely had some status in the country from which they came. Over the years, the titles of “Wise Men” and “King” have been added and their number was three. Nothing points to these titles or that there were three in number. There were three gifts so three Magi so the reasoning goes.

They likely knew of the prophesy of the Jewish redeemer from the events that had happened 600 years earlier. At that time, King Nebuchadnezzar attacked and destroyed Judah and its kingdom. The army spoiled the Temple and took several captives back to Babylon. These captives had with them the old testament scriptures given up to that time. One was particularly important, what we know today as the book of Isaiah. In Isaiah, we find the prophesy that a virgin would give birth to a child and the child would be called Emmanuel – that is God with us, a redeemer. Some years later some of the Jews returned and some stayed in Babylon. The Jewish culture, scripture and prophecies would have remained in the land and become known to the people of that land which was now in the Persian empire.

Interesting thing about the Babylonians, they studied the stars in the night sky. They demarked the sky by the regions in which the stars are found and gave them names, and ascribed earthly significance to them. They paid attention to the “wanders” (planets) which passed through the regions of the sky (we call these constellations today). Eventually these regions would be assigned months of the year and have significance to the person from when the person’s birthday occurred. These beliefs are still with us today in the form of the Horoscope. We are not told much about the star which of itself is an interesting story in history, but we will not spend any time here today.

At the appearance of the star their preparations and journey began and their travels took them to Jerusalem – the capital city of the Jews. Where else would the “King of the Jews” be found? On arrival, they came to ruling leader - Herod the Great. Their question, “Where is He who has been born King of the Jews” troubled both the city and Herod. Herod was not a Jew. In fact, he had been appointed ruler of the region by the Roman Senate some 37 years earlier. The question itself could have been viewed as challenge to his position and it was not good thing to challenge this ruthless ruler. Given the location of the foretold town where this King of the Jews would be born they traveled to Bethlehem and found Jesus. No longer in a stable Jesus could have been a newborn or perhaps a child of 2 years or less old. There they worshiped Jesus and presented Him their gifts of Gold, Frankincense, and Myrrh. You can read the rest of the story in Chapter 2 of Matthew.

Let us look at these gifts.

A few weeks ago, Pastor Jerry shared the fragrance of Frankincense, today you can sample the fragrance of Myrrh and we’ll pass that out now so everyone will have a chance to enjoy the fragrance before the end of the service

The First Gift is Gold

Gold has always been valued by man. It is a rare substance, beautiful in appearance and has been used to craft works of art and function in history. It also has been used to represent deity’s and idols. Some interesting facts about gold. A single ounce can be drawn into a wire 50 miles long. Ancient Egypt could pound gold leaf so thin it would take over 300,000 sheets to stack up to one inch. For those 55 or older you may recall the Apollo moon landings and appearance of the astronaut’s helmets. They had a very thin layer of gold on the visor as a shield for the solar radiation present on the moon but blocked out on earth by the

atmosphere. Of all the gold ever mined and if formed into a cube that cube would only be 67 feet on one side.

Gold, Kings, and Authority all seem to go together historically. Consider King Tut's burial mask, the appearance today still brings amazement and appreciation for the craftsmanship and use of gold. Here are two Biblical references that also show King's use of gold:

2 Chronicles: 9:20 – All King Solomon's goblets were gold, and all the household articles in the Palace of the Forest were pure gold. Nothing was made of silver, because silver was considered of little value in Solomon's day.

Daniel 3:1 - King Nebuchadnezzar made an image of gold, sixty cubits high and six cubits wide, and set it up on the plain of Dura in the province of Babylon.

Both verses reference the King's use of gold. While visiting the Ft. Benning Military Museum a few years ago I saw a display case with some of the spoils of World War 2, among them a golden baton. The baton was a symbol of authority to whom it belonged the appearance was quite amazing to look at. As one followed the lines of the baton they led to the top where there was a swastika – the symbol of Nazi power. Quite a mix of beauty and contrast with a dark time in history. Both good and evil have valued gold over time as status for: power, wealth and authority.

Gold is also associated with the Tabernacle and later the Temple that Solomon built. There are over 100 references to the use of gold as instructed by God to Moses. Let's consider the Ark:

Exodus 25: 10 -12 - Have them make an ark ... Overlay it with pure gold, both inside and out, and make a gold molding around it. Cast four gold rings for it and fasten them to its four feet, with two rings on one side and two on the other. Then make poles of acacia wood and overlay them with gold.

Later when the Tabernacle was replaced by the Temple which Solomon built it is described as this: *Solomon covered the inside of the temple with pure gold, and he extended gold chains across the front of the inner sanctuary, which was overlaid with gold. So he overlaid with gold the whole interior with gold. He also overlaid with gold the altar that belonged to the inner sanctuary.*

Heaven itself is replete with gold, even the streets. When we think of earthly Kings one symbol stands out – what is it? - a golden crown. Listen to this final reference regarding Christ from Revelation

Revelation 17:14 - Then they will wage war against the Lamb, but the Lamb will triumph over them, because he is Lord of lords and King of kings.

There is no greater power ... no greater authority - than our King Jesus.

The first gift of Gold points to Christ's position as King of Kings

Frankincense

The second gift presented to the newborn King was the gift of incense or frankincense. Frankincense is the dried sap or resin from the Boswellia tree. This tree grows on the Arabia peninsula and the horn of Africa. The trade of frankincense goes back at least 5000 years and has quite a history in this region. To produce the resin the tree is wounded by a cut and sap runs out and forms a resin-like substance which is collected, dried, and ready for use. Traditionally the resin is placed over burning charcoal and begins to smoke as it contacts the hot coals and releases the fragrant odor it is famous for. It can also be made into essential oils which is popular in recent years. It was and still is quite valuable. Raw high-quality Frankincense sells for about \$26 dollars an ounce today and the essential oils can be quite expensive for a small bottle. I found one estimate that at the time of Christ's birth frankincense would have been about \$31 dollars an ounce. We are not told just how much was given by the Magi.

Like gold, frankincense is often mentioned in the Bible and associated with spiritual significance. Again, we find reference in Exodus:

Exodus 30:7 - Aaron must burn fragrant incense on the altar every morning when he tends the lamps. He must burn incense again when he lights the lamps at twilight so incense will burn regularly before the Lord.

Recall that Aaron was the first high priest in Israel. The role of priestly duties was to serve as a mediator between God and Man. The High Priest had all the regular duties of the priesthood but also had duties of the oversight of the tabernacle or temple and its place in Israel's national identity and relation to God. One other very important duty was in the performance of the High Priest's office, a special service to conduct the annual day of Atonement ceremony. In doing the work of this duty as prescribed by God the High Priest had to enter the Holy of Holies once per year with the blood of a sacrificed bull and was required to burn incense. This ceremony first made atonement for the sins of the High Priest, the other Priests, and finally the entire nation of

Israel. It was a very solemn time for the people who were dependent of the High Priest to perform this duty of seeking atonement as prescribed by God.

God gave Moses specific instructions for making a special kind of incense to be used:
Exodus 30:34 - Take fragrant spices, gum resin, onycha, and galbanum and **pure frankincense** all in equal amounts.

This was an exclusive formula and only the priests of Israel could make and use as it was to be considered, "most holy to you".

Further use of incense by the priests is noted in Leviticus 2:
When anyone brings a grain offering to the Lord, their offering is to be of the finest flour. They are to pour olive oil on it and take it to Aaron's sons the priests. The priest shall take a hand full of the flour and oil, together with all the incense, and burn this as a memorial portion of the alter, a food offering, an aroma pleasing to the Lord.

The smoke of the burning incense was symbolic of prayer rising to the Lord. David prays in Psalm 141 that his prayers would be set before God like incense. In Revelation, we find reference to this when the Lamb goes forward to take the Scroll from Him who sat on the throne:

Revelation 5:8 - And when he had taken it, the four living creatures and the twenty-four elders fell down before the Lamb. Each one had a harp and they were holding golden bowls full of incense, which are the prayers of God's people.

The second gift of Frankincense points to Christ's role as High Priest serving as mediator between God and Man.

2 Timothy says, "For there is one God, and one mediator between God and mankind, the man Christ Jesus."

Jesus now occupies this role as High Priest --- mediator between Us and God – He Serves as the last and final occupant of this office, Hebrews says this:

Therefore, since we have a great High Priest who has ascended into heaven, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold firmly to the faith we profess. For we do not have a high priest who is unable to empathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are – yet he did not sin. Let us then approach God's throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need.

Myrrh

The final gift given is Myrrh. Myrrh is also dried sap only from the Commiphora tree and it grows in the nearly the same location as the Boswellia tree. Myrrh is also gathered by making cuts in the tree and letting the sap run out and dry. Myrrh is also placed over burning coals to release the fragrance or can be made into oils. Like Frankincense the trade in myrrh is ancient and we find it first mentioned in the bible as one of the spices the caravan of traders were carrying to whom Joseph was sold to by his brothers.

Myrrh is an ingredient used in making a holy anointing oil as directed by God to Moses:

Ex. 30: 22-24: Then the Lord said to Moses, Take the following fine spices: 500 shekels of **Liquid myrrh**, half as much of fragrant cinnamon, 250 shekels of fragrant calamus and 500 shekels of cassia and a hin of olive oil. Make these into a sacred anointing oil ...

This oil was use to consecrate or purify the tabernacle and the things of it. It was sprinkled on the items such as the ark, alters, priestly garments, and even the priest themselves. Myrrh was used in medicine and cosmetics of the day, consider the beauty treatment that Esther received before becoming Queen:

Esther 2:12: ... she had to complete twelve months of beauty treatments prescribed for the women, six months with **oil of myrrh** and six with perfumes and cosmetics.

The King James Bible and some other translations use the term "purification treatments" in place of beauty treatments. I would ask that you keep that in mind. Myrrh was apparently the more expensive of the two spices, one reference gave a value estimated at \$250 per ounce at the time of Christ. Again, we are not told how much myrrh was given.

Myrrh also takes on another role historically and biblically as an embalming spice for the dead. The Egyptians used myrrh in the mummification process and it is noted in the Gospel of John in the burial of Christ, we read:

John 19: 38 – 42: Later, Joseph of Arimathea asked Pilate for the body of Jesus ... with Pilate's permission, he came and took the body away. He was accompanied by Nicodemus, the man who earlier had visited Jesus at night. Nicodemus brought a mixture of **myrrh** and aloes, about 75 pounds. Taking Jesus

body, the two of them wrapped it, with the spices, in strips of linen. This was in accordance with the Jewish burial customs.

In our Christian faith we recognize that the price and penalty of sin is death. We also recognize Christ came to earth to pay that price for us by His death on the cross, a substitution so to speak. Romans uses another word for this substitutionary action: Propitiating. The sense I have of this word is that which satisfies or appeases a debt or anger. This gift of Myrrh, to me is the most significant and most precious of the representation of Christ.

The third gift of Myrrh points to Christ's atoning sacrifice paying the price for our sin by His death on the cross.

Christ himself says it this way:

Matthew 20:28 "the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many".

Strange gift for a newborn - eh? One that signifies His death ...

When a child I never could get the name of Good Friday. How could a day that signifies Christ's death be good? Only later did I come to understand the goodness of this day - it was the day that bought our salvation! For us it is the greatest day ever! Salvation comes to man under no other name than Jesus, and for those who believe and put their trust in Him - forgiveness and **purification** from sin is given.

A review

A quick review as we close. We are not told that the Magi knew of the significance of their gifts nor does the bible prescribe for us that significance. However I hope you can see, at least to a degree, these connections as we study God's word and the life and words of Jesus. This brings us back to the question that Christ asked as we began this talk, "whom do men say that I am"? The three gifts point to the description of:

Gold - "King"

Frankincense - High Priest"

Myrrh - "Savior"

If someone asked you whom do you believe Christ is this Christmas season what answer would you give? High Priest and even King are not likely the first thoughts that come to mind, but Savior - that may be a more common answer for those who know him. And Savior holds its special meaning in another season we celebrate - the Risen Christ at Easter.

One last thought. After the Magi left that night Joseph was told in a dream to "take the child and his mother and escape to Egypt". Not many of us could immediately load up the car and head down to a foreign city to live without some means of support. Yet apparently, that is exactly what happened - well maybe camel instead of car. The three gifts given by the Magi were of the highest value of that day and could have easily provided the financial support needed for the journey and time spent there. Doesn't that sound like God to you? Making provision for us as we go about His business?

A few Christmas' ago Deb and I were given a gift that appeared to be representative of our family name (Williams) - this large wooden "W". But it too had spiritual significance: on the W is inscribed these words, "Wise men still seek Him". May that be said of all of us here today.

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