

Gifts for a King

The popular Christmas song “We Three Kings of Orient Are” depicts the Magi or wise men, told about in Matthew 2: 1-12 as they offer their gifts of Gold, Frankincense, and Myrrh to the Christ Child. Tradition sets the number of Magi as three. This is possibly because of the number of gifts being three. It is my understanding that the wise men were in actuality astrologers who were wondering at the heavenly manifestation of the star which they had seen, and came from the East to offer these gifts to the Child perhaps as much as two years after the birth.

At first I questioned the wisdom of offering the three gifts of gold, incense, and myrrh that they did[1]. After all, what would a small child need with gifts such as these? From my interpretation of practicality, these gifts were actually useless. Except for the monetary value to this itinerant carpenter and his family, these gifts were excess baggage.

Then I thought about Who this child was prophesied to be, and the gifts began to take on a different meaning altogether. Let us look a bit deeper into the meaning of these gifts.

Gold is a valuable medium of exchange, especially for royalty. Gold was the metal out of which crowns were made. Gold was symbolic of the deity of the Christ Child acknowledging His sovereignty through this gift of gold for His diadem was only prophetic. Remember that the inside of the temple was completely overlaid with pure gold; the items for holy sacrifice were made of pure gold. Due to its softness, pure gold would have made a poor choice for a sword, but the ornate and “show” shields were made of gold, at least in Solomon’s day[2]. Jesus was supposedly the child of a carpenter, yet, interestingly enough, the gift of gold was symbolic of His Deity.

Frankincense was used as fragrant means of carrying the prayers of the priest to heaven as it was burned on the altar and as such was symbolic of His purity. It is my understanding that it was against the Jewish Laws to have any fragrance that was made to have the same aroma as true frankincense. This is because it also would have been sacred, being used in the sacrificial rites of Judaism[3]. Thus, if Jesus were not pure, He would have been in violation of Jewish Law by even owning such material. This gift made Him out to be sacrificially pure....Prophetic of His crucifixion for our sins.

Myrrh was used in the process of embalming. The song says “Myrrh is mine, its bitter perfume, breathes a life of gathering doom, sorrowing sighing bleeding dying, sealed in a stone cold tomb[4]”. This was prophetic of His purpose for being born....To be a sacrifice for all of Humanity.

As you can see, the three gifts which were offered were not gifts of practicality but rather each was its own gift of prophesy, foretelling who the Christ was, and what His purpose in coming was.

This song, however, has a last verse which might be viewed as a sealant to the entire message of the song: “Glorious now behold Him arise, King and God and Sacrifice, prayer and praising, all men raising, worshiping God most High[5]”. This verse tells of His resurrection from the grave. Were it not for the resurrection, the other gifts’ prophetic foretelling would be in vain. The resurrection tells us that Jesus was victorious even over the final and most foreboding enemy of all....Death. All the other gifts, gold, frankincense and myrrh testify that in the first place, he alone is worthy to make the sacrifice for our sins....Praise His Name!

[1] Matthew 2:11 (NIV)

[2] 1 Kings chapters 5-10

[3] Exodus 30: 34-38

[4] Christmas Carol “We three kings of Orient are”

[5] ibid