

“WISE MEN FROM THE EAST OPENED THEIR TREASURES AND OFFERED HIM GIFTS”

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When they saw the star, they rejoiced exceedingly with great joy. And going into the house they saw the child with Mary his mother, and they fell down and worshiped him. Then, opening their treasures, they offered him gifts, gold and frankincense and myrrh” (Mt 2:10-11).

Many legends have come out of the story of the wise men from the East who visited Jesus after he was born. In most nativity scenes, the wise men are included, which is most unlikely. Someone had estimated that if they came from Babylon, it would have taken them about 40 days to travel to Jerusalem. So, when they arrived, Jesus and his family were not in a stable, but already living in a “house.” And their names, how many there were, and being “kings” are mere myths, and not mentioned anywhere in Holy Scriptures..

But Matthew focused on more important things concerning this visit. One is that the wise men came *to worship Jesus*. They must have been familiar with Old Testament prophecies regarding the Divine Messiah, including Balaam’s prophecy, “*A star shall come out of Jacob, and a scepter shall rise out of Israel*” (Nm 24:17). How did these Gentiles know that the star they saw in the East was *the star* that signified the coming of the Messiah? Like Simeon in the temple, “*it had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit*” (Lk 2:26).

It is also significant that Matthew informs us that the wise men brought gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh. This is not merely trivia about Jesus' birth, because these specific gifts foreshadowed the person and work of our Savior Jesus Christ. They are fitting symbols of Jesus' mission in his incarnation.

Gold is one of the symbols of wealth, especially the wealth of kings. The wise men were recognizing Jesus as the King of Kings who has authority over all things in heaven and on earth. In ancient days, no one who came to pay tribute to a powerful king will fail to bring gold (1Kgs 10:10). Isaiah even foretold that in the end, nations shall come to bring their riches and honor to God's people, “*They shall bring gold and frankincense, and shall bring good news, the praises of the LORD*” (Is 60:6). As our eternal King today, Jesus “governs us by His Word and Spirit, and defends and preserves us in the redemption obtained for us.” (Heidelberg Catechism Q&A 31; Ps 2:6; Mt 28:18-20;).

What about **frankincense**? Incense had many functions in Israel's worship. As it was burned, its smoke symbolized the prayers of the people ascending to God (Ps 141:2; Rv 8:4). It was mixed with oil used to anoint the priests of Israel. It was also blended into food offerings that were brought by the people to the high priest as thanksgiving and praise to God. And incense emitted a pleasant aroma, and as such also symbolized Jesus’ “fragrant offering and sacrifice” to God (Ep 5:2).

But while used in many thank offerings, incense was never used for sin offerings, reminding us that Jesus was *the* ultimate Sacrifice without blemish or spot. True, he was fully human in

addition to being fully divine, but he did not sin. And since he was the only sinless human being who ever walked on earth, it is fitting that frankincense was offered to him. Jesus is our Great High Priest, *“But when Christ had offered for all time a single sacrifice for sins... he has perfected for all time those who are being sanctified”* (Hb 10:11-14). After he ascended into heaven, he is now making intercession for his people in *“the presence of God on our behalf”* (Hb 9:24; HC 31).

The last gift mentioned is **myrrh**. Myrrh is a rare and expensive perfume imported from Arabia and Greece. The psalmist describes the king's robes at his wedding as *“all fragrant with myrrh and aloes and cassia”* (Ps 45:8). But myrrh is not only used as perfume; it is also used as an embalming spice. At the burial of Christ after he died on the cross, it is one of the 75 pounds of spices brought by Nicodemus to embalm his body (Jn 19:39-40).

Myrrh was also used as an anesthetic, a kind of a numbing agent or painkiller. When Jesus was about to be crucified, Roman soldiers offered him *“wine mixed with myrrh”* (or gall) (Mk 15:23). Knowing that he would lose feelings in his body, he refused to drink this bitter wine as his mission was to endure all the hellish sufferings that we would have had to suffer as sinners.

Gold for a King. Frankincense for a Priest. Myrrh for a Sacrifice. The wise men most probably did not know that the Child the star pointed to would be a King, a Priest, and a Sacrifice for them and for all his people.

All of these riches are fitting for one who was rich in heaven but became poor on earth for your sake. But through his Holy Spirit, Jesus also gives you gifts, all spiritual gifts in the heavenly places, so that you may also be kings, priests and sacrifices to God. You are kings because *“with a free conscience [you] may fight against sin and the devil in this life”* (HC 32; Ep 6:12) You are priests and sacrifices because you are enabled to *“ present yourselves a living sacrifice of thankfulness to Him”* (Rm 12:1-2; HC 32).

Because Christians are partakers of Christ and his anointing, he also gives you his own treasures – of wisdom and knowledge – treasures from the Scriptures (Cl 3:2). In the new heaven and new earth, he will also give you all the treasures he has in store for you. All because he has accomplished his work as your King, Priest and Sacrifice. And in eternity, you will sit with Christ on his throne and *“reign with Him over all creatures”* (Rv 3:21; HC 32).