

The Gifts of the Wise Men¹

Matt. 2:1 Now when Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judaea in the days of Herod the king, behold, there came wise men from the east to Jerusalem, ... 11 And when they were come into the house, they saw the young child with Mary his mother, and fell down, and worshipped him: and when they had opened their treasures, they presented unto him gifts; **gold**, and **frankincense**, and **myrrh**.

Introduction

My mother taught us: “It’s not the gift, it’s the thought that counts.” Matthew is at pains to tell us what the Wise Men brought to the new king. What was the thought behind their gifts?

The Greek word for “Wise Men” in Matt 2:1 is *μαγοι*, from which we get Magi. This term occurs in the LXX in only one book, Daniel.² Daniel was made head of this clan, along with other specialties (chart):

Dan 5:11 There is a man in thy kingdom, in whom *is* the spirit of the holy gods; and in the days of thy father light and understanding and wisdom, like the wisdom of the gods, was found in him; whom the king Nebuchadnezzar thy father, the king, *I say*, thy father, made master of the magicians, **astrologers**, Chaldeans, *and* soothsayers;³

Because of his prestige, they would naturally seek to emulate him, and they would learn two things from Daniel.

First, from his own teachings, they would learn the time of Messiah’s birth:

Dan 9:25 from the going forth of the commandment to restore and to build Jerusalem unto the Messiah the Prince *shall be* **seven weeks, and threescore and two weeks** [sevens of years]

Second, in the books brought by Daniel into captivity, they would find Balaam’s prophecy:

Num 24:17 **there shall come a Star out of Jacob, and a Sceptre shall rise out of Israel**, and shall smite the corners of Moab, and destroy all the children of Sheth. 18 And Edom shall be a possession, Seir also shall be a possession for his enemies; and Israel shall do valiantly.

Daniel’s day was the highlight of Mesopotamian culture. By the time of the NT, Babylon and Persia had been eclipsed by Greece, and then by Rome, but the descendants of those scholars remembered Daniel’s teachings, supported by a Jewish population that remained in the area (cf. Esther). When an unusual heavenly phenomenon attracted their attention at the epoch to which Daniel had drawn their attention, they believed its teachings enough to do homage to the new king. If the OT taught them to expect the coming of a Jewish king, it would also teach them how to honor him. For each gift, let’s

- study its meaning in the OT,
- deduce the intention behind the Magi’s offering,
- and trace the NT sequel to see how Messiah’s life actually reflected this intention.

¹ Versions of this study were presented at WIBC at Christmas 2002 and 2012.

² LXX is irregular in its translation of *חֲשִׁיבִים*, rendering it *2x μαγος* (2:2, 10), and once each *επισκοπος*, *φιλοσοφος*, and *φαρμακος*. In the second century, Theodotian uses *μαγος* consistently for *חֲשִׁיבִים* eight times (including 5:11, and three times where LXX apparently reads a different Hebrew text that lacks *חֲשִׁיבִים*).

³ It is tempting from the KJV translation “astrologers” to assume a special interest in this class of wise men in astronomical phenomena. But cognates of *חֲשִׁיבִים* show that it more likely means “conjurer” or “necromancer.”

Gold

OT Usage

TWOT: “[In the OT,] Most references to gold relate to the tabernacle or to Solomon's temple and palace.” It is most common (105/389) in Exodus, describing the tabernacle. For example (chart),

Exo 37:1 And Bezaleel made the ark *of* shittim wood: ... 2 And he overlaid it with pure **gold** within and without, and made a crown of **gold** to it round about. 3 And he cast for it four rings of **gold**, *to be set* by the four corners of it; 4 And he made staves *of* shittim wood, and overlaid them with **gold**. ... 6 And he made the mercy seat *of* pure **gold**: ... 7 And he made two cherubims *of* **gold**, beaten out of one piece made he them, on the two ends of the mercy seat;

Gold marks the dwelling of the deity.

Gold is mentioned next most often in 2 Chronicles (49x) and 1 Kings (44x). Most of these references describe Solomon's temple, but some recall the tribute of the Queen of Sheba, which looks a lot like the tribute of the wise men:

1Ki 10:2 And she came to Jerusalem with a very great train, with camels that bare spices, and very much **gold**, and precious stones:

Pagan monarchs were considered quasi-divine,⁴ so it is not unusual that the Queen of Sheba would bring him a gift of gold.

Magi's Intent

Like the queen of Sheba, the Magi bring gold to honor the Son of God. Their attitude is confirmed when they “worship” him (vv. 2, 11), a verb reserved in the NT for objects that are, either truly or supposedly, divine.⁵

NT Usage

Most references to gold in the NT disparage it as a sign of carnality and human self-sufficiency (e.g., James 5:3). Its only positive references are with respect to the dwelling of God, in line with the OT usage. First, in this present age, gold is used to describe the church:

1 Cor 3:12 Now if any man build upon this foundation **gold**, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, stubble; 13 Every man's work shall be made manifest:⁶

Then, in the description of the heavenly Jerusalem:

Rev 21:18 the city was pure **gold**, like unto clear glass. ... 21 the street of the city was pure **gold**, as it were transparent glass.

Thus the Magi's intent is realized. Their gift of gold was a fitting tribute for the One in whom “God tabernacled among us,” and in whom we are built up to be a dwelling place of God by the Spirit.

4 David himself thought that Solomon was the “son of God” prophesied in 2 Sam 7:14 (see 1 Chr 28:5,6)

5 TDNT, Bickersteth

6 Cf. also 2 Tim 2:20-21

Frankincense

OT Usage

Out of 15 uses in the OT, 12 have to do with worship in the temple. Like gold, frankincense is preeminently a gift that relates to God.⁷ In the temple, we find it used in three ways (chart):

- A component of the temple incense, burned on the altar of incense before the holy of holies:

Exo 30:34 Take unto thee sweet spices, stacte, and onycha, and galbanum; *these* sweet spices with pure **frankincense**: of each shall there be a like *weight*: 35 And thou shalt make it a perfume, a confection after the art of the apothecary, tempered together, pure *and* holy:

- Placed on the shewbread

Lev 24:5 And thou shalt take fine flour, and bake twelve cakes thereof: two tenth deals shall be in one cake. 6 And thou shalt set them in two rows, six on a row, upon the pure table before the LORD. 7 And thou shalt put pure **frankincense** upon *each* row, that it may be on the bread for a memorial, *even* an offering made by fire unto the LORD.

- Most commonly, it is a part of the meal offering מנחה, offered with every sweet savor offering:

Lev 2:1 And when any will offer a meat offering unto the LORD, his offering shall be *of* fine flour; and he shall pour oil upon it, and put **frankincense** thereon:

It is NOT used with the sin offering.⁸

Lev 5:11 he that sinned shall bring for his offering the tenth part of an ephah of fine flour for a sin offering; he shall put no oil upon it, neither shall he put *any* **frankincense** thereon: for it *is* a sin offering.

In every case, frankincense is presented by people to God in the act of worship.⁹

Magi's Intent

It is often thought that by bringing incense to him, they were recognizing his deity ("Incense owns a deity nigh"). But that would have required them to burn it before him, which they did not do. They brought it for his use. As Gold recognizes the deity of the one they come to greet, Frankincense recognizes his humanity, one who owes sinless worship to God. They bring him what he will need to offer worship.

NT Usage

The NT mentions frankincense only here and Rev 18:13 (describing the merchandise of Babylon). So the fulfillment of the Magi's intent involves some degree of speculation (chart).

As a godly Jew, there would have been many occasions when our Lord would have offered up sweet savor sacrifices in Jerusalem, and could have used the frankincense. But the most significant sweet-savor offering our Lord offered was not made of flour and oil, like the Levitical meal offering.

⁷ The other three uses are in Canticles, always in combination with other spices as a perfume.

⁸ Lev 5:11; cf. Num 5:15

⁹ Compare the picture of worshipers coming to the temple in Jer 17:26; 41:5.

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Eph 5:2 walk in love, as Christ also hath loved us, and hath given himself for us an **offering** and a sacrifice to God for a sweetsmelling savour.

“Offering and sacrifice” are from Psa 40:6 (in reverse order), a prophecy of the Savior’s coming:

Psa 40:6 Sacrifice and **offering** מנחה thou didst not desire; mine ears hast thou opened: burnt offering and sin offering hast thou not required. 7 Then said I, Lo, I come: in the volume of the book *it is* written of me, 8 I delight to do thy will, O my God: yea, thy law *is* within my heart.

Here “offering” is מנחה, the meal offering, always made with frankincense.

Thus if Gold reflects his royalty and his status as God dwelling among men, Frankincense reminds us of his obedience to the Father, a life lived in the Father’s will as one continuous sweet-savor offering to God. Again, the Magi’s gift was right on the mark.

Myrrh

OT Usage

Myrrh, unlike frankincense, is not used as incense (though it has a pleasant smell when burned). In the OT, it is used as a component of perfume. It forms a component of the holy anointing oil, Exod 30:23. All of its other 11 OT uses are romantic (chart):

- It is most common (8/12 uses) in Canticles.

Sol 3:6 Who *is* this that cometh out of the wilderness like pillars of smoke, perfumed with **myrrh** and frankincense, with all powders of the merchant?

- It prepares Esther to marry King Ahasuerus:

Est 2:12 so were the days of their purifications accomplished, *to wit*, six months with oil of **myrrh**, and six months with sweet odours, and with *other* things for the purifying of the women;

- It adorns the royal bridegroom:

Psa 45:8 All thy garments *smell* of **myrrh**, and aloes, *and* cassia, out of the ivory palaces, whereby they have made thee glad.

- The adulteress perfumes her bed with it:

Pro 7:17 I have perfumed my bed with **myrrh**, aloes, and cinnamon.

Magi’s Intent

Perhaps the Magi intended myrrh for the king’s future wedding. A king so important that his birth is announced with a star must represent the beginning of a great dynasty. One day he will marry. They would love to participate in that wonderful celebration! But they are sages, aged men, and may not live so long. So, in anticipation of that joyous union, they bring myrrh to anoint the bridegroom.

NT Usage

In the NT, myrrh has nothing to do with marriage. In fact, its only two associations are with quite a different theme, suffering and death (chart).

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Mar 15:23 And they gave him to drink wine mingled with **myrrh**: but he received *it* not.

Joh 19:39 And there came also Nicodemus, ... and brought a mixture of **myrrh** and aloes, about an hundred pound *weight*. 40 Then took they the body of Jesus, and wound it in linen clothes with the spices, as the manner of the Jews is to bury.

Yet the NT does teach us something about the marriage of the Messiah.

Rev 19:8 notes that the Lamb's wife is arrayed in "fine linen, clean and white." Elsewhere, Revelation teaches how our garments attain to this perfect purity: "they ... have washed their robes, and made them white in the blood of the Lamb" (7:14).

And in Eph 5:25, the measure of Christ's love for the church is that "he gave himself for it."

Thus the myrrh of our Savior's passion becomes the fragrance of his marriage. He draws us to himself, not by carnal pleasures or seductive odors, but by bearing our sin in our place, dying for us and rising again to purchase us as his own bride. Once again, though in a way they perhaps did not understand, the Magi's intent was realized.

Summary

The Magi's gifts were not arbitrary. Their knowledge of the OT led them to the infant Jesus, and that same knowledge guided their choice of gifts.

- In offering gold, they recognized him as the son of God, one worthy of worship.
- In offering frankincense, they recognized him as a godly Man who himself would serve God with the sweet savour of obedience.
- In offering myrrh, they looked forward to his marriage, a joyful event that lay on the other side of Calvary's tree.

This Christmas, as we worship him, let this be our intent as well. The NT describes three sacrifices that we can offer in worship (chart):

Heb. 13:15 By him therefore let us offer the sacrifice of **praise** to God continually, that is, the fruit of our lips giving thanks to his name.

Heb 13:16 But to **do good and to communicate** forget not: for with such sacrifices God is well pleased.

Rom. 12:1 I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that ye present **your bodies** a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable unto God, which is your reasonable service.