

Born to Die
Strange Gifts
Matthew 2:1-12
December 10, 2017

Welcome and intro to the series...

I read this really funny twist on the Wise Men from a woman's point of view. If it had been 'Wise Women' instead of 'Wise Men', they would have asked directions, arrived on time, helped deliver the baby, cleaned the stable, made a casserole, and brought practical gifts from Baby's-R-Us, including diapers, wipes, bibs and formula.

Let's look at these wise travelers from the east and especially what they brought with them. What things do we *not* know about the "Wise Men?" Let's do a kind of Q & A about this part of the account of the birth of Jesus...okay.

1. So, how many wise men there were? The number three comes from the three gifts: Gold, frankincense, and myrrh. But for such a trip they would have had a caravan with them especially since they were carrying valuable gifts. All that the Bible tells us about their number is that they gave three gifts. The Bible doesn't say that there were 3 or 50. It does seem that the most prominent of these travelers would be the ones who presented the gifts, so our picture of three men giving gifts seems a decent depiction no matter how many there actually were.
2. Where did they come from? All we know is that they came from the east. Some suggest the near east such as Iran or Iraq. Others believe they came from as far as the Orient. The Armenian tradition identifies the "Magi of Bethlehem" as **Balthasar** of Arabia, **Melchior** of Persia, and **Gaspar** of India.
3. How far did they travel? The estimates are anywhere from 500 to 1500 miles, or more.
4. How long did they travel? It is obvious that they were not present at the stable because the Bible tells us that they came into the house not the stable. Their travel time could have been a year or even two.
5. Why were they called "wise?" In the original manuscripts they are called the "magi" from an ancient Iranian word which was used to describe wise people who acted in very strange ways, were captivated by astrology, spells and incantation and dressed in a very bizarre manner. By the time Jesus is born, Magi would be a blanket word for prophets, seers, magicians and all who would fall into a category that dealt with the supernatural. The most likely place they came from seems to be Babylon, but we can't be sure of that.
6. Why are they called kings? In the second century, a church father named Tertullian suggested that these men were kings because the Old Testament had predicted that kings would come to worship him.
- 7.. When did they arrive? While we think of these men as part of the Christmas story, they were not present on that first Christmas. As a matter of fact, they didn't arrive on the scene until well over a year or perhaps almost two years later. We know that they were not there on that holy night because if they were, Joseph and Mary would not have given a poor person's sacrifice of two turtledoves (Leviticus 12:8) because of the gift of gold. Another clue to the time of their arrival is the fact that Herod put to death all the male children ages two and under, "according to the time he had determined from the wise men."

Whoever they are, they have enough power that Herod does not have them killed on the spot for suggesting his replacement is born. And, let me tell you, Herod was capable of doing just that, having them killed. He had anyone who opposed him killed including several of his own family members. Remember, this is the same guy who has all boys under the age of 2 years old killed just to make sure he eliminated the threat. He was taking no chances. To come to Herod saying, "A new king is born" is as dangerous as it gets.

They told King Herod, **"we have come to worship him."** And they did when they found him, **"they bowed down and worshiped him"** (v 11). Notice their position when they worshiped: they bowed down. This is one of the attitudes we find in Scripture when people worship God. When Ezra led the Jew's returning from exile in Babylon in worship, the people "bowed their heads and worshiped the LORD with their faces to the ground" (Neh 8:6 also 2 Chr 20:18). King Solomon bowed down in worship at the dedication of the temple (1 Ki 8:54; 2 Chr 6:13). Psalm 95:6 call us, "Oh come, let us worship and bow down; let us kneel before the Lord, our Maker!" And we're told that on the last day "every knee shall bow" to Jesus. These Magi, these wise men believe that all the signs point to this child being a king...and not just any king, an important king, one worth the travel time, one worth the risks, and one worth some pretty significant gifts.

The Magi believed that this child was an important king.

About that time some wise men from eastern lands arrived in Jerusalem asking, "Where is the newborn king of the Jews? We saw his star..." Matthew 2:1-2 NLT

Okay, what about those gifts they brought? The wise men offered to Jesus gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh. Is this just another incidental detail in the birth narrative? And why these three items. Is there something going on that we don't know about that is buried in the symbolism of these three gifts? There must be more to the story, right? If not, then these wise men are not very wise at all because if these gifts have no meaning then they should have brought something helpful like diapers, and one of those bouncy things you hang in the door way, right. No, these three gifts are also symbols of who Jesus is and what he will be doing in his 33 short years on earth, as one who was born "to save his people from their sins." So, let's look at the gifts to see what they tell us about this baby.

The gifts are symbols of who Jesus is and what he will do.

They entered the house and saw the child with his mother, Mary and they bowed down and worshiped him. Then they opened their treasure chests and ace him gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh. Matthew 2:11 NLT

First there's gold? Gold, obviously, is the most precious metal in all the world. In the ancient days, gold was a necessary tribute paid by vassal kings to superior kings. The more powerful the king, the more gold you paid. King Solomon, for instance, had a gold throne, made 500 shields of gold, and all his drinking vessels were made of gold. The queen of Sheba in southern Arabia also brought him gold. Gold is brought to King David by other kingdoms who recognize him as the big dog. And the ark of the covenant is covered in – what? – right, Gold. The gold is a clear sign that these travelers believe that they are visiting a King who is greater than their king. Even though he is just a baby they believe that one day he will rule and they need to make sure that he knows that they recognize is status. The gold is a sign for us that laying in the manger is King Jesus...the King of the world.

Gold is a symbol of Jesus being King of the world.

Second, they brought frankincense which is a fragrant white gum produced from certain trees found only in the land of Sheba (Isa 60:6; Jer 6:20). It is used till this day in incense and in perfumes. In the Old Testament, the high priest is directed to blend it with other sweet spices to make holy incense for burning in the tabernacle and temple as an offering to God (Ex. 30:34-38). Frankincense is said to have qualities that help heal wounds and scars, fight off colds and flu's and reduce inflammation and pain. In other words, this pure incense has healing qualities. Not only is it an aromatic used to in ancient Jewish Temple worship but, it also brings healing to people's lives – just like Jesus will do. You see, these wise men may have brought this resin, on purpose, to Jesus as a gift to a King so that there might be a sweet fragrance lifted up to God but, what they may not have realized is that the healing powers of frankincense was a foretelling of the healing power of Jesus. This baby laying in a manger will one day heal the lepers, give sight to the blind, correct physical defects, restore people to physical health, and raise the dead. All while he is making his way to his own death so that we might live. The frankincense is a sign of the healing power – both physical and spiritual – of this baby.

Frankincense is a symbol of Jesus being the Healer of the world.

We come finally to the third gift of the wise men: myrrh. Myrrh is sap produced from a species of tree that grows, again, in southern Arabia, Ethiopia, Kenya, and Somalia. It is used as far back as 3000 bc by the Egyptians in embalming. Like frankincense, it is one of the components for making incense for temple rituals (Exo 30:23). It is also used as perfume, as in the Song of Solomon, where it is often mentioned with other spices and frankincense as a perfume (Song 3:6; 4:14). It is said that the Romans valued it almost as much as gold.

Myrrh as a flavoring, embalming and narcotic is found in the death and burial of people in the biblical world as well as in the times of celebration. In Psalm 45:8, the robes of the Bridegroom-King are perfumed with "myrrh and aloes and cassia." The wise men's gift of myrrh is then fit for a king. But, myrrh also mentioned in John 19:39, where Nicodemus brought "a mixture of myrrh and aloes, about seventy-five pounds in weight" to prepare Jesus' body for burial. And before he was crucified on the cross, Jesus was offered a drink of wine mixed with myrrh, but he refused it (Mat 27:34). Why? Like a painkilling drug, it would deaden the pain that he was suffering – physically, emotionally, as well as spiritually. The myrrh brought to Jesus is a symbol that one day this King will die. This aromatic myrrh was a sign to the world that this King, this baby was born to die.

Myrrh is a symbol of Jesus giving his life for the world.

You see, these wise men were making a statement about Jesus that maybe even they didn't fully understand at that moment. We can see it today as we look in the rearview mirror, can't we. But, let me say this for all of us to hear right now...that God knew what was to come. For the very beginning of all things, it was in God's plan to give everything He had so that we could have everything God has. The plan was that God would die so that we can live. Every baby ever born has this truth built into their soul...it is why we long for and search for more than just seeking out an existence here on earth. Just living is not enough when we discover that the plan for this baby born in Bethlehem would one day save the world...save me...save you.

Maybe this year the gift the magi bring to Jesus means something different. May we allow this news to change how we give gifts, how we recognize the things around us, how we worship this King and how we give ourselves to the one who was willing to be born to die...for the likes of us.

These may have seemed like strange gifts to give to a child but, remember – they are bringing gift to who they believe is a powerful king in order to worship him. What gifts do we have to lay before King Jesus...we all have something of value to bring to this King as a way to show our worship. So, what gift(s) do we bring? What are we doing to honor and worship the King?

I will bring _____ to the King.

Those first wise men most likely didn't know the full scope of what they were doing. They brought gifts to recognize what they believed was a significant event...the birth of a king. But, for us...looking now at this account from the rearview mirror, we know that they were bringing prophetic gifts to say to all of us...this King will one day rule the world by giving his life for us all. In using those gifts, we all have, in discovering what they are and using them each day, we are recognizing the person and position of Jesus in our lives and in His Kingdom.