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The Three Gifts

The three gifts are explicitly identified in Matthew: gold, frankincense, and myrrh. Different theories of the meaning and symbolism of the gifts have been brought forward. While gold is fairly obviously explained, frankincense, and particularly myrrh are much more obscure.

One theory is that all three gifts are ordinary offerings and gifts given to a king, myrrh being commonly used as an anointing oil, frankincense as a perfume, and gold as a valuable.

Another theory says that the three gifts had a spiritual meaning: gold as a symbol of kingship on earth, frankincense, an incense, as a symbol of priesthood, and myrrh, an embalming oil, as a symbol of death. Sometimes this is described more generally as gold symbolizing virtue, frankincense symbolizing prayer, and myrrh symbolizing suffering.



The three wise men bearing gifts

It was these three gifts, it is thought, which were the chief cause for the number of the Magi becoming fixed eventually at three. They can also be linked to Isaiah where it is said that gifts will be given by kings; this has played a central role in the perception of the Magi as kings, rather than as astronomer-priests.

What subsequently happened to these gifts is never mentioned in the scripture, but several traditions have developed. One story says that the gold had been stolen by the two thieves who were later crucified alongside Jesus. Another tale says it was entrusted to and then misappropriated by Judas.

In the Monastery of St. Paul of Mount Athos there is a 15th century golden case containing purportedly the gifts of the Magi. It was donated to the monastery in the 15th century by Mara Branković, daughter of the King of Serbia, wife to the Ottoman Sultan Murat II. Apparently they were part of the relics of the Holy Palace of Constantinople and it is claimed they were displayed there since the 4th century AD.

Myrrh

Myrrh was used as an embalming ointment and as a penitential incense in funerals and cremations until the 15th century. The "holy oil" traditionally used by the Eastern Orthodox Church is traditionally scented with myrrh. It has been suggested by scholars that the "gifts" were medicinal rather than precious material for tribute.

Myrrh is the dried oleo gum resin of a number of Commiphora species of trees. Like frankincense, it is produced by the tree as a reaction to a purposeful wound through the bark and into the sapwood. The trees are bled in this way on a regular basis.

Since ancient times, myrrh has been valued for its fragrance, its medicinal qualities as a wound dressing and for the ancient Egyptians as the principal ingredient used in the embalming of mummies.

Where did the three kings go?

Marco Polo claimed that he was shown the three tombs of the Magi at Saveh south of Tehran around 1270.



Altarpiece with the three kings

A Shrine of the Three Kings at Cologne Cathedral, according to tradition, contains the bones of the Three Wise Men. Reputedly they were first discovered by Saint Helena on her famous pilgrimage to the Holy Land. She took the remains to the church of Hagia Sophia in Constantinople; they were later moved to Milan, before being sent to their current resting place in AD 1164.