



The Gifts of the Magi

...to the star, which they had seen in the east, went before them, 'till it stood over where the young child was.

10. When they saw the star they rejoiced with exceeding great joy.

11. And when they came into the house, they saw the young child with Mary his mother, and fell down and worshipped him:: and when they had opened their treasurers, they presented unto him gifts: gold, and frankincense, and myrrh."...

St. Matthew
Chapter 2

Since earliest childhood, we have been told of the gold, frankincense, and myrrh brought as gifts to the Christ Child by the Magi. Gold, of course, is self explanatory, but how many are aware of what

frankincense and myrrh actually are, and of what significance they were as gifts? If we consult the encyclopedia, we find under frankincense:

...“an aromatic resin from a tree that grows only in southern Arabia and the Horn of Africa.” For centuries, along with myrrh, frankincense was the mainstay of trade in those regions. Frankincense was used in offerings of pagan religions and in funeral rites. In ancient Israel, frankincense was used in the incense burned in the temple”...

Myrrh is described as:

...“an aromatic gum resin secreted by shrubs and small trees native to Arabia, Ethiopia, and Somaliland. It oozes from cuts in the plant stem in the form of pale yellow “tears” that become brown or even blackish after solidification on exposure to air. Myrrh was widely used in the ancient world as an ingredient of perfumes and incenses, and sometimes as a topical antiseptic and astringent, and was often used in embalming materials”...

The selection of gold as a gift for the promised King would seem logical in light of its traditional association with royalty and its inherent value, but what of frankincense and myrrh? Would not gifts of greater material value have been more appropriate?

What of silver or precious jewels? We find the answer in several references and legends.

We know from history that frankincense and myrrh had great value as trade goods in the biblical era, but perhaps the symbolism described in the familiar Christmas Carol, "We Three Kings" sheds the most light on the mists of the traditional past. Of the gifts, it ascribes (or alludes to), the following purposes for each gift. Gold was brought to crown the King as befitted any monarch. Frankincense was to be used in the worship of the Child as God, even as it was used in the Temple in Israel of that day. Myrrh symbolizes the suffering and subsequent death of the Christ Child considering its traditional use in funerary practices and in embalming materials. The pertinent stanzas read:

"Born a king on Bethlehem's plain,
Gold I bring to crown Him again.
King forever, ceasing never,
Over us all to reign."

"Frankincense to offer have I,
Incense owns a Deity nigh,
Prayer and praising, all men raising,
Worship Him, God most High."

"Myrrh is mine: Its bitter perfume
Breaths a life of gathering gloom;
Sorrowing, sighing, bleeding, dying,
Sealed in a stone-cold tomb."

And finally tied together in the last verse:

"Glorious now behold Him arise,
King and God and Sacrifice;
Alleluia, Alleluia,
Earth to Heaven's replies."

There you have it - whatever you choose to believe, it is a beautiful story, and one deeply rooted in the Christian history and tradition. This symbolic gift is given in the true spirit of that original Christmas Day in hope that it will enlighten and as least some small way, make this Christmas Season a more meaningful one for you and yours.

Merry Christmas