

## Why Bring Myrrh?

Matthew 2:1 Now after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea in the days of Herod the king, behold, wise men from the east came to Jerusalem, 2 saying, "Where is he who has been born king of the Jews? For we saw his star when it rose and have come to worship him." 3 When Herod the king heard this, he was troubled, and all Jerusalem with him; 4 and assembling all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Christ was to be born. 5 They told him, "In Bethlehem of Judea, for so it is written by the prophet: 6 "' And you, O Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for from you shall come a ruler who will shepherd my people Israel.'" 7 Then Herod summoned the wise men secretly and ascertained from them what time the star had appeared. 8 And he sent them to Bethlehem, saying, "Go and search diligently for the child, and when you have found him, bring me word, that I too may come and worship him." 9 After listening to the king, they went on their way. And behold, the star that they had seen when it rose went before them until it came to rest over the place where the child was. 10 When they saw the star, they rejoiced exceedingly with great joy. 11 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. 12 And being warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they departed to their own country by another way.

*In the Name of the Father, and of the ✠ Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.*

1 Why bring myrrh? The gold makes sense. The magi sought a king, so they brought gifts fit for a king. But this King is not like they were expecting. They sought a king of the Jews in the likeliest of places: Jerusalem. They searched for Him in royal palaces, but to no avail. Had they sought the counsel of the Scriptures instead of astrology, heeding the prophecy of Micah, they would have gone to Bethlehem instead. And instead of searching in palaces for well-adorned princes from the lineage of Herod, they should have sought a more humble-appearing boy in the lineage of Israel's first king, David.

2 But gold is nevertheless a fitting gift for a king. Even if the magi were off in their calculations, off in their predictions, off in their expectations, this was the newborn King of the Jews. Herod's fears notwithstanding, this King was not destined for an earthly palace. Instead, His crown would be woven of thorn branches, and He'd be nailed to His throne. But the sign they hung over His head was no less true: Jesus Christ, King of the Jews. And not just the King of the Jews, this One the magi sought was their King, too.

3 Even the frankincense made sense. The dried sap from the frankincense tree, frankincense was an expensive incense that burned with a sweet smell. While the magi might not have known Micah's prophecy that the King for Israel would be born in Bethlehem, perhaps they knew of the Levitical commands to mix frankincense with the grain offerings so that the sweet smell may be pleasing to the Lord. Even the psalmist prays that his prayer may ascend to the Lord as the sweet smelling smoke from the burning incense. So, the magi brought expensive frankincense for the infant King and His parents. While they may not realize the divinity of the recipient of their gifts, the magi brought frankincense, a fitting gift for the Lord.

4 But the myrrh makes less sense. In many Middle Eastern cultures myrrh was used either alone or in a mixture as an embalming liquid. While fitting for a king preparing for his funeral, myrrh however makes an odd gift for a newborn King. Sure it was an expensive gift, but it's most common use would only come at the time of death. So why give it at a time of birth?

5 Perhaps the magi brought myrrh simply because of its value or perhaps because there was some practical use of myrrh with a young child. But they were not the last ones to bring myrrh to the Lord. While Jesus was at the house of Simon the Leper, a woman came with an alabaster flask of very expensive ointment, presumably myrrh, and poured it on his head. When the disciples were indignant that this expensive oil was "wasted" this way, Jesus says, "In pouring this ointment on my body, she has done it to prepare me for burial." (Mt 26:12) Like the magi, this woman could hardly have meant that to be what she was doing, but Jesus explains the myrrh as a preparation, a sign, of His impending death.

6 At His death, while He was hanging on the cross, some soldiers offered Him wine mixed with myrrh as an intoxicant to numb the pain, but Jesus refused. After the death of this once-infant Savior, Nicodemus, the one Jesus told to be born again by water and

the Spirit, came with 75 pounds of myrrh and aloes to wrap the dead body of Jesus.

Whether the magi realized it or not, they brought embalming myrrh for the body of this baby Christ. This baby, God-in-human-flesh, the Lord Almighty, the King of the Jews and Gentiles, was born to die. Their gifts inadvertently confessed this stark reality.

7        Seven hundred years before the magi arrived in Bethlehem with their gifts, Isaiah wrote about them: “They shall bring gold and frankincense, and shall bring good news, the praises of the Lord.” No mention of myrrh. The three gifts Isaiah prophesies are gold, frankincense, and good news. Myrrh means death for the Christ. And His death is good news. Repent of thinking that the Lord took on human flesh for any other reason than to die. Repent of thinking His death was an otherwise avoidable tragedy. Instead, rejoice at this good news: your Lord died for you.

8        Today is Epiphany, the day the church celebrates the manifestation of Christ to all people. The arrival of the magi from the east is good news for you. These foreigners worship the Lord, as well. Sages, leave your contemplations; brighter visions stream afar. Gentile, find in this Jewish boy a savior for you, as well. You who had no claim to the Lord, who had no right to worship a foreign God, who in no way deserved the gracious visitation of this Lord born in your flesh, take heart. He was born to claim you, a foreigner, as His own.

9        Through this Lord’s birth, life, and death, that’s exactly what He does: claims you as His own. Epiphany is a season of celebration because the Lord’s death, prophesied by the gift of myrrh, is for you, as well. In the waters of Holy Baptism, your Lord has joined you into this very death. The Lord whose living and dead body was anointed with myrrh died as the sacrifice for your sin. So you have been anointed with the waters of Holy Baptism, joined into His death and into His resurrection, given the forgiveness of sins, made a part of the Lord’s Church.

10      Although you can give the Lord no gifts, He gives you, as St. Paul says, the “unsearchable riches of Christ.” Epiphany is the pattern of the Church’s life. As the Lord has enlightened you with the light of His Gospel, made you a part of His chosen people with His gift of forgiveness, so you shine forth this light to the nations around you. This light, this forgiveness, is for all people. Even you.

*In the Name of the Father, and of the ✠ Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.*

*Soli Deo Gloria*  
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