

The Magi

Three gifts picturing three seasons in Jesus' ministry

For many Christians in Western Christianity the season of Epiphany, or Epiphanytide, starts on the twelfth evening - or "Twelfth Night" - after Christmas. According to the Encyclopedia Britannica "the festival primarily commemorates **the visit by the Magi to the infant Jesus,**" the original purpose of which, according to Western Catholic tradition, was to reveal Jesus' divinity as the Son of God. The word "Epiphany" in Greek means "revelation from above" or "manifestation of the divine."

One has to wonder, though, why any date was chosen for the Magi's visit when no date is given in Scripture for it, but one has to wonder even more why God would have a group of foreign wise men travel over 500 miles from their homeland in the empire of Parthia to the tiny town of Bethlehem in Judea (Micah 5:2) to offer gifts to the baby Jesus. Who were these Easterners, and how on earth did they even know of Jesus? And why would they worship him when they saw him? And, intriguingly, what did they see in Jesus that might reveal something about Jesus and his ministry for us Christians today?

Well, let's take a look at the gifts the Magi brought - gold, frankincense and myrrh (Matthew 2:11). The Bible doesn't tell us what the gifts represented, but do a little digging into who the Magi were and how they came to know about Jesus and why they worshipped him and there are good reasons for believing the gifts represented the three roles of Jesus as **king, priest and saviour**. And taking that one step further, do these three gifts also represent **three seasons in Jesus' ministry** too, beginning with the myrrh picturing his ministry as our Saviour, then the season of his ministry as our High Priest pictured by the frankincense, and finally his ministry as our King pictured by the gold?

If that is the case, then these Magi certainly knew a lot about Jesus already, starting with the **myrrh**, because myrrh was a perfect picture of **Jesus being crucified as our Saviour**. Myrrh was a resin extracted from trees in Africa, Arabia and India, and it was highly prized, not only as a perfume and medicine but also for embalming dead bodies to preserve them and hide the smell. The Egyptians used myrrh for the embalming of mummies. So, why, one must ask, would the Magi bring an embalming resin five hundred miles from their homeland to give to Jesus, unless they understood its meaning themselves, and God was passing that meaning on to us **through them**?

And why did they bring frankincense too? Well, in the setting up of the tabernacle as God's dwelling place with his people in the wilderness in Moses' day, "pure frankincense" was ground into a powder with three other spices and "placed in front of the Testimony in the Tent of Meeting (or tabernacle)" in **Exodus 30:34-36**. This frankincense-infused perfume was then burnt by the High Priest morning and evening on the Altar of Incense "in front of" the curtain separating "the Most Holy Place" from the rest of the tabernacle tent.

"The Testimony," according to Exodus 31:18, was the name for the two tablets of the Ten Commandments placed beside (or inside) the ark of the Covenant in the Most Holy Place, which accounts for the ark of the Covenant also being called the "ark of the Testimony" in Exodus 30:6 and 25:22. On the Day of Atonement once a year the high priest entered the Most Holy Place where the ark of the Testimony was, carrying two handfuls of the frankincense-infused powder and coals from the Altar of Incense to cleanse and reconcile all Israel to God for another year (Leviticus 16:12-13 and 30).

So frankincense was directly connected to **the priestly duties** inside the tabernacle, just as it was later on in Solomon's temple in 2 Chronicles 2:4. The New Testament - in Hebrews 9 and 10 - then connects the priestly duties in the Old Testament tabernacle to **Jesus being our High Priest today**. In Hebrews 4:14 we are explicitly told "we have a great high priest...Jesus the Son of God," and in Hebrews 8:1-2 we too "have such a high priest...who serves in the true tabernacle set up by the Lord, not by man." And Jesus' priesthood is "permanent" too, Hebrews 7:24.

Is it any coincidence, then, that the Magi brought along frankincense? Or was it because they knew Jesus would also be a priest?

Bringing myrrh, first of all, indicates the Magi understood that Jesus would be sacrificed as our saviour, exactly as stated in **Hebrews 9:12**, that "Jesus entered the Most Holy Place once and for all by his own blood, having obtained eternal redemption." But who would have guessed that these Magi also understood **verse 14**, as to "**how much more** would the blood of Christ cleanse our consciences from acts that lead to death, so that we may serve the living God"? Cleansing consciences and enabling the Israelites to serve the living God were the job of the High Priest on the Day of Atonement, and here in verse 14 that's exactly what Jesus as our high priest now does for us today.

So, why, one must ask, would the Magi bring frankincense five hundred miles from their homeland to give to Jesus, unless they understood this was its meaning, and God was passing that meaning on to us through them?

And why did they bring **gold** as well? Well, from as early on as **Genesis 2:12** that says “the gold of that land is good,” the Bible makes it clear how valuable gold is. It was gold - over one ton of it - that God ordered for his tabernacle in the desert in Moses’ day. In **1 Chronicles 22:14** King David set aside 100,000 talents of gold for the building of the temple (plus another 3,000 talents of his own treasure in 1 Chronicles 29:3-4). That’s over 3,000 tons of gold. At \$2,000 an ounce, it rounds out to 200 billion dollars in today’s money. And in **Revelation 21:21** “The great street of the city (the new Jerusalem) was made of pure gold, like transparent glass.” To both God and kings, then, gold has always held great value. It’s what Nebuchadnezzar used in the 90 foot statue he had made of himself. Gold is what kings like to be crowned with, and what has always been stripped from a country when invaded. Gold is the great symbol of wealth and power; it’s the stuff of kings.

But the gold the Magi brought to Jesus takes on even greater significance when you realize who these Magi themselves might have been. We get a hint that they were more than mere astrologers from the reaction they created in Jerusalem on their arrival. In **Matthew 2:3**, “King Herod was disturbed and all Jerusalem with him.” The Message translation says they were “**terrified.**”

Terrified? But why would a powerful king like Herod, appointed “King of the Jews” by no less than the great Caesar Augustus himself, be terrified of these wise men from the east? Herod had the power and authority of the Roman empire behind him too, and weren’t the Romans the dominant power in all the known world of that time?

No, they weren’t. The Romans weren’t the only powerhouse in the region. Right next door was the **Parthian Empire**, a confederation of kingdoms that stretched from eastern Turkey, down through Syria and Iran, and across to India and modern Afghanistan. In 53 BC - a mere 50 years before Jesus was born - Crassus, the wealthiest man in Rome, attacked the Parthians in Turkey in search of military glory and riches, but the Parthians, outnumbered five to one, soundly defeated Crassus’ troops, killing Crassus and at least 20,000 of his 40,000 troops and capturing 10,000 more. It was the worst defeat the Romans had suffered so far. The Parthians were clearly a force to be reckoned with.

Thirteen years later, in 40 BC, the Parthians led by Antigonus 11 marched into Judea, conquered Jerusalem and forced King Herod (the Great) to flee Jerusalem and hole up in Masada and then Rome. In 37 BC, Herod, with the aid of Roman general Mark Anthony (of Cleopatra fame) managed to smash their way back into Jerusalem and recapture it, where Herod was set up as “King of the Jews,” a title given to him by the Roman senate.

A year later in 36 BC, Mark Anthony, flushed with success, marched deep into Parthian territory with a massive force of 100,000 troops. But bad strategy on his part led to 10,000 of his troops being wiped out by the Parthians, and another 15,000 died due to the vicious winter weather. King Herod, therefore, was on high alert from that time on, because the Jews under his rule could easily side with the Parthians in a counter attack against Jerusalem. To Herod the Parthians were an ever present danger. And now, thirty or so years later into his reign, scary reports were coming in to him that Parthians had arrived in Jerusalem in search of a rival “king of the Jews” (Matthew 2:2).

And these Parthians weren’t just three men on camels either, because why would Herod and the whole city of Jerusalem be “terrified” of them? Well, that takes us back to **who these Magi were** in their homeland of Parthia, and for that we turn to the book of Daniel, where we discover these Magi were very powerful people too.

There’s a hint much earlier in Scripture, first of all, that the Magi had their roots in God’s prophet Balaam, based on Balaam’s prophecy to the Moabite king Balak in **Numbers 24:17**, that “**A star will come out of Jacob; a sceptre (picturing a king) will come out of Jacob (or Israel).**” This would help explain why the Magi were aware of a unique star being used by God to announce **Jesus being the real king of the Jews**. Could it be that God had kept that prophecy to Balaam alive, therefore, **through the Magi?**

But why through the Magi? Well, this is where the book of Daniel comes in, because Daniel and his fellow Jews had been carted off as captives by Nebuchadnezzar into the future land of the Medo-Persians where the Magi came from. And the Magi were no wilting wallflowers either. Because of their profound and extraordinary knowledge of science, agriculture, mathematics, history and religion, their religious and political influence had grown to the point they became the most prominent and powerful group of advisors to Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon, and to Darius the Great, king of the Medo-Persian empire. It’s no surprise the Magi were called “wise men.”

Some of the Magi had also become so expert in the interpretation of dreams that they’d officially been made the empire’s supreme priesthood. These Magi, therefore, were very powerful people in both government and religion.

And guess who became their leader and chief? **Daniel**, whose rise to power had begun during Nebuchadnezzar’s reign when “In every matter of wisdom and understanding” the king found Daniel and his three friends “ten times better than all the magicians and enchanters in his whole kingdom” **Daniel 1:20**.

And because Daniel was the only one able to interpret the meaning of Nebuchadnezzar's dream about the giant statue picturing future empires, the king "made Daniel ruler over the entire province of Babylon and placed him in charge of all its wise men" **Daniel 2:48**.

And when Belshazzar, Nebuchadnezzar's son, suddenly saw a hand writing on the wall and no-one could interpret what the words meant, his queen piped up and said, "There's a man in your kingdom," **Daniel 5:11**, "whom your father appointed **chief of the magicians**, enchanters, astrologers and diviners," so "Call for Daniel," she said in **verse 12**, "and he will tell you what the writing means."

Notice that word "magicians" in verse 11? The first four letters spell out "Magi," from which we get our word magician today, so Daniel was a member of the Magi, and not only a member he was the **Rab-mag**, the actual Chief of all the Magi priests too. And later, in **Daniel 6:3**, "Daniel so distinguished himself" among the three administrators of the new Persian king, Darius the Great, the dominant ruler of the Parthian empire, "that the king planned to **set Daniel over the whole kingdom**." So Daniel was not only given the position of a **king**, he was also the Chief **priest** of the Magi, and looked upon by Nebuchadnezzar and Darius as a type of **saviour** as well for God saving and sparing them through Daniel.

So Daniel filled the roles of saviour, priest and king as a God-believing Jew with enormous influence and authority given to him over an entire foreign empire - and with the total support of king Darius who actually issued an empire-wide decree in **Daniel 6:26**, "that in every part of my kingdom people must **fear and reverence the God of Daniel**."

Imagine what opportunity that gave Daniel to teach and influence thousands of people - and especially the Magi he was in charge of. And what might he have taught to them? Well, we get clues in Daniel's vision of the future in **Daniel 7:13-14**, that "one like a son of man...was given authority, glory and sovereign power; all peoples, nations and men of every language worshipped him. His dominion is an everlasting kingdom that will never be destroyed," an obvious prophecy about Jesus being given rulership of the entire earth.

Daniel's vision also spoke of "the sovereignty, power and greatness of the kingdoms under the whole heaven" being "handed over to the saints, the people of the Most High" in **verse 27**. So the Magi were thoroughly tuned in to future events by Daniel, involving a **future king and his people who would rule the world forever**.

But what was truly remarkable was the **timeline** given by Daniel in **Daniel 9:24-27** that enabled the Magi through the following centuries to pinpoint the exact time of this great future king's arrival. According to verses 24 and 25 "the Anointed One" would arrive 483 years after the Persian emperor "issued a decree to restore and rebuild Jerusalem." So, did God preserve that prophecy - and all the other prophecies given to Daniel - through the Magi as well, just like the prophecy he gave to Balaam about "a star coming out of Jacob"?

Well, why not, when Darius had issued a decree for all his people to "fear and revere the God of Daniel"? And with Daniel in charge of the Magi they would have learnt a great deal from him about the God of Israel and his plans for his people in the future. It was probably required reading all the way up to the time of Jesus' birth, **making the Parthian empire the centre and preserver of the Jewish religion.**

Which is where the story of the **Jewish Queen Esther** comes in. She became the wife of King Xerxes, the eldest son of Darius the Great of Daniel's day. It was during her reign that the evil-minded Haman wanted to "destroy the Jews throughout the whole kingdom of Xerxes" in **Esther 3:6**. So we know there were still many Jews living in Persia, and probably many like Daniel and his three friends among the Magi too. But Esther, with the help of her cousin, Mordecai, saved the day, resulting in "many people of other nationalities (in that land) **becoming Jews**" **Esther 8:17**.

Well, all those people "becoming Jews" in the Parthian Empire would also have kept the Jewish religion alive and well, including the prophecies of Daniel, and especially among the Magi. It would also help explain why the Magi knew more about the timing of Jesus' birth than the Jews in Jerusalem - and they knew the significance of the star when it appeared too. They also knew the significance of Jesus' birth because their sole purpose in travelling from Parthia was to seek out the King of the Jews "to worship him" **Matthew 2:2**.

And that's what must've terrified King Herod, because "**worship**" meant this other king was more than a mere man. Could this other king be the Messiah the Jews believed would be ruling over the whole world forever? But what also terrified him, and the whole city of Jerusalem along with him, was WHO was seeking this rival king. It was Magi, the most powerful people in the Parthian Empire. Suddenly, they weren't just another caravan of merchants; they were more like kings at the head of an invasion force ready to set up a rival king. Were they spying out the city in preparation for another war with the Romans? Herod was taking no chances; he immediately set about discovering for himself where this rival king had been born and eliminating him.

But how embarrassing it was too, that the Magi were the ones who'd understood the prophecies about Jesus, not the Jewish priests or king Herod. And it was the Magi who were guided by the star of Jacob to the exact place "where the child (Jesus) was" in **Matthew 2:9** too. And it was the Magi who recognized the voice of God when he spoke. The Magi, therefore, were the true Bible-believers and God-seekers, not the Jews in Jerusalem.

It was to the Magi, then, that God gave the understanding of Jesus as saviour, priest and king, which the Magi would also have grasped from Daniel, their Magi ancestor and chief, who was also a type of saviour, priest and king.

But **how does all this relate to us as Christians today?** God made the story of the Magi's visit to Jesus dramatic enough to catch our attention, but catch our attention for what?

It's realizing who these Magi were and what they understood. They were the first and only people to recognize the roles that Jesus would play, thanks to what God had revealed to Daniel and preserved through the Magi in the Parthian Empire right up to the time of Jesus' birth.

And what great wisdom God had given these Magi too, in having them carry gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh. These weren't the kind of gifts you'd give to a child of one or two years old. But this is what they chose to give to Jesus, and travelled 500 miles to give to him too, and gave to him after lying prostrate on the ground in an act of worship, and after being guided to the very house Jesus was in by a star prophesied long, long ago by Balaam.

So why gold, frankincense and myrrh? Because they would picture the three seasons of Jesus' ministry, and enable us to pinpoint which of those seasons we are now living in as Christians.

The first of those seasons, for instance, is pictured by the myrrh. It's about Jesus being our Saviour through his life of obedience and trust in God, and in his death giving us a clean slate, freeing us from the power and corruption of evil, and from the devil's power of death that was hanging over humanity. And that was accomplished and completed once and for all time - and for all humanity - on the cross. That season of his ministry, therefore, was fulfilled in Jesus' life and death as a human. Jesus himself said, "It is finished." So that season of his ministry is over. It's done and dusted. And all we do is accept it and say like Paul, "I have been crucified with Christ" to complete that season in our lives too. We always remember him being our Saviour, yes, but we also recognize his ministry as our Saviour was completed on the cross.

And the gold, of course, pictures his ministry as king of kings in the future when he comes again. This will be the season of Jesus putting everything to rights, and restoring all humans to the life God intended for us from the beginning. It's the season of "restoring everything" in **Acts 3:21**, when Jesus and his bride will change the whole world. And that's in the future, isn't it? So that's two seasons in the ministry of Jesus - one already past, pictured by the myrrh, and one in the future, pictured by the gold - both of which we're not living in now.

The season of Jesus' ministry we're living in now is pictured by the frankincense, because it represents his ongoing ministry as our high priest and ever present helper. Frankincense is all about temples and priesthood and cleansing us of our sins, and reconciling our relationship with God, and transforming us into Jesus' likeness. It's the season of Jesus being our "mediator" (1 Timothy 2:5), and Jesus having an "unchangeable priesthood," through which "he is able to save us to the uttermost, seeing he ever lives to make intercession for us" (Hebrews 7:25). It pictures his prayers with our prayers constantly rising to God as a sweet smelling perfume, like the sweet smelling smoke of the burning frankincense in the Most Holy Place on the Day of Atonement, keeping our relationship with God intact and growing.

And this is the season of Jesus' ministry we're in right now. The other two seasons of Jesus' ministry we think about and talk about too, of course, but one is past and one is future. It's the **present** season of his ministry we focus on, because that's the one we're living in and experiencing every day, the **season of his priesthood pictured by the frankincense.**

And there are three things this present season in Jesus' ministry produce in us, that we can readily and easily recognize. And all three are mentioned in just three verses too, in the report sent to Paul about what was happening to the Christians in **Colossians 1:4-6**. Paul had been praying for them, and in verse 3 we find him thanking God for the Colossians, "because," **verse 4**. "we have heard of your **FAITH** in Christ Jesus and of the **LOVE** you have for all the saints - the faith and love," **verses 5 and 6**, "that spring from the **HOPE** that is stored up for you in heaven and that you have already heard about in the word of truth, the gospel that has come to you."

Wafting up to God, and to Paul too, was this sweet smelling frankincense of the Colossians' faith, love and hope. Imagine a church like that. Well, that's exactly what Jesus is producing in us right now. He's making us into a sweet smelling perfume. And to think that God first revealed this to the Magi, so that through them we Christians would easily recognize and be part of this amazing and wonderful season of Jesus' ministry today.