

## Myrrh

The Magi brought to the infant Jesus their gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh. Of these, myrrh might seem to be something of an odd one out. Gold and frankincense are mentioned together in Isaiah 60:6, a passage traditionally read at Epiphany, and thought of as a prophecy of the visit of the Magi. This verse reads: “A multitude of camels shall cover you, the young camels of Midian and Ephah; all those from Sheba shall come. They shall bring gold and frankincense, and shall proclaim the praise of the LORD.” But nothing is said of myrrh in this passage. Moreover, gold may readily be associated with kings, and frankincense with priests, and so these gifts suggest the kingly and priestly role of Jesus. But myrrh does not have an obvious association.

Myrrh was a fragrant resin, which was probably produced by a low shrubby tree of the genus *Commiphora*, found in the Arabian desert and also north Africa. The word “myrrh” represents the Hebrew word *mōr*, probably from a root meaning “to be bitter”, and it occurs 12 times in the OT; and in the NT related words in Greek are used 4 times to represent “myrrh”. Some English Bible translations also use “myrrh” to translate the Hebrew word *lōṭ* which is found twice in narrative about Joseph in the Book of Genesis (37:25; 43:11), and which probably refers to the resin of a different tree.

Myrrh was one of the ingredients of the holy anointing oil, described in Exodus 30:23, which was used to anoint the tabernacle and its sacred furnishings and utensils. The oil was considered to be so sacred that its formula was forbidden to be copied and used for any other purpose. Thus in this respect, the gift of the Magi (like the frankincense) might suggest the work of a priest. But Exodus 30:23 is the only place where this use of myrrh is referred to in the OT.

Elsewhere, it is used especially as a prized perfume in a variety of secular contexts. We see from Song of Songs 3:6 that it might be burned as incense for non-religious purposes. According to Song of Songs 1:13, it might be kept in a perfume bag around the neck. Psalm 45:8 refers to it being used as a perfume for clothes, and Proverbs 7:17 to its use as a perfume for a bed. We are told in Esther 2:12 that in the Persian royal court women had to be beautified for six months with oil of myrrh and six months with spices and ointments before they could go in to the king.

Myrrh was certainly a precious item. In 1 Kings 10:25||2 Chronicles 9:24 it is mentioned among the gifts that the kings of the earth brought to King Solomon each year as they came to hear his wisdom, the other items being articles of silver and gold, garments, spices, horses and mules. Similarly, in Revelation 18:13 it is among the precious items of merchandise in which the merchants of the earth can no longer trade after the fall of Babylon, that is to say Rome. Thus the Magi’s gift of myrrh, like gold, was a precious item fit to present to a king.

But if we really want to appreciate the significance of this third and final gift presented by the Magi to the infant Jesus, we need to look at the only other two occurrences of the word myrrh in the NT, which I have not yet mentioned. Mark tells us in 15:23 that when Jesus was crucified they offered him wine mingled with myrrh, but he did not take it. So this final gift of the Magi points forward to the passion of Jesus. We see this further in the only remaining reference to myrrh in the NT at John 19:39, where it is said that after the crucifixion, Nicodemus came bringing a mixture of myrrh and aloes, which was used together with linen cloths to prepare the body of Jesus for burial. This means that right at the very beginning of his life, Jesus was presented with a gift which symbolised his passion and death. He had come into the world in order to bring us his precious gifts of redemption and life, and he could achieve this purpose only by walking in the way of the cross.

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