

TREES OF THE MAGI

Frankincense and Myrrh

On January 6th the Christian Church through the world celebrates the festival of *Epiphany*. On Epiphany Sunday, people remember the visit of the wise men to the house of Joseph and Mary in Bethlehem (Mt 2:1-23). After reading the account, you might note the following:



- ! Herod the Great ruled from 37-4 BC. Like most rulers of his day, he was ruthless, murdering most of his family as well as the babies in Bethlehem. His reign was also noted for its splendor, as seen in many buildings which he either refurbished or constructed.
- ! The *Magi* or “wise men” were probably scientists or teachers from Persia or southern Arabia, both of which are east of Palestine. The Bible does not tell us how many there were. They were almost certainly not “kings.”
- ! The Magi were Gentiles (non-Jews), showing us how people of all nations are able to come and worship Jesus. Thus Epiphany is sometimes called the “Christmas of the Gentiles.”
- ! Although God led the men by a special star, they were also led by something else. What was it?
- ! Why was Herod so anxious to have the babies in Bethlehem killed?

When the wise men came to Jesus, they did not come empty handed, but they came bearing gifts. They came with gold, *frankincense*, and *myrrh*. All three gifts were expensive and precious, two of them came from plants which for the next additions to our “Bible garden.”

FRANKINCENSE

Frankincense is referenced throughout the Bible beginning in Exodus (30:34) as an incense used by the Children of Israel. It was of great economic importance to the likes of King Solomon and the Queen of Sheba.

Frankincense trees are large, but rather plain (even ugly) looking trees. They are low to the ground, twisted, and thorny. They do not have a central trunk. Instead, fat prickly branches spread out with small leaves. Using a special knife (called a *Mingaff*), a cut is made in the bark of the tree. A white resin then oozes from the cut. These drops, known as *luban*, are left on the tree for two weeks to dry into semi-translucent globules of gum-resin. These are then collected by men who have previously marked the trees, in March, April and May, before the monsoon. When heated or burned, the frankincense resin gives off a strong balsamic odor. In Jesus' day, frankincense was one of the most highly valued substances in the world— equal in many cases to gold itself.

Once the frankincense “tears” were collected from the trees, the resin had to be either carried overland for sale or exported by boat. Control of the incense trade (and the trade routes) was a coveted prize for the kings of the day. Ports cities were often established close to the source of the incense. Alexander the Great had once intended to invade Arabia in order to take control of the world supply of frankincense, but he died before his plan was realized.

Frankincense was used in religious ceremonies by both the God-fearing and the heathen, but it was also used to embalm corpses, as it has the property of preserving skin to a degree. When King Tutankhamun's tomb was opened in 1922, one of the sealed flasks still gave off the obvious odor of frankincense— after 3,300 years!

At the time of Jesus, the frankincense trade was at its peak. Following 50 AD or so, it began to decline, but the essential oils used in medicines and perfumes were still very much in demand into the 17th century.

Today, practically all commercially available frankincense comes from Somalia, but it is said that the best quality is that which is exported from the Dhofar region in southern Oman.

MYRRH

Myrrh has been widely known and used throughout history as an ingredient in perfumes and medicines. Myrrh got its name from an Arabic word meaning “bitter.”

The myrrh tree grows to about 30 feet tall and has musty smelling leaves with white flowers. It can be found growing in the Middle East, India, and parts of Asia. Myrrh oil is taken from the trunk of the tree by steam.

Myrrh has been used by many cultures for religious ceremonies and as a healing agent. In Greece, when soldiers went into battle, myrrh was an essential part of their gear because of its highly antiseptic and anti-inflammatory properties. Oil of myrrh is frequently used as an antiseptic, deodorant, stimulant, and a fungicidal agent and tonic. Today, it is used to alleviate ulcers, sores, wounds and chapped skin. It is also still used to prevent the spread of gangrene.

There are two other plants from which the Biblical myrrh could have been taken:

- ! There is a balsam plant known as *commiphora myrrha*. This is a large shrub found in Arabia. A gum-resin oozes naturally from the stems. When the yellow liquid solidifies, it turns brown or black in color. This resin is then used in tonics, antiseptics, etc.
- ! Also, the plant known as the *rockrose (Cistus ladaniferus)* is also a source of “fragrant gum.” The rockrose can be grown in western climates. It is an evergreen standing from three to five feet high and producing a single flower which resembles a rose.

CONCLUSION



Because of their mention in the Bible as the gifts of the Magi, frankincense and myrrh are forever linked with Christmas and the early life of Jesus. What can the mention of these gifts teach us . . .

About the Baby in Bethlehem?
About what He meant to the Magi?
About what Jesus is worth?
About our gifts to Him?
How can we come to Jesus with gifts like the wise men did?

FOR FURTHER BIBLE STUDY: GIFTS FOR JESUS

What moves us to worship Jesus and give Him gifts?

Ephesians 1:7

1 John 4:19

What are the greatest gifts we can give to Jesus?

Jel 2:12-13

Psalms 49:14-15

Mark 12:42-44

2 Corinthians 2:14-17

Matthew 25:34-40



What can I give Him, poor as I am?
If I were a shepherd, I would bring a lamb.
If I were a wise man, I would do my part.
But what I have I give Him, give my heart.

—Christina Rossetti, from *In the Bleak Mid-Winter*