

One of my favorite Christmas songs is We Three Kings. I have learned that there is a slight problem with this song; the problem is in the title and first line. Other than 2nd century tradition, we have no reason to think that there were three kings other than the mention of three gifts. Matthew uses the plural to refer to them, so there must have been at least two; there might have been many more than that. A few centuries later, tradition declared that each of the supposed three kings were each descended from a different one of Noah's three sons; this tradition also gave them names, and race, according to these ancestors. A further problem is that kings is a very poor translation of the Greek word magi.

Exactly who were these folks who came to see the infant Jesus? Magi is synonymous in ancient Greek with priest. These priests were also wise men, intellectuals: they studied science, medicine, nature. In part, this study led to a better understanding of the world around them. However, their primary goal was to study nature, especially the stars, looking for signs from God; searching nature for God's will. To call them astrologers in the modern sense would be demeaning, as if writing vague daily horoscopes could capture God's will. To call them astronomers would focus on studying the stars rather than looking for God's purpose contained within the heavens. To use the modern term derived from the Greek, magicians, is to lump them with charlatans and parlor tricks. Perhaps we do not have a good modern term for scientists and intellectuals who search for God's purpose for the world. We could call them Congregationalists, but let's just continue to call them magi.

There are some essential aspects that the hymn does get right. First, they traveled from a great distance to find the infant Jesus. Somehow, God chose to use these gentiles, these non-believers, to seek out the infant who would one day be king. Second, when they found this infant, they bowed down and worshiped him.

Third, they brought precious gifts to present to this newborn king.

These magi were confident folk. Their class and priestly status gave them access to King Herod and his court. They knew that it was proper to give gifts to a king. Yet, they did not give Herod their gifts in spite of his Roman title. Instead, they asked Herod where this special infant had been born. They did not ask if he had been born. They knew that Jesus had been born and born near Jerusalem; it was just a question of exactly where. The magi referred to this infant as a king; it was Herod himself who first referred to him as the Messiah.

When the magi found the baby Jesus, they fell to their knees in worship and offered gifts befitting a king: gold, frankincense and myrrh. I can not really tell you how deep and precise the symbolism of these particular gifts might have been at the time. Yet, we do know some things. Gold, like today, is a common form of exchange, a precious metal fit for a king. Some say that it was to represent a king's crown. Perhaps. Regardless, it most likely was used by Mary and Joseph to finance an unexpected and sudden trip to Egypt. The good part of gold and money is it can be used where it is most needed, then and today.

Frankincense was something totally different. Incense has long been used as part of worship in many cultures including the Jewish Temple: the sweet smelling odor thought to be pleasing to God. Frankincense has little value just sitting there as a lump of dried and hardened tree sap. Only when it is turned into a vapor, when it is being transformed by fire, does it provide its pleasant odor. Worship itself is much like that. Worship - an encounter with God - only has value in our transformation. True worship is when we are open to being transformed by God during this encounter, when we seek God's will much as the magi sought. Like frankincense, this transformation occasionally includes, if not fire, at least difficult times. Like frankincense, worship is as transitory as vapor: it needs to be repeated

often.

Then there is myrrh. Myrrh, resin from a bush, might have been used as a medicine although it is unclear what it treated. Myrrh was clearly used as part of funeral preparations; hence, its association with death and burial. The value of myrrh was in its ability to change things, whether to heal a person or to prepare a body for burial, it too was only useful when it was applied. Perhaps we can think of myrrh in terms of Christian service. The death of Christ, his hasty burial, had to precede his resurrection, the resurrection that gives us new life. It is when we die to self, when we put others first, when we have been transformed by our worship, that our service most glorifies God. This selfless service provides a medicine that our sickly world so desperately needs.

Wise and learned seekers after the will of God. Gifts of incredible value fit for a king. A king who would never live surrounded by such wealth; yet a king who has given us the gift of life. As we, wise and learned seekers after the will of God, come to fall upon our knees to worship the king, what gifts do we bring?

God has placed gifts of incredible value within each of us; no two of us have identical gifts. The Magi brought gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. Each of us can offer wealth and worship and selfless service. Each of us bears unique and valuable gifts needed for the Kingdom of God. As we gather at the table to celebrate the gift of life that Christ gave to us, let us ponder what gifts of thanksgiving we can offer to the King.