

The King-Priest is Worshiped at His Birth and Honored at His Death

Psalm 45:6-7; Matthew 2:7-12; John 19:38-42 (text)

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Congregation of Christ: Everyone loves the Nativity scene: a cute baby in a manger holding out his hands in blessing; Mary and Joseph in wonderment of their firstborn son; lowly shepherds and three kings kneeling in worship; and adorable sheep and cows in the background.

But Nativity scenes are far from real, and not even Biblical. A few years back, Dr. Jack Kinneer, professor at Reformed Presbyterian Theological Seminary in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, wrote a paper questioning many assumptions, both traditional and modern, that Christians have about the birth of Jesus. He bases his conclusions using Scripture texts and historical and geographical facts.

These are some things he questions. Most of us imagine that Mary started having labor pains as she was riding on a donkey on the way to Bethlehem. Rather, they were already in town for some time before Jesus was born. Luke 2:6 says, “*And while they were there, the time came for her to give birth.*” And animals surrounding the manger? Well, this also is doubtful, because “*no room in the inn*” is actually “*no place in the guest room*” in Greek (Luke 2:7). Luke uses the same Greek word for “guest room” when Jesus' disciples asked the owner of a house for a “guest room” in his house so that Jesus may eat the Passover meal with them (Luke 22:11). And the room where Joseph and Mary lodged was so small, probably used for feeding animals, that they had to clear it of the animals before the baby was delivered. This means that “the cattle are lowing” manger scenes are also improbable.

Also, did the wise men arrive on the night that Jesus was born? Not true, for Matthew 2 says that they came “*after Jesus was born*” (v 1). From their place of origin, they saw “*his star when it rose*” (v 2). Most commentators believe they came from Persia or Babylon, since the word “magi” which means “wise men,” “magicians” or “astrologers,” came from those areas. But a few believe that they came from Arabia, since Arabians, including the queen of Sheba have had centuries-old relationships with the Jewish people, even paying tribute to King Solomon.¹

So when did the wise men arrive? We know that Mary and Jesus did not go to the Jerusalem Temple until 40 days after Jesus was born for her purification rite and Jesus' redemption as a firstborn son. So it was after this that the family fled to Egypt. If the wise men started their journey after the star arose, it would have taken them about one or two months to reach Jerusalem, about 600 miles away. At the rate that most camel caravans travel – 15-20 miles a day – it would not take the wise men two years to reach Jerusalem. When Herod ordered the slaughter of infants up to two years old, there are two explanations: he was covering his bases; or he only ordered the slaughter two years after the wise men did not return.

¹ Christian News Wire, "Professor Shows Accuracy of Bible's Christmas Story, Debunks Popular Myths," <http://www.christiannewswire.com/news/243531675.html>

Therefore, our Nativity scenes are not realistic. The most realistic scene would be: a baby in a manger, his parents, some shepherds, and possibly a midwife and a few other people. But no wise men, angels and “cattle lowing.”

Still, humble and lowly shepherds and Gentile wise men worshiped him at his birth. And at his death, ruling Jews who became his disciples honored him.

So today, our theme is: **“The King-Priest Worshiped at His Birth and Honored at His Death”** under three headings: (1) **Wise Gentiles Worship Him with Three Gifts;** (2) **The Humble and Lowly Worship Him with Glory and Praise;** and (3) **Ruling Jews Honor Him with Myrrh and Aloes.**

Wise Gentiles Worship Him with Three Gifts

Let us now set aside the details of the birth of Jesus in Bethlehem and the wise men's journey from the east to Jerusalem. But let us now focus on what these Gentiles did after they arrived at the house where the baby Jesus was.

Let us consider why the wise men traveled 600 miles to Jerusalem. They told King Herod they *“have come to worship him”* *“who has been born king of the Jews”* (v 2). And this they did when they found him, *“they fell down and worshiped him”* (v 11). Notice their position when they worshiped: they fell down on their faces. This is one attitude that we usually find in Scripture when God's people worship. When Ezra led the Jews who returned from exile in Babylon in worship, the people *“bowed their heads and worshiped the LORD with their faces to the ground”* (Neh 8:6; see also 2 Chr 20:18). Other times, people knelt and bowed down in worship, as King Solomon did at the dedication of the temple (1 Ki 8:54; 2 Chr 6:13). Psalm 95:6 call us, *“Oh come, let us worship and bow down; let us kneel before the Lord, our Maker!”* On the last day, Paul says that *“every knee shall bow”* to Christ (Phil 2:10). But the Second Commandment prohibits us from bowing our heads to worship idols (Exo 20:5).

The closest we get to these attitudes in worship is bowing down our heads when we pray. But this does not mean we do not worship God. Because when we sing praises to God, when we stand before God, when we listen intently to God's Word read and preached, we worship him. Most churches today think that worship is merely the singing of contemporary music, calling this “Praise & Worship.” And this has become the major part of public worship. They think that the rest of the service following this singing is not worship anymore. But our whole service on the Lord's Day, from the Call to Worship to the Benediction and Doxology, is worship. Worship consists not only in praising God, but also trembling before God, as Psalm 96:9 says, *“Worship the LORD in the splendor of holiness; tremble before him, all the earth!”*

The wise men showed their outward token of respect and honor, adoration, reverence shown to Jesus by falling down on their faces. What else did they do to worship him? They offered to him gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh. Is this just another incidental detail in the birth narrative? No, it is not, for these three gifts are also symbols of who Jesus is and what work he will be doing, as one who was born *“to save his people from their sins.”*

First, what of the gold? Gold, obviously, is the most coveted precious metal in the world. So in the ancient days, gold was a necessary tribute paid by vassal kings to superior kings. The more gold, the more powerful a king is. King Solomon, for instance, had a gold throne, made 500 shields of gold, and all his drinking vessels were made of gold. The queen of Sheba in southern Arabia also brought him much gold (1 Kings 10).

So gold is a fitting gift for Jesus, because he is not only King of the Jews, but King of Kings and Prince of Peace. All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to him. Everyone will bow down in submission to him. We honor and reverence him as the King of his church (Psa 2:6). We bow down to him because he “governs us by His Word and Spirit, and defends and preserves us in the redemption obtained for us.”

Second, they brought frankincense or “pure incense,” a fragrant white gum produced from certain trees found only in Sheba (Isa 60:6; Jer 6:20). The high priest blends it with other sweet spices to make holy incense for burning in the tabernacle and temple as an offering to God (Exod 30:34-38). When Noah offered a burnt offering in thanksgiving to God for saving him and his family from the flood, God smelled the “*pleasing aroma*” (Gen 8:20-21). And Christ’s sacrifice on the cross for our sins, Paul says, is “*a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God*,” just as the incense offered by the high priest in the temple (Eph 5:2).

So frankincense is a fitting gift to the Christ-Child, because he is our great High Priest. Not only is he our King; he is also our High Priest. He is the fulfillment of Melchizedek, the Prince of Salem, whose name means king-priest (Psa 110:4; Heb 7:17, 21). We praise him for saving us from sin. We glorify him because as our High Priest, he brings all our petitions as he sits at his throne at the right hand of our Father in heaven (Rom 8:34).

What is also important in this birth narrative is that the wise men were Gentiles who were waiting for the coming of the “king of the Jews.” They were a fulfillment of Old Testament prophecies that even Gentile nations, represented by Babylon, Egypt and Assyria will come to worship the God of Israel (Isa 19:24). And in heaven, people from all nations, tribes and languages will worship the Lamb (Rev 7:9).

The third gift is myrrh. We will study this in our last point.

The Humble and Lowly Worship Him with Glory and Praise

The other group of people who worshiped Jesus at his birth is the shepherds. In those days, shepherds were usually at the bottom of the social order. When Samuel called all the sons of Jesse to choose the next king of Israel, David was left out because not only was he the youngest, but he was also tending the sheep (1 Sam 16:11). So Psalm 78:70 contrasts David as king and David as a shepherd, “*He chose David his servant and took him from the sheepfolds.*” Shepherds were also considered unclean, because they often touch dead sheep and other animals.

So shepherds represent the humble and lowly, even the despised. But God often chooses them to accomplish his work. Moses, David and Amos were shepherds. Jesus often associated

himself with the outcasts of society – tax collectors, prostitutes, fishermen, and even with a thief on the cross. Paul therefore says,

"For consider your calling, brothers: not many of you were wise according to worldly standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth. But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; God chose what is low and despised in the world, even things that are not, to bring to nothing things that are" (1 Cor 1:26-28).

Jesus exemplified humility, meekness and lowliness. Born in a manger. Despised and rejected all the way to the cross. He is a Shepherd, the Good Shepherd, who invites everyone, *"Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls"* (Matt 11:28-29).

How did the shepherds receive the *"good news of great joy"* that their Savior was born? They hastened to *"see this thing that has happened."* And after seeing with their own eyes what the angel told them, they went away *"glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen"* (Luke 2:8-20).

Ruling Jews Honor Him with Myrrh and Aloes

We come finally to the third gift of the wise men: myrrh. Myrrh is sap produced from a species of a balsam tree that grows, again, in southern Arabia. As we noted before, it is one of the components for making incense for temple rituals (Exo 30:23). It is also used as perfume, as in the Song of Solomon, where it is often mentioned with other spices and frankincense as a perfume (Song 3:6; 4:14).

Myrrh as a flavoring, embalming and narcotic is found in the death and burial of our Lord. In Psalm 45:8, the robes of the Bridegroom-King is perfumed with *"myrrh and aloes and cassia."* The wise men's gift of myrrh is then fitting for a king. But these different perfumes are also mentioned in our reading in John 19:39, where Nicodemus brought *"a mixture of myrrh and aloes, about seventy-five pounds in weight"* to prepare Jesus' body for burial. Another wealthy member of the ruling council but who had become a disciple of Jesus, Joseph of Arimathea, purchased the burial place. Before he was crucified on the cross, Jesus was offered a drink of wine mixed with myrrh, but he refused it (Mat 27:34). Why? That bitter, drugged cup would have prevented him from accomplishing the redemption that he set out to do from eternity. Like a painkilling drug, it would deaden the pain that he was suffering – physically, emotionally, as well as spiritually.

Therefore, myrrh is a fitting gift for our King-Priest. As King, he is garbed in this most fragrant perfume. As our High Priest, myrrh represents his atoning death, his once-for-all sacrifice to satisfy God's wrath on our sins: himself.

Beloved people of God, this Christmas, consider the three gifts the wise men brought to our infant Savior. They represent our Lord's person and work. He is True God whom we are to worship. He is True Man, our Priest, Prophet and King.

In Matthew 12:42, we read of Jesus saying something difficult to the Pharisees, “*The queen of the South will rise up at the judgment with this generation and condemn it, for she came from the ends of the earth to hear the wisdom of Solomon, and behold, something greater than Solomon is here.*” The queen of Sheba gave huge tributes of gold and spices, but as great a king as Solomon was, Jesus is the greater King. In the verse before this, Jesus says, “*something greater than Jonah is here*” (v 41). As great a prophet Jonah was, Jesus is the greater Prophet. And in verse 6, he says, “*something greater than the temple is here.*” As great a temple the Jerusalem Temple was with all its high priests, Jesus is the greater Priest. In fact, Jesus says that he is the Temple himself (John 2:19-21). Jesus is our only Prophet, Priest and King.

Consider also that we too have been anointed by Christ as prophets, priests and kings. As prophets, we proclaim the true Word of God. As kings, we fight our war against sin. And as priests, we offer our lives as living sacrifices to God, as fitting worship of God. Our righteous and godly lives make us “*the aroma of Christ to God among those who are being saved and among those who are perishing,*” those who see our good works (2 Cor 2:15). And Paul commands us to “*walk in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God*” (Eph 5:2). May we be mindful that we are to love God and one another, as this love is our own fragrant gift of praise and thankfulness to Jesus who was born to be our Great Priest-King.