

Supplement #1 to Remembering Christ at Christmas

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The following notes add to related information already in the book, *Remembering Christ at Christmas*. For more information, see www.sviewp.com.

Old Testament influences on the Christmas story

“The *ox* knows his master, and the *donkey* his owner's *manger*” (NIV Isa. 1:3). Early Christians believed this verse referred to Jesus in the manger. Since the second century, an ox and a donkey have been included in art and nativity scenes. (Joseph F. Kelly, *The Origins of Christmas*, 2004, 36-37)

“The multitude of *camels* shall cover thee ...; all they from Sheba shall come: they shall bring *gold* and [*frank*]incense; and they shall shew forth the praises of the LORD” (Isa 60:6). Almost every image of the wise men shows them riding on camels (*ibid.* 37). Frankincense and myrrh could only be obtained from trees found in Ethiopia, Somalia, and southern Arabia where Sheba was located. Arab camel caravans brought frankincense and myrrh to Roman markets along the Incense Route that passes through or near Sheba. Some early Christians believed the wise men came from Arabia which is south and east of Jerusalem.

“Gentiles shall come to thy light, and *kings* to the brightness of thy rising. ... and their kings shall minister unto thee” (Isa. 60:3, 10). These verses helped turn the wise men into kings (*ibid.* 37-38).

In Genesis 26, Isaac, a type of Christ, met three pagan men who made a covenant with him because the LORD was with him. Origen, a third century Christian, said these *three* men symbolized the wise men that brought *three* gifts. (*ibid.* 97)

Magi may have been Essene high priests from Arabia

Justin, a native of Palestine in the second century, said the magi or wise men came from Arabia. “Jewish tradition ... knew that *many priests of the first temple* had settled in ‘Arabia’ after Josiah’s temple purges in the late seventh century BCE.” Perhaps the wise men were descendants of these priests, “especially as the traditional way to depict the magi in nativity icons is as three high priests.” They might have been Essenes. Essenes “were a conservative priestly group opposed to the current temple regime in Jerusalem, they studied prophecy and were themselves prophets, they were astronomers, and they were looking for the Messiah. ... But if they were Essenes, why did they need to ask ... where the king of the Jews had been born? ... One answer might be that they knew a different version of the Bethlehem prophecy in Micah 5.2” that said he shall “*not* come forth” out of Bethlehem. (Margaret Barker, *Christmas: The Original Story*, 2008, 121-123)

Temple Symbolism of Gold, Frankincense, and Myrrh

Irenaeus, a second century Christian, gave an interpretation of the three gifts: “myrrh ... was for him who should die ...; gold because he was a king ...; and frankincense because he was a God.” (96) These traditions are found in the Christmas carol, “We *Three Kings* of Orient Are,” which says “*Gold* I bring to crown Him again *King* forever ... *Frankincense* ... owns a *Deity* nigh ... *Myrrh* ... sealed in the stone-cold *tomb*.”

Marco Polo traveled to China between AD 1272 and 1298. In Persian, the people told him that the three magi or wise men left from the city of SABA “to worship Jesus Christ; and in this city they are buried, in three very large and beautiful monuments, side by side. ... The bodies are still entire, with the hair and beard remaining. One of these was called Jaspas, the second Melchior, and the third Balthasar. ... [The people said] these were three kings who were buried there in days of old. ... They carried with them three manner of offerings, Gold, and Frankincense, and Myrrh; in order to ascertain whether that Prophet were God, or an earthly King, or a Physician. For, said they, if he take the *Gold*, then he is an earthly *King*; if he take the *Incense* he is *God*; if he take the *Myrrh* he is a *Physician* [or *healer*]. ... When they had come to the place where the Child was born ... they beheld the Child with the appearance of its actual age, to wit, some thirteen days. Then they adored, and presented their Gold and Incense and Myrrh. And the Child took all the three offerings.” (*Travels of Marco Polo*, 1903 Yule-Cordier edition, <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/10636/10636.txt>)

Ephrem, a fourth century Syrian, knew both interpretations of myrrh. He wrote, “*gold* is the offering to *kings* ...; by *myrrh* they signified the *sufferings* of his humanity; ... again by the *myrrh* the ascertained that he is the *physician who heals the wounds of Adam* ... by the *frankincense* they intimated, first, of his *divinity*.” Loftus adds, “They were accustomed to burn incense to their gods and to give gold to their kings and to embalm their dead with myrrh.” (*Fragments of the Commentary of Ephrem Syrus Upon the Diatessaron*, by Ephraem, James Rendel Harris, 1895, 36, at <http://books.google.com> search for “commentary of Ephrem”) The symbolism of myrrh and healing clearly foreshadows Christ’s role as a healer and the atonement (*Remembering Christ at Christmas*, 104–105).

Temple Symbolism: Gold, frankincense and myrrh were symbolic of the temple. Pure *gold* was used to make the ark of the covenant, the cherubims, the incense altar, the table of showbread, the seven branch candle stick, and other temple items (Ex 25). *Frankincense* was used to make the “perfume” or “sweet incense” (Ex. 30:34–38) used in the temple to invoke the presence of the LORD. The rising smoke represented the prayers ascending to heaven (Rev. 8:3–4). *Myrrh* was used to make the holy anointing oil that was used to anoint the furnishings of the temple, to anoint Aaron a high priest and his sons as priests, and later to anoint kings (Ex. 30 22–30; 40:13–15; 1 Kgs. 1:39).

High Priest Symbolism: Gold, frankincense and myrrh foreshadowed Christ’s role as a “*great high priest*” and “an high priest after the order of Melchisedec” (Heb. 4:14; 5:10).

Gold was used to make the breastplate, ephod, robe, coat, mitre or cap, and girdle of the high priest (Ex. 28). The high priest “wore a golden seal on his forehead. ... What was engraved on the golden seal? Most English versions translate Exodus 28:36: ‘engrave on it like the engravings of a seal *Holy to the LORD*’, but writers in the late second temple period understood that the seal was engraved only with the *four letters of the sacred Name* [YHWH]. ... The Hebrew of Exodus 28:36 probably meant that the seal was holy, and so it should be translated ‘engrave on it like the engravings of a holy seal “The LORD.”’” (Margaret Barker, *Temple Theology*, 58–59) Thus, it would appear that the name of God was “written in their foreheads” (Rev. 14:1; 22:4; D&C 133:18) or that they had taken upon themselves the name of God.

On the Day of Atonement, the high priest entered the Holy of Holies and put on the fire the sweet incense made of *frankincense*

“that the cloud of the incense may cover the mercy seat” for the LORD “will appear in the cloud upon the mercy seat” (Lev. 16:2, 12–13). A cloud often represented the presence of the LORD (Ex. 13:21; 19:19; 34:5; Lev. 16:2).

Moses used the holy *myrrh* oil to anoint Aaron a high priest. The high priest used the myrrh oil to anoint priests as well as kings like Solomon (1 Kgs. 1:39). The names *Messiah* (Hebrew) and *Christ* (Greek) mean *anointed one*. In *2 Enoch*, “the LORD summons Michael to remove Enoch’s earthly clothing—the symbol of his mortal body—and to dress him in the garments of glory—the symbol of the resurrection body. Enoch is then anointed with a fragrant myrrh oil and sees himself transformed into an angel. ‘The appearance of the oil is greater than the greatest light, its ointment *like sweet dew*, and its fragrance myrrh, and it is like the rays of the glittering sun’ (*2 Enoch 22*). The myrrh oil . . . was a most holy oil, which means that it imparted holiness and anything it touched became holy (Ex. 30:29). Nothing like it was to be made for secular use.” (Margaret Barker, *Temple Theology*, 57–58) Anointing one with the holy myrrh oil appears to be part of the process of becoming more like God. Interestingly, YHWH, the Hebrew name of the God of Israel, is translated as LORD or Jehovah. YHWH can mean “He causes to be” or “He creates.” Also the title LORD God (YHWH Elohim) can be translated as “He creates Gods.” (William H. Brownlee, “The Ineffable name of God,” *BASOR*, April 1977)