

## Why Did the Magi Bring Gold, Frankincense and Myrrh?



In traditional Catholic -- and most Christian denominations also -- recorded events of Jesus Christ's birth, the child Jesus is visited by three people alternately referred to as wise men, kings or, as the New Testament Gospel of Matthew describes them, the magi.

Magi is derived from the Greek word "magoi," which can have four different meanings. Magoi can refer to priestly men of Persia; men who have occult powers and knowledge of astrology; magicians; or charlatans. Matthew indicates in his Gospel that the Magi came from the East and were guided by a star. Balaam, an Old Testament prophet, had revealed that the Messiah's arrival would be marked by a bright star. With this information, it's likely the magi were Persian priests, educated in astrology and astronomy, who interpreted the star's appearance as a sign of the "God's" great event on Earth: the Christ's birth.

The gifts which the magi bring to Jesus are consistently described as gold, frankincense and myrrh. These three gifts were valuable items traditionally offered to a god in ancient times and symbolize the magi's beliefs about the Christ child's identity and his future.

Since the early days of Christianity, Biblical scholars and theologians have offered varying interpretations of the meaning and significance of the *gold*, *frankincense* and *myrrh* that the magi presented to Jesus, according to the Gospel of Matthew (2:11). These valuable items were standard gifts to honor a king or deity in the ancient world: **gold** as a precious metal, **frankincense** as perfume or incense, and **myrrh** as anointing oil. In fact, these same three items were apparently among the gifts, recorded in ancient inscriptions, that King Seleucus II Callinicus offered to the god Apollo at the temple in Miletus in 243 B.C.E.

The Book of Isaiah, when describing Jerusalem's glorious restoration, tells of nations and kings who will come and "bring gold and frankincense and shall proclaim the praise of the Lord" (Isaiah 60:6). Although Matthew's gospel does not include the names or number of the magi, many believe that the number of the gifts is what led to the tradition of the Three Wise Men.



(Frankincense clumps)

The traditional gifts of the magi—gold, frankincense and myrrh—may have had symbolic as well as practical value. Researchers believe the medicinal uses of frankincense may have been known to the author of Matthew’s gospel.

In addition to the honor and status implied by the value of the gifts of the magi, scholars believe that these three were chosen for their special spiritual symbolism about Jesus himself—gold representing his kingship, frankincense a symbol of his priestly role, and myrrh a prefiguring of his death, embalming (burial wrap) and burial—an interpretation made popular in the well-known Christmas carol: “We Three Kings.”

Still others have suggested that the gifts of the magi were a bit more practical—even medicinal in nature. Researchers at Cardiff University have demonstrated that frankincense has an active ingredient that can help relieve arthritis by inhibiting the inflammation that breaks down cartilage tissue and causes arthritis pain. The new study validates traditional uses of frankincense as an herbal remedy to treat arthritis in communities of North Africa and the Arabian Peninsula, where the trees that produce this aromatic resin grow.

[When (i.e., how many days, weeks, months or years) after the Christ child’s birth did the Magi arrive? In the absence of any specific records, historians, biblical scholars and early Christian Church writers differ in the exact timing of the Magi’s arrival after the birth.

The traditional liturgical feast of their arrival on January 6th, did not command universal assent however. Eusebius and Epiphanius (300-400 CE), reasoning from Matthew 2:16, put the coming of the Magi some two years after His birth.

While some have thought the January 6<sup>th</sup> date was selected for liturgical convenience, rather than as having any direct or exact chronological connection with the event, absent any scriptural or first-hand accounts to date, it remains a mystery of sorts. But, does really matter? No.

This is simply one of many occurrences recorded in sacred scripture that simply lacks an exact calendar period or greater details; because perhaps the writer thought such were unneeded.

That said however, the possible “two-year” time frame does give us some a possible understanding of why: (a) King Herod (after the Magi failed to return to him) gave the order to slaughter all Jewish male infants two years or younger in Bethlehem and the surrounding communities (Matthew 2:16-23) (the Feast of the Holy Innocents); and (b) Thereafter, the Angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph and warned him to flee with the Christ child to Egypt (Matthew 2:13-15).]

---

Based on:

- Strata, “The Magi’s Gifts—Tribute or Treatment?” *Biblical Archaeology Review* (magazine), January/February 2012
- Catholic Meaning of the Magi Gifts by Laura Leddy Turner (undated) (<https://classroom.synonym.com/catholic-meaning-magi-gifts-7815.html>)
- Revised New American Bible (RNAB) citations.