

## Three Kings; Three Gifts

By Susan Vogt



Everybody knows the story about the three Magi (also referred to as Kings or Wise Men). It adds color and drama to our Christmas pageants. But surely there is more to this story than royalty and an expanded crèche scene. Learn why.

### For

Adult, Couple

### Season

Winter

### Needed

A curious mind.

### Activity Plan

Why does the Gospel of Matthew tell us about these three important and unusual visitors to the baby, Jesus? Let's explore what it might mean.

1. Read over the story of the Magi, Matthew 2:1-12) paying special attention to the bolded phrases.

In the time of King Herod, **after Jesus was born** in Bethlehem of Judea, **wise men from the East came** to Jerusalem, **asking, "Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews?"** For we observed his star at its rising, and have come to pay him homage." When King **Herod heard this, he was frightened**, and all Jerusalem with him; and calling together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Messiah was to be born. They told him, "In Bethlehem of Judea; for so it has been written by the prophet: 'And you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for from you shall come a ruler who is to shepherd my people Israel.'"

Then Herod secretly called for the wise men and learned from them the exact time when the star had appeared. Then he sent them to Bethlehem, saying, "Go and search diligently for the child; and when you have found him, bring me word so that I may also go and pay him homage."

When they had heard the king, they set out; and there, ahead of them, went the star that they had seen at its rising, until it stopped over the place where the child was. When they saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy. On entering the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother; and they knelt down and paid him homage. Then, opening their treasure chests, they **offered him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh.**

2. Pause and ponder the scripture. How much do you believe is historically factual? Is there anything you wonder about?
3. What is true? What difference does it make? The Holy Scriptures in the Bible started out being passed on by word of mouth and were eventually written down. Over time they were translated into many different languages. All this allows for quite a large margin of variance in the details, yet we believe the Bible is true and serves as a moral guide for our lives. As some have said, "Everything in the Bible is true. Some of it actually happened." The point being that "truth" is larger than the specific "facts" presented in a story. Fairy tales are fictional but many carry some universal truths about good,

evil, and human nature. In the story of the Magi, we can confirm some of the facts as actually happening through historical records of King Herod, yet it's the *meaning* of the story, that is truly important to us as Christians.

4. Some things to notice:

- Matthew does not specify that there were *three* wise men, yet tradition always refers to them as three. Perhaps this is because three gifts are mentioned at the end of this passage.
- In this translation, the wise men are not referred to as kings, but that's how we typically portray them. Perhaps it is assumed that since they were seeking the "king of the Jews" that they too were kings. Perhaps only kings would have the wealth to give such expensive gifts.
- The wise men came from the east. Where in the east, we're not sure, perhaps Arabia. The important part is probably that they were foreigners, not known to Herod.
- Why might King Herod have been frightened? How does the threat of losing power impact politics today?
- The gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh were certainly gifts of great value, but they also have symbolic meaning. Gold was the symbol of royalty. Incense represented divinity. The perfume, myrrh connotes passion.

5. What does it all mean?

Sometimes meaning is in the eye of the beholder but scripture scholars studying this passage usually focus on the fact that the wise men were from afar, meaning that they represent the manifestation of Jesus to the wider world, those beyond the Jewish people. This is a way of saying that Jesus did not come only for the people of his ethnicity but for all people. The Feast of the Epiphany (which means manifestation) is the time when the Church reminds us that Jesus birth was a public event and meant for all. Traditionally the Epiphany is celebrated on January 6, the twelfth day of Christmas.

6. What about those three gifts? Who knows whether they were really only three but again we can bring some human intuition to the gifts. Jesus is often referred to as Priest, Prophet, and King. Incense is a liturgical substance used by priests during worship. Myrrh (perfume) can arouse one's passion as a prophet does by words. Gold is a sign of wealth and royalty.

7. So what might the gifts have to do with my family? In the spirit of giving Christmas gifts (but not too many) you might consider the following custom that the author developed. When they were young each child received three gifts:

- One gift of clothing (no gold spun cloth here, but kids can have royal clothing tastes)
- One gift for learning (it wasn't incense but it was educational, perhaps prophetic)
- One heart's desire (passion for a particular gift was honored in this way.)

