

**“Strange Gifts for a Baby Shower”**  
Isaiah 60:1-6 and Matthew 2:1-12 (NRSV)  
By John Gill

How do you guys out there like to spend a Saturday afternoon? If we were to take a poll this morning, we’d get lots of different answers: fishing perhaps, or golf; maybe watching sports on TV, or tinkering on the motor of your favorite vehicle; you might have a hobby you enjoy, like woodworking or gardening. You may even elect to take a nice long nap! There are lots of things men might like to do on a Saturday afternoon. But, attending a baby shower probably isn’t one of them.

For most of you men out there who are older than I am, you may have never experienced a baby shower. In earlier generations, women didn’t even consider inviting the men-folk to attend. But, in my generation, it became fashionable to hold “co-ed” baby showers. I’ve attended a few of these egalitarian unisex baby showers in my day. Husbands would tag along with their wives to “enjoy” cute baby-themed games, pink or blue decorations and balloons, finger sandwiches and cutesy crafted food items, - and, of course, the opening of baby gifts.

The guys would politely take part in the first activities and the silly games - especially if food was involved. But inevitably, one by one, we would slip away to the backyard, or the deck to drink a beer - or into the den to watch the football game we were missing. And, the “expectant mom” would finally get to enjoy the party with her girlfriends – after all, that’s who the party was really designed for.

As far as we know, Mary never had a baby shower – and Joseph never had to endure one! That shouldn’t surprise us – Mary’s pregnancy was ... let’s just say... problematic. Mary was “with child” before she was married – a condition that doesn’t even raise an eyebrow these days, but which would have been scandalous among Mary’s neighbors in Nazareth. Mary’s girlfriends would have shunned her – certainly they would never have thrown her a baby shower. She was ostracized. And so, according to Luke’s Gospel, Mary leaves town for a while.

During her pregnancy, the closest thing to a baby shower the scriptures record is Mary’s visit with her cousin, Elizabeth, who was also pregnant at the time. But still, no mention of finger sandwiches or cutesy baby games. And certainly, no gifts. Mary, and the remarkable young man she was engaged to, had to journey through this pregnancy and birth on their own. In the midst of, what was (of course) a joyous occasion, there must have been a measure of sadness about how estranged they were from the support of their family and friends.

Even though there was no “Baby Shower” for Mary and her baby, Jesus, the bible does record a remarkable story of an encounter where the baby is showered with gifts. According to Matthew’s Gospel, after the birth of Jesus in Bethlehem, Mary and Joseph appear to settle in Bethlehem as their new home – perhaps for at least two years. By the time of the visit of the Wise Men, Matthew tells us they are living in “a house.” Presumably, by now, Joseph has set up his trade in Bethlehem. They are making a new start, and all seems to be returning to normal.

Until one day, Mary looked up and saw, at the door of their little house, strange foreigners – wealthy men in odd robes, speaking a foreign language, accompanied by an entourage of servants tending their camels: Astrologers from Persia, called Magi, who had discerned from watching the heavens, that a new king had been born. They had traveled about 1,000 miles, just to pay homage to this new king. And - to present gifts to the baby, of course.

And what strange gifts they were.

If you were invited to a baby shower for Jesus, what gift would YOU bring? In the Christmas carol, “In the Bleak Midwinter,” one of the verses asks that very question:

*What can I give him? Poor as I am  
If I were a shepherd, I would bring a lamb  
If I were a wise man, I would do my part  
Yet what I can, I give him, Give my heart*

Of course - “give your heart.” That goes without saying. But practically – if you were invited to a party for this baby-now-toddler, Jesus, and you wanted to bring a gift, what present would you have brought?

In the weeks leading up to Christmas, there were a couple of a memes that were going around Facebook – you may have seen them. They speculated on how different the story would have been had the Wise visitors been women, rather than men. One post said, “Three wise women would have asked for directions, arrived on time, helped deliver the baby, brought practical gifts, cleaned the stable, made a casserole - and there would be peace on earth.” Another was a cartoon of this scene, and asked, “What if the Holy Family were visited by three wise women, instead of men?” They would have brought diapers, casseroles, and formula! These Facebooks posts may make us chuckle, but we men have to admit that there is a lot of truth to them!

Women would certainly have brought more practical gifts, gifts appropriate for a baby or toddler – useful gifts that would make the life of the new parents easier. That’s just the way women are – always thoughtful and helpful. Nothing like the gifts these men brought!

What kind of gifts are these for a small child? Gold, Frankincense, and Myrrh? Strange gifts for a baby shower! But, in fact, they were perfect gifts – more perfect than even they may have realized.

What can we say about these odd gifts mentioned in our text?

The first gift presented to Jesus and his mother was GOLD.

Now, certainly gold was a very nice and useful gift – obviously valuable, and a welcomed gift to receive. Everyone loves the gift of cash. When we don’t know what to give someone, a gift card or a crisp \$50 bill is never returned. So, gold was certainly a nice present.

But in this case, the gifts the Magi brought were also symbolic. The text tells us they have come to pay “homage” to a “Child born a King.” William Barclay, in his commentary on this text, tells us that in the ancient world, no one would ever approach a king without a gift... that gold, the king of metals, is a gift fit for a king. That obligatory gift was referred to as “offering tribute” to a king.<sup>1</sup>

In Psalm 72, which we read responsively following our first hymn this morning, it is written: “*May the kings of Tarshish and of the isles render him tribute, and the kings of Sheba and Seba bring gifts! May all kings fall down before him, all nations serve him.*”<sup>2</sup> This gift of gold was more than a kind gesture. It symbolized allegiance and submission to the authority of a king. Matthew is challenging us to bring our “gold” to lay at Jesus’ feet – to proclaim Christ as the King of our lives.

So, the first gift the Magi brought was “a gift fit for a King.”

The second gift was Frankincense.

What exactly is frankincense? Both Frankincense and Myrrh are resins, from the sap of fragrant trees in the middle east. They were both used in perfumes as they are very aromatic, but they had many other uses. Both were also considered extremely valuable at the time – some say, ounce-per-ounce, they were as valuable as gold.

Clearly, all three gifts were over-the-top extravagant gifts for this poor family – riches they only could dream about. That day, Mary and Joseph must have felt like they had hit the lottery! If not wealthy, at least they were financially secure – for the first time in their lives.

But they didn't have long to enjoy it. As you know from the rest of the story, very soon Joseph and his family will be forced to flee for their lives – to Egypt, where they will have to live as exiles for several years, until King Herod dies, and it is safe for them to return to Israel.

How do you think they were able to survive as refugees in a foreign land? Probably by selling their Gold, Frankincense, and Myrrh! God had sent the Magi with valuable gifts just in time! Providentially, God acted to provide for the needs of the Holy Family, just as he provides for your needs and mine – if only we are willing to recognize his blessings. Isn't God amazing! He's always "on time."

Anyway, back to frankincense. What does the gift of frankincense represent in the story? As I said, frankincense had many uses in the ancient world, but it was primarily used in the Temple by the priests, as the incense they burned when they led the people in their prayers as they worshiped God. Matthew is telling us that this Child, born a king, is also to serve as a high priest.

So, what is the role of a priest? Barclay tells us that "the function of a priest is to open the way to God" for people. "The Latin word for priest is pontifex [from which the word, 'pontiff' (another word for pope) is derived. "Pontifex" (priest) means "bridge-builder." The priest is the [one] who builds a bridge" between us and God.<sup>1</sup> At the time of Jesus, the High Priest was the only person able to approach God directly, by entering the Holy of Holies, the dwelling of the Ark of the Covenant, which was the throne of God. And he only did this one day of the year (Yom Kippur) in order to make atonement for the sins of all the people. The High Priest WAS "the bridge" – from the people to God, and from God to the people.

This Child the Magi have come to worship is the One who is our "bridge to God." The writer of Hebrews in the New Testament makes this role of the Christ clear, when he writes: *"Since, then, we have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus, the Son of God, let us hold fast to our confession... Let us therefore approach the throne of grace with boldness, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need."*<sup>3</sup>

And that "bridge" to God was built at Calvary. To drive home this point, Matthew tells us later in his Gospel, that, at the moment Jesus died on the cross, the Temple-curtain that divided humans from the Holy of Holies was torn "from top to bottom," giving us access to God directly.<sup>4</sup> It was God's doing – the tearing of the veil began from the top – God has acted to open a way for us to come home to him.

In my Study Bible (the one I write notes in), at some point I wrote this in the margin: "When we accept the death of Jesus for our salvation, the veil of our heart is torn open and we have communion with God directly in our heart." The gift of frankincense foretells that this Child will "build a bridge" for us to God.

He is the ultimate “High Priest.” With this gift of frankincense, Matthew is asking us this question: Have you and I recognized and claimed Jesus as our High Priest, the only One, through whom we can be reconciled to God?

So, we have considered two of the gifts of the Magi. Gold and frankincense are powerfully-symbolic gifts – worthy of a King and a High Priest. But there is one more gift – the oddest gift of all.

If you have been in my Bible Studies, you might recall me saying that Matthew is written to a Jewish audience. He is trying to convince the Jews that Jesus is their long-awaited Messiah – that the events of Jesus’ life fulfill prophecies recorded in Jewish scripture. Whenever a lesson from one of the gospels is read in worship, and the you hear the words, “and this was done to fulfill the word of the prophet,” you can be assured the reading is from Matthew’s Gospel.

In the story about the visit from the Magi, Matthew doesn’t explicitly make the connection between the details of this story and prophecy – he doesn’t need to. When the Jewish readers came across this story of the gifts of the Magi, they would immediately have recalled a passage from the Prophet Isaiah – the 60<sup>th</sup> chapter, which was read as our first lesson today.<sup>5</sup> That prophecy foretells of a time when the kings of the earth would come to Israel to pay homage or tribute in Jerusalem. You see, when Isaiah wrote this, the Jews had been living in Exile in Babylon as punishment for their unfaithfulness. But Isaiah has foretold that soon, the Jews would be free to come home and rebuild Jerusalem and the Temple – and this time, the nations of the world will honor Israel, and her God.

Did you notice the gifts mentioned in the prophecy? *“Nations shall come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your dawn... They shall bring gold and frankincense, and shall proclaim the praise of the Lord.”*<sup>5</sup> Nations will bring gifts fit to pay homage to the king God has anointed, and to offer worship through the priest God has ordained. The People of Israel will finally be “a light to the nations,”<sup>6</sup> just as God had designed them to be. A powerful vision for the Jews.

But, there is a gift missing, isn’t there. Myrrh. How interesting that the prophecy fails to mention myrrh.

That may be because myrrh is associated with death. The Messiah the Jewish people looked forward to was a living Messiah – a Kingly Priest, or a Priestly King – a person God would send to bring glory to Israel and to restore the people’s relationship with himself. They looked for a victor and religious reformer to reestablish the glory-days of Israel. Yes, Gold and Frankincense would be very appropriate gifts, indeed for such a Messiah.

But Myrrh? How was myrrh used? As I said, primarily, myrrh was associated with death and the burying of the dead. Mark, in his Gospel, tells us that, as Jesus was dying on the cross, the soldiers offered Jesus wine laced with myrrh, but Jesus refused it. And John, in his Gospel, tells us that, as Jesus was to be laid in the tomb, Nicodemus brought a mixture of myrrh and aloes, to prepare Jesus’ body for burial.

You see, the custom was that the corpse would be laid out in a family tomb to decompose; and months later the family would open the tomb to collect the bones and place them in a stone box, called an ossuary, making room for the body of the next family member to be laid out. Of course, as the body decayed, there would be a strong stench; so, if the family could afford it, the body would be anointed with myrrh to mask to odor.

That is what people associated with myrrh. Death. Yes, a very strange gift for a baby!

With the gift of myrrh, Matthew is foreshadowing what is to come for this Holy Child. Yes, this Jesus would one day reign as King – but not until he had passed through *“the valley of the shadow of death.”* He would take his place as the Great High Priest, giving us access to God – but not until he had become the sacrificial Lamb of God on the cross. This Child who would soon be saved from death at the hands of Herod’s soldiers, would, in the end, not escape death at the hands of the Roman authorities.

No wonder most of the Jews rejected Jesus. For them, a dead Messiah was an oxymoron. As Paul wrote in First Corinthians – *“For Jews demand signs and Greeks desire wisdom, but we proclaim Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God.”*<sup>7</sup>

And again, from Hebrews – *“When Christ came as a high priest... he entered once for all in the Holy Place, not with the blood of goats and calves, but with his own blood, thus obtaining eternal redemption... For this reason, he is the mediator of a new covenant, so that those who are called may receive the promised eternal inheritance, because a death has occurred that redeems...”*<sup>8</sup>

“Holman Hunt was an artist who painted a famous picture of Jesus. It shows Jesus at the door of the carpenter’s shop in Nazareth. He is still [a young man], and has come to the door to stretch his limbs which had grown cramped over the bench. He stands there in the doorway with arms outstretched – and behind him, on the wall, the setting sun throws his shadow, and it is the shadow of a cross.”<sup>1</sup>

You can almost smell the aroma of myrrh in the air.

So, these odd baby shower gifts were the perfect gifts, after all. They declare the truth of who this Holy Child is more eloquently than diapers or casseroles or baby formula ever could. These gifts of Gold, Frankincense, and Myrrh proclaim that the Child God has sent is our King, our High Priest, and the Lamb of God who takes away the sin – all the sin – of the world.

But, the gifts also hit at the joy of the Easter dawn, when the Child born a King, took his throne as King of Kings, and Lord of Lords!

That is precisely why he came. And that is certainly Good News for you and me!

<sup>1</sup> Barclay, William. The Gospel of Matthew, Vol. 1, revised edition. The Westminster Press c. 1975

<sup>2</sup> Psalm 72:10-11 (NRSV)

<sup>3</sup> Hebrews 4:14-16 (NRSV)

<sup>4</sup> Matthew 27:50 (NRSV)

<sup>5</sup> Isaiah 60:3,6 (NRSV)

<sup>6</sup> Isaiah 49:6 (NRSV)

<sup>7</sup> First Corinthians 1:22-24 (NRSV)

<sup>8</sup> Hebrews 9:11-15 (NRSV)