

“You Gave a Baby That?”

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Good morning friends worshipping with us both here and online! Happy Day after Christmas! Did you get all the gifts you asked for? And did everyone like all the gifts you gave? It is so crazy that it's Jesus's birthday and we are the ones who get and give gifts. Back when Jesus was born, there were some people who thought to bring gifts to the Christ child. In the second chapter of Matthew we read about the Magi who traveled many, many miles to bring gifts to Jesus. Who were they? Why did they travel so far? Today I'm going to share a story, a sort of fable about the Magi and the gifts they chose to bring to the actual birthday boy. Let me grab my book and let's begin!

He was nervous the whole trip. But he couldn't show it. If he, for one instant, questioned his decision, the other two would seize the opportunity to tease him. They should have been more understanding. After all, Xerxes was only a novice Magi, recently promoted from the apprenticeship. His colleagues, however, showed no mercy and were quick to point out his flaws. The random hairs on his chin and upper lip were a poor excuse for a Magi's beard. Xerxes' Latin, Greek and Akkadian were weak, though he seemed to excel in Hebrew, for what that was worth. They continually tormented the lad about his inability to correctly identify the constellations. He could not find the Hunter, the Bear or the Lion to save his life. Worst of all, at the ritual when he was ordained to the Magi priesthood, Xerxes froze up just as he went to offer the sacrifice on the altar. A few of his classmates said he forgot the words. The more charitable, experienced Magi called it "stage-fright" and added that he would get over it. But Xerxes himself couldn't remember what happened. Why did he go blank at his most important ritual sacrifice? Now he can only recall the shame of needing help to finish the service.

Yet the elders must have recognized a special gift of wisdom in the young Magi. For they immediately assigned him to a unique mission. "You will go to the land of the Jews," the High Magi commanded, "and find their new born king. A recently discovered star confirms the prophecies. This divine Child will usher in a new age and a new kingdom. You will be a member of the Magi delegation to welcome and worship this god-child." Xerxes was deeply honored. He attributed this appointment to his knowledge of Hebrew. The other Magi joked that the Council was probably trying to get rid of him. Xerxes traveling companions came to the same conclusion. Cyrus, the senior member of the delegation, was annoyed at having to babysit a rookie. He was a diplomat, schooled in the art of negotiating with princes. If the Magi were to win the favor of this new king, he must use all the skills at his disposal. Political alliances and trade relationships were delicate matters. One wrong word from Xerxes could blow the whole deal.

Esther, the expert in religious affairs, had a different agenda. This was a god-child, possibly like one of their emperors. Egyptians, Greeks, Romans and Persians all worshiped their kings as gods. This, however, was different. Never before had a Jewish king been considered divine. For centuries, the Jews held the foolish notion that there was only one God. Esther, a true theologian, wanted to witness the evolution of the Jewish religion into a more enlightened polytheism. She wanted to be among the first to worship this god-king of the Jews. Yet Esther also worried about Xerxes. Since he ruined his own ordination ceremony, what else might he do to foul up this historic moment?

As they packed up their bags, scrolls, and gear, Cyrus brought out his gift for the Child. He opened the jeweled box to reveal a magnificent ingot of gold. Purified by fire and polished to a mirror-like luster, it was a present fit for a king. Esther's offering was no less impressive. The white-yellow resin emitted the tell-tale scent of frankincense. This forbidden fragrance was reserved for the gods alone. An excellent choice for a divine Child.

After seeing their treasures, Xerxes proudly announced, "I too have selected an appropriate gift." The young Magi confidently pulled out an alabaster flask filled with reddish-brown liquid. Esther's eyes widened. Cyrus threw his head back and laughed. It was certainly an expensive item, equal in value to the gold. Its aroma was as powerful as the frankincense. But it was totally inappropriate for this mission. "You're giving that to a baby?" Cyrus chuckled. "Myrrh?" Esther added, "Why would you bring myrrh to a child?" Xerxes quickly replied, "Because the Jewish Scriptures require it." "Well," Esther demurred, "it is a nice perfume for clothing (Psalm 45:8) and for the women in a king's harem (Esther 2:12). But not for an infant." "Don't forget its other use," Cyrus added darkly. "Myrrh is great for perfuming dead bodies. Unfortunately it's useless to a baby."

Flushed with embarrassment, Xerxes tried to defend his gift. "What do the Jews call this promised Child?" "Messiah," Cyrus answered. "The Greeks call him Christ," said Esther. "Right," affirmed Xerxes. "Both titles mean, 'The Anointed One.' This Child will be anointed with holy oil at his coronation ceremony like all great kings. Or perhaps He will be ordained as a priest with the anointing oil. Either way, He will be commissioned to fulfill a great calling. And the Law of the Jews clearly states that myrrh is the prime ingredient in that holy anointing oil (Exodus 30:22-33). Cyrus and Esther were silent. Xerxes smiled a bit defiantly. "Perhaps you are right," Cyrus conceded. "But without the other ingredients for the anointing oil – cinnamon, cane, cassia and olive oil – all you have to offer is embalming fluid." In silence the three packed their treasures and began the journey.

Two dozen moons waxed and waned. Over seven hundred times the Sun rose and ran its course to the horizon. Their caravan traveled west from Susa to Babylon then to Palmyra, Damascus, Tyre, and eventually south to Jerusalem. Along the way Cyrus never lost an opportunity to needle Xerxes. "What will the king and queen think when you present their child with a gift fit for a corpse? They'll take it as a dark omen or a curse." Esther was a bit gentler. "He's probably right, Xerxes. You may offend them. Trade the myrrh for something

more fitting: a jeweled scepter or a regal purple robe.” But the young Magi would not listen. The Messiah must be anointed with myrrh.

After making some inquiries in Jerusalem, they were quickly, and somewhat roughly, brought to a private audience with King Herod who was quite taken aback by the appearance of the star and the prophecy of a new born king. Cyrus refused to let Xerxes say a word in the consultation with Herod. Neither did Esther invite the lad to her discussions with the chief priests and scribes. When they finished, both were quite proud of their diplomatic achievements. “King Herod has even commissioned us to find this newborn king for him. He wants us to return with a full report so that he also may worship the future monarch. And I have learned from the chief priests that the Child is just down the road in a village called Bethlehem,” Esther added excitedly. “Let us go to his palace and worship this Son of the gods.”

But when they arrived in Bethlehem, the locals knew nothing about a palace or a new born king. The only clue to his whereabouts came from the reappearance of the star which first inspired their journey. It seemed to lead them to a simple house on the edge of town. Knocking on the flimsy door, they were admitted to the little hovel by a young man about Xerxes age. The tools that hung on the walls revealed that his trade was carpentry. His even younger wife stopped her work at a loom to gaze at the impressive visitors. And on the floor at her feet, a Child in a simple homespun tunic played in the discarded thread. The couple was utterly surprised to watch the strangers fall on their knees before their Boy. They were not surprised, however, to hear the Magi tell of the star and the prophecy of his glorious future. They had been told by the angel Gabriel their Son was chosen for greatness.

The greatest shock, though, came when the Magi opened their treasures. “Gold for the future King,” Cyrus nobly proclaimed. “Frankincense for a Child of the gods,” offered Esther with reverence. Then all eyes turned to Xerxes. Sweating and tongue tied, all he could manage was a mumbled, “Mmmmyrrh.” His two companions looked down in shame. The Child’s parents were confused and yet gracious as they accepted the odd gift. Having nothing to give to the Magi that could match such riches, they offered them hospitality and a place to rest. Despite the successful completion to their long mission, none of the Magi slept soundly that night.. In fact, all three shared the same bizarre dream. A voice like the roll of thunder spoke to them. Turning, they saw that it came from a fiery angel. “Well done good servants. The Lord is pleased with your worship of His Son. There is one more instruction. You must return to your country by a different path. Do not go up to Herod again. If you reveal the location of this Child, Herod will send down his assassins to slay Him. Cyrus was embarrassed to hear that he had been so easily fooled. To cover his mistake he asked, “Is the Lord pleased with my gift of gold?” “Yes,” replied the angel. “And the frankincense?” Esther added. “Yes,” the angel affirmed. “And what of my gift?” Xerxes asked cautiously. “Son of Persia,” began the angel, “your gift brought the greatest joy to the Lord.” All three were stunned. Myrrh? “I see that you do not believe me. Come, I will show you what must be.”

The scene shifted and the three found themselves in the streets of a crowded city. "I know this place," Cyrus declared. "We are back in Jerusalem." Instantly they were swept up in a wave of humanity, all pushing forward to watch a parade. The path through the mob was covered with coats and palm branches. People shouted, "Hosanna to the Son of David. Blessed is the King who comes in the name of the Lord!" (Matthew 21:1-11) At the center of the commotion was a man, riding on a donkey, like a triumphant warrior king returning to his capital. "Is this the Child?" asked Cyrus. "Yes," said the angel. Immediately the man ascended the steps to the Temple. But instead of praying, He began to overturn the merchants' tables - coins scattered everywhere. Doves were set free. "My house will be called a house of prayer," He shouted, "but you are making it a den of robbers" (Matthew 21:12-17). When this chaos subsided, all manner of the needy were brought to Him. With a touch of His hand and a word from His lips the blind gained their sight and the lame danced for joy. "This truly is God's Son," Esther remarked, "With the power of God He is healing their religion and their people. May we see His coronation ceremony?" "Yes," Cyrus added, "we want to see how He uses the gold and frankincense."

Again the scene was altered. Now they stood outside the city walls on a severe rock hillside. This was a hellish place. The stink of the city garbage dump mixed with decomposing corpses that littered the ground. Packs of wild dogs competed with vultures for food. Then, out of the city gate, a noisy riot erupted. Now the purpose of this place was clear. Several condemned criminals carrying their own wooden frames were pushed forward by Roman legionnaires. Stripped of their cloaks, the three were held down as spikes were driven through their limbs into the wood. Then they were hoisted aloft over the mob. "These must be the scoundrels the new King has dethroned," said Cyrus. But then the charges were posted over their heads. Two of them were partners in robbery. But when the crime of the third was posted, the Magi froze. In three languages it read, "This is Jesus, the King of the Jews." The bruises, whip lashes and blood on his body made Him unrecognizable. He wore not a crown of gold but a crown of thorns. He was not offered sacred frankincense, but a cup of bitter gall to dull the pain.

It only took three hours for Him to die, rather quick for a crucifixion. The spikes were removed and his limp, cold body slumped to the rocky ground. A group of women gathered up his lifeless corpse and wailed. Then two men gently offered to prepare the body for burial. One face in the circle was familiar. Though she was older and gray, Xerxes recognized Mary, the mother of Jesus. And then, out of the folds of her gown she carefully brought forth a chipped, stained alabaster flask and gave it to one of the men. It was the myrrh. He poured the reddish brown liquid on the body and rubbed it in. The sweet aroma briefly pushed away the stench of death. Then Mary watched as they bound her Son's body in a clean linen cloth and laid it on a rock cut ledge of a tomb just as she once wrapped Him in swaddling clothes and laid Him in a manger. A stone was rolled in place over the mouth of the tomb. And they all went home, sad and defeated.

“Why did God let Him die?” Esther demanded. “Let Him die?” the angel replied. “The Lord sent Him to die.” “Why?” Xerxes demanded in disbelief. “You know,” said the angel. “Think back to your ordination Xerxes. What did you see?” Now the buried memory of that embarrassing moment he froze came back to him. “I saw that all these sacrifices are futile. All the rituals are empty. All the rivers of blood never brought us one step closer to God and never would. But it’s more than that – of all the religions on this globe, all the philosophers and their scrolls, all the kings and princes who’ve led armies into battle – not one ever brought heaven to earth. Some even make this place a living hell. We are all racing toward the grave and there is nothing to stop us. That’s why I froze. Then Xerxes paused and looked at the sealed tomb. “Except for this Jesus. He came down from heaven not to lead armies, to sit on thrones or to perform rituals. He came to take our place in the grave. It was so simple. We cannot find our way to His place. So He came and took our place. He gave His life for ours. “You speak the truth,” said the angel. “But not the whole truth. Watch.”

As they turned to look at the stone sealed tomb, the earth beneath their feet began to skip and jump – tumbling them to the ground. The stone launched from the opening like a cork from a shaken bottle. The once dark sepulcher radiated an unbearable light. The light radiates from Jesus – gloriously alive. It is clear to all them now He is the King of kings worthy of gold, the Lord of Lords deserving of incense. Yet most of all, Jesus is the one anointed with myrrh – for He is the Sacrifice to end all sacrifices. Xerxes, Cyrus and Esther were silent in awe. Their mission complete; their lives forever changed. The birth of Jesus is not a fable or a story to share around the fire, a nativity set to decorate our tables. That tiny baby born in a manger so, so long ago came to set us free from sin and death forever. He is the lamb of God, our ultimate sacrifice, our hope, our risen savior -- our Emmanuel.