



We Three Kings

Upon hearing a few phrases of this well-known Christmas carol, we may encounter mental images of young children wearing bright costumes and paper crowns, carrying tissue boxes wrapped in gold paper, marching laboriously toward a doll resting in a hay-strewn manger on stage. However, upon looking more closely at the other stanzas of this hymn and considering its deeper meaning, we find theological significance for people of all ages.

Though scripture is not specific regarding the number of kings or Magi who visited Jesus, we often visualize three, perhaps associated with the gifts listed in Matthew 2:11. The second, third and fourth stanzas in this hymn are composed in such a way that we envision each kingly guest stepping forward, one at a time, presenting his gift.

Stanza two reverses the roles of the characters depicted in the scene; the visiting king humbly bestows his gift of gold—a treasure fit for one of royal lineage—to the One who is truly the King, destined to reign and rule over all, forever. The third stanza addresses the gift of frankincense, a fragrant element used in various forms of worship. Its association with worship signifies that the Deity is present, an important recognition on the part of the Magi.

Myrrh, referred to in the fourth stanza, is a type of bitter perfume or incense, possibly associated with burial rituals. In a moment of foreshadowing, this hymn calls to mind the suffering Christ would take upon himself at the end of his earthly life. When we celebrate the birth and early life of Jesus, we, as believers, understand that there was more to come—his purpose would be fulfilled in his death, a realization that brings a hint of gloom represented, perhaps, with bitter perfume.

Yet we know that Christ's death was not the end. The gold, frankincense and myrrh, symbolizing Jesus the King, God and Sacrifice, reach a joyous conclusion in the observance and celebration of Jesus' resurrection. The entire life of Christ is depicted completely, though briefly, in this hymn, from his birth to his death and resurrection. Alleluias sound throughout the earth and skies.

We, as believers and followers of Christ, strive to follow the Star. We may trip along in our oversized robes and drooping paper crowns as we stumble over our humanness and shortcomings. Nonetheless, we continue onward toward the perfect light of Christ, acknowledging him as our eternal King, our ever-present God, and the embodiment of the sacrifice that paid for our salvation.

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