

Day 13: We Three Kings of Orient Are

Dec. 10

*1 We three kings of Orient are;
bearing gifts we traverse afar,
field and fountain, moor and mountain,
following yonder star.*

Refrain: *O star of wonder, star of light,
star with royal beauty bright,
westward leading, still proceeding,
guide us to thy perfect light.*

*2 Born a King on Bethlehem's plain,
gold I bring to crown him again,
King forever, ceasing never,
over us all to reign. [Refrain]*

*3 Frankincense to offer have I;
incense owns a Deity nigh;
prayer and praising, voices raising,
worshiping God on high. [Refrain]*

*4 Myrrh is mine; its bitter perfume
breathes a life of gathering gloom;
sorrowing, sighing, bleeding, dying,
sealed in the stone-cold tomb. [Refrain]*

*5 Glorious now behold him arise;
King and God and sacrifice:
Alleluia, Alleluia,
sounds through the earth and skies. [Refrain]*

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. (Matthew 2:11)

We Three Kings of Orient Are is in many ways an enigma. It was written (words and music) by John H. Hopkins in 1857. Hopkins was a multi-talented man: scholar, writer, editor, preacher, fund-raiser, musician, poet, artist, and more. And he excelled in all that he did. Hopkins' following was national in scope: he delivered the eulogy at the funeral of President Ulysses S. Grant.

It is when we turn to his great hymn, *We Three Kings*, that we are confronted with a challenge. How could a man so broadly educated, with such great ability, combine sublime theology with misguided, and frankly wrong, biblical understandings – all in a single song?

First, and most obvious, are the errors – incorporated as they are in the very title (and first words) of the song: “We three kings.” Succinctly put: the Bible knows nothing of visiting

“kings” at the birth of Jesus, just wise men. And their actual number is never mentioned either. Matthew 2 merely says “wise men,” thus we know it was more than one. Yes, they bore three varieties of gifts. But it could have been 33 guys as well as just 3 – 20 of whom bring gold ingots, thirteen show up with decanters of frankincense and a box of myrrh; no one knows.

So what are “wise men”? The biblical word is *magi*. These were very learned men. Often *magi* devoted themselves to astronomical observations, to mysteries and to religion. But they were not kings. The song clearly misidentifies them.

Enough for the errors. The miscues are more than outweighed by the deep theological insight of the hymn. In the second, third and fourth verses, each of the “three kings” in turn explains his gift for Jesus. *Gold* signified royalty; the infant is: “King forever, ceasing never, over us all to reign.” Next comes *Frankincense*, signifying Jesus’ deity. Frankincense was used in religious rituals the world over. And finally *Myrrh*. This expensive spice foretold that the Christ child was born to die, as it was used in preparing bodies for entombment.

Of course, the actual *magi* would not have understood the meaning of their gifts as they followed the star and made their deliveries. But God knew what he was leading them to bring: gold, frankincense and myrrh. And God knew that one day we too would grasp his revelation to us, that these very gifts would reveal the three identities of the one born in Bethlehem.

The final verse of *We Three Kings* sums it all up. The babe is seen as “King and God and sacrifice.” Yes, this little babe, born in an out-of-the-way locale, is our king! Yet he is more; he is actually our God, born among us in human flesh! And, in light of these two identities, most amazingly of all, he is also our sacrifice! He came to die for you and me.

Thus the mystery is thick as we finish off the exotic tune: “O star of wonder, star of light, star with royal beauty bright, westward leading, still proceeding, guide us to thy perfect light.”

Questions

1. To you, what is the best part of the hymn, *We Three Kings*?
2. Who function as “wise men” in our world today?
3. What gifts will you offer to your King, God and Sacrifice this Christmas?

Prayer

Jesus, we marvel at how you arranged the circumstances of your birth with such exquisite detail. Your true identity was revealed in the gifts brought by mysterious strangers from the east. Without understanding why you were leading them to give as they did, the *magi* showed us for all time that you are our King, our God, and our Sacrifice. How majestic is your revelation. How majestic are you, Jesus our Lord. Amen.