

BREAKFAST EPIPHANIES 2018



ABOUT PITTSBURGH THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY

Rooted in the Reformed tradition, Pittsburgh Theological Seminary is committed to the formation of women and men for theologically reflective ministry and to scholarship in service to the global Church of Jesus Christ.

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Metro-Urban Institute

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Zeitah Excavations

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SUN., DEC. 31

GOLD

Matthew 2:10-12

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As we continue our journey to epiphany, we're going to take a few days to look closely at the three gifts given by the Magi. The first gift listed is gold.

Humans have been fascinated by gold since the dawn of history. There's a great passage from the book of Job in which Job discusses how difficult it is to find wisdom. He compares the search for wisdom to the quest for gold.

Job 28:1-13

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3 Miners put* an end to darkness,
and search out to the farthest bound
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7 'That path no bird of prey knows,
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Though today we don't often equate gold with griffins, we do have some pretty powerful associations with the precious metal, from the lore around the 19th century "Gold Rush" to the way we use gold ceremonially, even in weddings.

Gold is the first gift in the list that the Magi give to Jesus, gold from the depths and edges of the earth, gold guarded by supernatural creatures in myth, gold the subject of lore and ceremony. The gift of gold, even apart from its price or value, alerts us to something wonderful and mysterious in the Epiphany. The Magi make a claim that Jesus is worthy of a rare and precious gift—and that his presence has cosmic significance.

Image left: Griffin sergeant – German Version, from *Fictitious Symbolic Creatures in Art*, by John Vinycomb, 1906, p. 152

MON., JAN. 1

FRANKINCENSE

Matthew 2:10-12

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As we continue our journey to Epiphany, we're taking a few days to look closely at the three gifts given to Jesus by the Magi. The second gift in the list is frankincense.

We know what gold is. Frankincense, though, is a mystery to most of us. In short, it's a sort of resin, often burned as incense, that comes from a variety of trees.

Which . . . doesn't help a whole lot. Luckily, frankincense does appear in Scripture from time to time. For example, this passage in Exodus helps describe its use.

Exodus 30:34-38

34 The Lord said to Moses: Take sweet spices, stacte, and onycha, and galbanum, sweet spices with pure frankincense (an equal part of each), 35 and make an incense blended as by the perfumer, seasoned with salt, pure and holy; 36 and you shall beat some of it into powder, and put part of it before the covenant in the tent of meeting where I shall meet you; it shall be for you most holy. 37 When you make incense according to this composition, you shall not make it for yourselves; it shall be regarded by you as holy to the Lord. 38 Whoever makes any like it to use as perfume shall be cut off from the people.



In this passage, as the people are beginning their new life, free from slavery in Egypt, they make new preparations for how to worship. As part of these new preparations, they use frankincense. Often, the fragrant substance was used in worship; it signaled an encounter with God.

In addition to its use in worship, frankincense was considered valuable and very dangerous to obtain. Herodotus claimed that the trees needed to make frankincense were difficult to reach because "winged serpents, small in size and various in form, guard the trees that bear frankincense, a great number round each tree" (*The Histories*, III.107). The only way to reach the trees was to burn special flowers, the smoke of which repelled the flying serpents.

Herodotus also explained how people used frankincense. After battling the winged serpents and obtaining the rare incense, people would use it as a gift for kings or as incense in sacrifices.

Historically, frankincense was used for worship and sacrifice. In legend, it was dangerous to obtain and so precious that it was reserved for kings and gods. When the Magi brought frankincense to Jesus, the gift may have carried a proclamation about his identity.

Image left: Amphiptere or Flying Serpent, from *Fictitious Symbolic Creatures in Art*, by John Vinycomb, 1906, p. 122

TUES., JAN. 2

MYRRH

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Often in Scripture, especially in the Song of Solomon, myrrh is paired with frankincense. But perhaps one of the most powerful mentions of myrrh appears in the Gospel of John.

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Jews, asked Pilate to let him take away the body of Jesus. Pilate gave him permission; so he came and removed his body. 39 Nicodemus, who had at first come to Jesus by night, also came, bringing a mixture of myrrh and aloes, weighing about a hundred pounds. 40 They took the body of Jesus and wrapped it with the spices in linen cloths, according to the burial custom of the Jews. 41 Now there was a garden in the place where he was crucified, and in the garden there was a new tomb in which no one had ever been laid. 42 And so, because it was the Jewish day of Preparation, and the tomb was nearby, they laid Jesus there.



Myrrh is used in the burial of Jesus. Not only does it appear at the beginning of his life, but it also appears at the end. It serves as a sort of foreshadowing of what is to come. Like that ominous line in “I Wonder as I Wander,” which proclaims that Jesus was “born for to die,” myrrh signals to us that there will be very difficult days in the life of Jesus.

There’s another story about myrrh that comes to us from outside Scripture. It’s not a true story, but it highlights how rare and valuable frankincense was. Herodotus again tells the story of a fantastic creature, the Phoenix. He explains that once every five centuries a phoenix buries its dead inside an egg of myrrh (*The Histories*, 2.73).

As with gold and frankincense, there is something otherworldly about myrrh. As in the passage from John, there is something ominous about its presence—something that points beyond Epiphany to Holy Week

and hints at Easter to come.

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WED., JAN. 3

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