



Gold, Frankincense, and Myrrh

"Now when Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judaea in the days of Herod the King, behold, there came wise men from the east to Jerusalem. Saying, where is he that is born King of the Jews? For we have seen his star in the east, and are come to worship him. And when they were come into the house, they saw the young child with Mary, his mother, and fell down, and worshipped him: and when they had opened their treasures, they presented unto him gifts: **gold**, and **frankincense**, and **myrrh**." (Matthew 2: 1-2,11)

These three treasures inspired merchants and moved caravans along ancient trade routes for millennia. From the port cities of Qana, present-day Bir Ali in Yemen, and Samhram, present-day Khor Rori near Salalah in Oman, frankincense and myrrh were transported to Egypt and other destinations along the Red Sea and around the Mediterranean. In addition, sea vessels carried this cargo east to China, India, and beyond.

History of Frankincense and Myrrh

The pharaohs of Egypt used frankincense for perfume, medicine, and embalming the dead. Clumps of incense were discovered among the treasures buried in the tomb of Tutankhamen who died in 1339 BC.

Moses, the Hebrew prophet who led the exodus from Egypt in the 13th century B.C., received instructions from the Lord to use pure frankincense as one of the ingredients of a perfume to be used in the Tabernacle (Exodus 30:34) and pure myrrh as one ingredient of a holy anointing oil (Exodus 30:23-25).



In the middle of the 10th century BC, the Queen of Sheba, ruler of a southern kingdom in Arabia, traveled by caravan to Israel and, it is thought, questioned King Solomon regarding his merchant fleet based at Eilat on the Red Sea and his trading policies which could greatly affect her kingdom, the main producer of frankincense and myrrh and a key player in the world's spice trade.

It is recorded that Jerusalem imported frankincense prior to its capture by Nebuchednezzar in 587 BC (Jeremiah 6:20). During Jewish captivity, Esther, who became queen to the Persian King Ahasuerus, used oil of myrrh for six months as part of a purification process for women (Esther 2:12).

When Jesus Christ was born, the Holy Land was under the rule of the Roman Empire. At this time, frankincense and myrrh were literally worth their weight in gold. Frankincense was used for state meetings and in religious ceremonies. The Emperor Nero (A.D. 37-68), at the funeral of his second wife Poppaea, burnt in excess of the total annual production of Arabia!

In later history, we find the medicinal use of frankincense recorded in the Syrian Book of the Middle Ages and in Chinese texts of the 12th and 13th century AD. However, the demand for frankincense and myrrh had diminished with the decline and fall of the Roman Empire (337-476 A.D.) The discovery of new, more efficient waterways and trade routes broke Arabia's trade monopoly and the trade balance shifted throughout the known world. Arabia did continue to sell frankincense and myrrh but with a much reduced profit.

Today, although gold is still an internationally recognized commodity, we hear little mention of frankincense and myrrh in the marketplace. Yet, treasures they remain.



Frankincense

Frankincense trees (*Boswellia sacra*) grow on the coasts of southern Arabia and Somalia. When an incision is made in the trunk of a frankincense tree, a milk-like juice exudes and firms up with exposure to air. After the required consistency is obtained, harvesters scrape off the hardened "tears." This gum resin is collected into baskets. The color of the gum resin is influenced by its harvest time. A whiter gum is collected closer to autumn time, whereas a darker reddish-brown color is harvested closer to spring. The gathering season lasts from May through mid-September, but the product is available year-round in traditional local markets of the Middle East.

In a traditional suk, or market, in Arabia today, one kilogram of Omani frankincense may be purchased for 450 riyals (\$120 US dollars/Oct. 2003). If you are hoping to buy some, it is helpful to know that "libaan" is the Arabic word for frankincense. From there, you may note that there are different types of "libaan." There is, for example, "libaan Omani," "libaan Somali," and libaan thakr," (male frankincense). There is also a frankincense "look-alike" called mastika. In the end, you can either burn, chew, or swallow your purchase.

Male frankincense (libaan thakr) is used for medicinal purposes. It may be diluted in water for a day and then strained and the water swallowed. It relieves sore throats and coughs and is also considered good for the stomach. In Arabia today, following the delivery of a baby, some women remove their clothes and stand over smoke of burning frankincense, onion skins, black seed, and shaba (a type of stone). The warmth is said to relieve pains from the contracting uterus. Also after delivery, frankincense is burned for one to two weeks by those who believe it to be protection from envious eyes (the evil eye) and evil spirits in general. Libaan thakr is known for its pleasant smell. It is burned as incense and can be wafted on clothes and serve as a kind of deoderant protection. It sells for approximately \$10 US dollars per kilogram.

Libaans Omani and Somali may be chewed like gum. This is one of their popular uses as they have a mild, pleasant taste and help to eliminate bad breath. The juice derived from the gum is thought to benefit the kidneys and liver. The earlier mentioned frankincense look-alike, mastika, may also be chewed as gum, used sparingly as a flavoring when cooking, and burned for a pleasant smell. Libaan thakr is not usually chewed as gum because it is bitter and does not taste good. It also breaks into small pieces and does not form gum consistency.

Finally, an interesting cosmetic fact to note is that charred frankincense is used to make kohl, the black powder traditionally used by women in the Middle East to paint their eyelids.



Myrrh

The third treasure, myrrh (*Commiphora myrrha*) is collected from the stems of bushy shrubs also found growing in Arabia and Somalia. A granular secretion exits the stem through natural fissures, or cuts, as a pale yellow liquid. It then hardens to a reddish-brown mass. It can be found in different sizes in the marketplace, most pieces being the size of large marbles or walnuts.

While shopping, one simply needs to ask for "murr." The word myrrh means "bitter" in Arabic. A kilogram of myrrh may be purchased for 90 riyals (24 US dollars/Oct. 2003) in the local markets of Arabia.

Myrrh is an antiseptic, an astringent, and a stimulant, and has other medicinal properties as well. As one of the best antiseptics known, it is commonly applied to disinfect wounds. In fact, Jethro Kloss, a famous herbalist, left the legacy of the Kloss liniment. He recommended putting 2 ounces of gum myrrh into a quart of rubbing alcohol along with 1 ounce of golden seal root and one half ounce of cayenne pepper and letting it stand for a week or ten days, shaking it every day, and then straining prior to use. This liniment is healing to open wounds, cuts, scratches, bruises, sprains, and any purpose for which liniment is normally required.

Although it doesn't taste very good because it is so bitter, myrrh is used to alleviate inflammation in the body. Myrrh may be left in water for two or three days and then strained. The myrrh water is then drunk. A myrrh tea may also be similarly used. Myrrh water is an excellent mouthwash and is helpful for mouth sores or blisters, sore throats, bronchial congestion, and other conditions requiring an antiseptic astringent.

In Arabia today, myrrh is used by women after the delivery of a baby. The new mother sits for about fifteen minutes in a myrrh/salt water bath. Myrrh is also flammable and may be used as an incense.

With such healing, aromatic, and cosmetic properties, is it surprising that wise men included frankincense and myrrh in their selection of gifts for a king? As we move into the twenty-first century, wise men and women are once again discovering the many and varied uses inherent in these natural treasures.