

CALLED TO WORSHIP

DEVOTIONAL READING: Exodus 1:8-22

BACKGROUND SCRIPTURE: Matthew 2:7-15

TODAY'S SCRIPTURE: Matthew 2:1-2, 7-15

I. Going West

Matthew 2:1-2

1 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,

2 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.

1a. *Bethlehem*, meaning “house of bread,” was the site of many important events that Jewish audiences likely remembered. While Bethlehem was a small village in Jesus’ time, it was the place where Jacob’s wife Rachel—mother of 2 of the 12 patriarchs whose offspring became the 12 tribes of Israel (Genesis 35:24; 49:1-28)—died in childbirth and was buried (35:19).

The events of the book of Ruth are set in Bethlehem. Ruth’s great-grandson, King David, was raised there (Ruth 4:21-22; 1 Samuel 16:4-13). Because God had promised David that one of his descendants would rule over God’s people forever (2 Samuel 7:8-16), it was widely understood that the Messiah—a descendant of David—would also be associated with Bethlehem (see Micah 5:2, 4).

1b. *Herod* was installed as *king* of Judea by Rome in about 38 BC. He reigned until

his death in 4 BC. While powerful, Herod was never popular with traditional Jews, who questioned his lineage. They resented his pro-Roman policies. Upon his death, widespread revolt erupted across Judea.

1c. While the precise origin of the *wise men* is unknown, they are clearly portrayed as Gentiles (non-Jews). In ancient paganism, wise men were considered experts in discerning the will of the gods and divining the future. This was accomplished through observation of various elements of nature, such as stars, weather patterns, and the behavior of animals. Wise men commonly served as counselors at the courts of royalty, giving advice on the basis of their supposed supernatural insight.

The citizens of many nations were prophesied to come to Israel to worship when the Messiah appeared (Micah 4:1-5). This would usher in a new era of peace and prosperity as all joined as one people under God. The appearance of the Gentile wise men is the first indication of God’s intention to fulfill this prophecy through Jesus.

The east may refer to Babylon or Persia, which had been home to large numbers of Jews since the Babylonian exile.

2a. This is the first time in Matthew’s Gospel that Jesus is referred to as *King of the Jews*. This title foreshadows Jesus’ trial before Pilate, torture, and execution.

2b. The wise men witnessed an unusual astronomical phenomenon. It was widely believed in antiquity that stars, eclipses, comets, and other astral events heralded significant events. The Law of Moses clearly forbids the occult practices in which the wise men were experts (Deuteronomy 4:19; 18:9-14). Still, God communicated with these pagan astrologers in terms they could understand. Since the wise men sought wisdom in the stars, God chose to speak to them through that medium, calling them to leave their home country in search of a newborn king. Clearly, God ensured that Gentiles were included on the momentous occasion of today's text.

2c. The wise men seemed aware of Scriptures that spoke of a coming King. They may have been sent by their own king to *worship* and pay the respects typical of royal births. Because this was a royal event, they went first to Jerusalem, the political and religious center of Judea.

Herod was deeply suspicious of the wise men. Herod had spent almost four decades establishing himself as king of the Jews, and in the process had undertaken a series of brutal military actions and massive civil works projects to convert Judea, Samaria, Galilee, Perea (east of the Jordan), and Batanea (east of the Sea of Galilee) into productive areas. Since Herod had no newborn children at this time, the notion that a royal messianic figure might be coming could only spell rebellion. He may have suspected that the wise men were impostors, involved in a plot to create dissent.

II. Seeking the King

Matthew 2:7-12

7 Then Herod, when he had privily called the wise men, enquired of them diligently what time the star appeared.

8 And he sent them to Bethlehem, and said, Go and search diligently for

the young child; and when ye have found him, bring me word again, that I may come and worship him also.

9 When they had heard the king, they departed; and, lo, the star, which they saw in the east, went before them, till it came and stood over where the young child was.

10 When they saw the star, they rejoiced with exceeding great joy.

11 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.

12 And being warned of God in a dream that they should not return to Herod, they departed into their own country another way.

7. Herod's own religious experts advised him that the Messiah would be born in Bethlehem, about six miles south of Jerusalem. Herod's inquiry into the timing of the star's appearance foreshadowed his intention to quell this threat.

8. Based on the information his own experts had provided, Herod *sent* the wise men *to Bethlehem* in hopes that they would locate a potential political rival. The wise men, interpreting the situation in religious rather than political terms, appeared to be oblivious to his scheme. Herod spoke deceitfully when he claimed that he too wanted to *worship* this *young child*.

9. The reference to *the star* going *before* the wise men has generated considerable discussion. Because Bethlehem was essentially a suburb of Jerusalem, it would seem unnecessary for the star to guide them there. Yet the wise men were clearly not from the area and would need guidance to find *the young child*, especially at night.

10. The wise men doubtless *rejoiced* be-

cause their confusion had been resolved. While their initial observations simply led them to Jerusalem, they certainly would have been surprised to learn that there had been no royal births in Herod's household. The long journey was reaching its goal.

11a. *Mary* and Joseph, who were from Nazareth, were still in Bethlehem. The wise men first saw Jesus at a certain *house* rather than in the manger. It is possible that the wise men saw the star and began their journey some months before Jesus was born. The result would be to see Jesus days or weeks after His birth.

The worship offered by the wise men does not mean they fully understood Jesus' identity. More likely their reverence reflects the typical gestures of obeisance that would be offered to any ancient king.

11b. The *gifts* offered were consistent with the mission of the wise men to honor a newborn king. *Gold*, of course, was precious. *Frankincense* and *myrrh* were rare and expensive items.

12. *God* continued to communicate with the wise men in a way familiar to them. As a result, they *departed* the country secretly rather than reporting Jesus' identity and location to Herod.

Herod was likely made aware that Micah 5 predicted that the Messiah from Bethlehem would destroy oppressors and their pagan religious customs. To Herod, this could only mean a challenge to his own pro-Roman policies.

III. Fleeing to a Strange Land Matthew 2:13-15

13 And when they were departed, behold, the angel of the Lord appeareth to Joseph in a dream, saying, Arise, and take the young child and his mother, and flee into Egypt, and be thou there until I bring thee word: for Herod will seek the young child to destroy him.

14 When he arose, he took the young

child and his mother by night, and departed into Egypt:

15 And was there until the death of Herod: that it might be fulfilled which was spoken of the Lord by the prophet, saying, Out of Egypt have I called my son.

13. The *angel of the Lord* warned Joseph of the looming consequences of the wise men's informing Herod about a new king.

The Roman province of *Egypt* was to be the place of refuge. It was home to a large and influential Jewish community. Traffic between Israel and Egypt was common, and Joseph could easily find work and support. The gifts would be a huge help to the family during the sojourn.

Herod is often portrayed as attempting to fight against God himself. How could any human being hope to thwart the divine plan? Nothing in Matthew's account, however, suggests that Herod believed God was behind the appearance of the wise men. In his view, they were either crackpot pagans or, more likely and more seriously, foreign agents involved in an elaborate hoax to generate unrest among the Jewish people. His failure to see the hand of God in the situation stands as a timeless lesson on the need to be mindful of God's movement at all times.

14-15. Prophecies are often explicitly cited in Matthew's Gospel. Matthew 1:23 connects the angel's announcement to Joseph with Isaiah 7:14. The verses before us quotes Hosea 11:1 to explain why Jesus had to be taken to Egypt. Matthew 2:18 connects the massacre of the infants to Jeremiah 31:15, and an otherwise unknown prophecy explains why Jesus grew up in Nazareth (Matthew 2:21-23). These references to Scripture, combined with the various dreams (1:20; 2:12-13, 19) and unusual star, work together to stress the unique role of Jesus in God's plan.

INVOLVEMENT LEARNING

CALLED TO WORSHIP

Into the Lesson

Write down synonyms for the word *venerate*.

Write down things that are venerated in today's culture.

In our culture, there are some people who are confused about who they should worship. But some of those we will study about today got it right.

Into the Word

Read Matthew 2:1-2, 7-15. What verse from today's Scripture do the following prophecies match up with?

Jeremiah 23:5 and Numbers 24:17.

Isaiah 60:3, 9 and Psalm 72:10.

Hosea 11:1.

Answer the following questions

Wise Men

What kind of "GPS" did the wise men rely on?

What was their physical posture in worship?

What gifts accompanied their worship?

Herod

What instructions did Herod give the wise men?

What was Herod's stated motive in giving those instructions?

What was his real motive?

Into Life

What's So?

What are the stated facts regarding the wise men's worship of Jesus?

So What?

How might this be one model for our worship?

THOUGHT TO REMEMBER

Those who faithfully seek Jesus find Him.