

CALLED TO WORSHIP

DEVOTIONAL READING: Exodus 1:8–22

BACKGROUND SCRIPTURE: Matthew 2:7–15

MATTHEW 2:1–2, 7–15

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.

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.

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.

KEY VERSE

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 2:11

CALL IN THE NEW TESTAMENT
Unit 1: The Beginning of a Call LESSONS 1–4

LESSON AIMS

After participating in this lesson, each learner will be able to:

1. Identify the Old Testament sources used within the lesson text.
2. Compare and contrast the motives behind the two expressed desires to worship Jesus.
3. Worship the Lord in the reverent and sacrificial spirit of the wisemen.

LESSON OUTLINE

Introduction

- A. Mirror, Mirror
- B. Lesson Context
- I. Going West (Matthew 2:1–2)
 - A. The Journey (v. 1)
 - B. The Star (v. 2)
- II. Seeking the King (Matthew 2:7–12)
 - A. Led by Men (vv. 7–8)
 - B. Led by God (vv. 9–10)
 - C. The Joy of Discovery (vv. 11)
 - D. The Return Home (v. 12)
 - A Dream Come True*
- III. Fleeing to a Strange Land (Matthew 2:13–15)
 - A. The Warning (v. 13)
 - B. The Flight to Egypt (vv. 14–15)
 - Sacrificial Faith*

Conclusion

- A. Expect the Unexpected
- B. Prayer
- C. Thought to Remember **HOW TO SAY IT**
 - Batanea *Bah-tuh-nee-uh.*
 - Bethlehem *Beth-lih-hem.*
 - frankincense *frank-in-sense.*

Galilee	<i>Gal-uh-lee.</i>
Herod	<i>Hair-ud.</i>
Hosea	<i>Ho-zay-uh.</i>
Idumean	<i>Id-you-me-un.</i>
Judaea (Judea)	<i>Joo-dee-uh.</i>
myrrh	<i>mur.</i>
Perea	<i>Peh-ree-uh.</i>
Samaria	<i>Suh-mare-ee-uh.</i>

Introduction

A. Mirror, Mirror

The 1937 Disney film *Snow White* has given us many lasting catchphrases, including the famous (misquoted) rhyme, “Mirror, Mirror on the wall, who’s the fairest of them all?” In the movie, these words are spoken each day by the beautiful-but-evil queen to her magic mirror, which has knowledge of all things. The vain queen’s sense of prestige and selfworth are tied to the mirror’s daily affirmation that she herself is, in fact, “the fairest in the land.” So fragile is her ego that she becomes enraged beyond reason when the mirror finally says one day that a lowly peasant girl is now “the fairest in the land.” The powerful queen promptly disguised herself as a witch so she could destroy Snow White.

Our passage today describes a similar scenario that also bore tragic and deadly fruit.

B. Lesson Context

Matthew and Luke provide unique details on the story of Jesus’ birth. Both contain genealogies that trace Jesus’ human heritage (see lesson 1). Both mention that angels announced Mary would conceive. Luke describes the message delivered to Mary before her pregnancy ([Luke 1:26–38](#)), while Matthew describes how Joseph learned of its origins after she was found to be with child ([Matthew 1:18–25](#); see lesson 2).

Luke then offers a detailed description of the events leading up to the night of Jesus’ birth, including Joseph and Mary’s journey from Nazareth to Bethlehem for the Roman tax census, the fact that the newborn child was laid in a manger, and the visit of the shepherds ([Luke 2:1–20](#)). Matthew skips the actual birth story to describe the strange appearance of wealthy and mysterious Gentiles to honor the baby Jesus ([Matthew 2:1–18](#); see lesson text).

The two accounts broaden our awareness of the events surrounding Jesus’ birth and also offer complementary perspectives on the implications of Christ’s coming. Luke’s focus on the manger and the shepherds anticipates Jesus’ later emphasis on the poor and outcast (example: [Luke 6:20–21](#)). Matthew’s story of the wise men shows how Christ’s life and death would reach far beyond the borders of Israel to bring salvation to people of many races and nationalities (example: [Matthew 28:18–20](#)). Taken together, the two Gospels underscore a key feature of Christ’s ministry: reaching across barriers to bring salvation to all ([John 3:16–18](#)).

I. Going West ([MATTHEW 2:1–2](#))

A. The Journey (v. 1)

1a. Now when Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judaea.

Bethlehem (about six miles south of Jerusalem) 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 1:19](#)). 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](#); quoted in [Matthew 2:6](#), not in today's lesson text). The word *Bethlehem* means “house of bread.” **1b. In the days of Herod the king.**

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. (Herod was ethnically Idumean, native of what was called Edom in the Old Testament.) They resented his pro-Roman policies. Upon his death, widespread revolt erupted across Judea.

1c. Behold, there came wise men from the east to Jerusalem.

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 (compare [Genesis 41:8; Daniel 2:2–11](#)).

The citizens of many nations were prophesied to come to Israel to worship when the Messiah appeared. This would usher in a new era of peace and prosperity as all joined as one people under God (compare [Micah 4:1–5](#)). The appearance of the Gentile wise men is the first indication of God's intention to fulfill this prophecy through Jesus' life, death, and resurrection and the church's proclamation of those facts.

The east may refer to Babylon or Persia, which had been home to large numbers of Jews since the Babylonian exile. That was during the time of Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and Daniel in the sixth century BC. Some scholars, noting that Herod attempted to kill Jesus by ordering the execution of all boys age 2 and under ([Matthew 2:16–18](#)), propose that the events of [Luke 2](#) occurred around 6 BC.

One would think that Jesus could not have been born in any year BC, just by definition. The blame lies with a well-intentioned monk of the sixth century AD who made a mistake in computation. The wise men may have arrived as much as two years later, during the last year of Herod's reign (see commentary on [Matthew 2:11](#), below).



Visual for Lessons 3 & 9. Use the visual to start a discussion about how your learners can be alert to calls from God.

B. The Star (v. 2)

2a. Saying, Where is he that is born King of the Jews?

This is the first time in Matthew's Gospel that Jesus is referred to as *King of the Jews*. This title is a glimpse of Jesus' trial before Pilate, torture, and execution ([Matthew 27:11, 29, 37](#)).

2b. For we have seen his star in the east.

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. Attempts to explain away the star's value by identifying it with datable astronomical events have often been little more than attempts to deny the miracle of the wise men's travel.

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. If it seems strange for God to speak through a forbidden practice, consider also that God forbade witchcraft ([Deuteronomy 18:10](#)) but chose to communicate with King Saul in such a setting ([1 Samuel 28](#)). His ways are not our ways. Clearly, God ensured that Gentiles were included on the momentous occasion of today's text.

2c. And are come to worship him.

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.

Verse 3 (not included in the lesson text) indicates that 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)

A. Led by Men (vv. 7–8)

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

In [Matthew 2:4–6](#) (not in our lesson text), Herod's own religious experts advised him from [Micah 5:2–4](#) 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 (see [Matthew 2:14](#), below; also [2:16](#)).

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.

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* ([Matthew 2:13](#)).

B. Led by God (vv. 9–10)

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.

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.

The star here functions in a way similar to the manger in Luke's account. The shepherds were told to go into Bethlehem and look for a newborn child, not knowing the specific place. For the shepherds, the sign that they had found the right person took the form of a manger ([Luke 2:8–16](#)). The image of the star remaining over the place there Jesus was recalls the pillars of cloud and fire that guided the Israelites ([Exodus 13:21](#)).

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

The wise men doubtless *rejoiced* because their confusion had been resolved. While their initial observations simply led them to Jerusalem, they certainly would have been surprised and confused to learn that there had been no royal births in Herod's household. Some students propose that the travelers had not seen *the star* for some time; now its reappearance, framed by references to the prophecies of the sacred Scriptures, was clearly a direct sign from God. The long journey was reaching its goal.

What Do You Think?

With whom will you share the joy of the wise men this Christmas? *Digging Deeper*

What can you do to create (not just expect) opportunities to do so?

C. The Joy of Discovery (v. 11)

11a. And when they were come into the house, they saw the young child with Mary his mother, and fell down, and worshipped him.

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 where the shepherds met the family ([Luke 2:16](#)). It is possible that the wise men saw the star and began their journey some months before Jesus was born; in that case, what they described in [Matthew 2:2](#) would have occurred sometime before [2:1](#). The result would be to see Jesus days or weeks after His birth. [Matthew 2:16](#) may indicate an even longer period of time (see on [2:1c](#), above).

The worship offered by the wise men does not mean they fully understood Jesus' identity. In fact, almost no one seemed to grasp Jesus' identity fully until after His resurrection (examples: [Matthew 16:13–23](#); [Acts 2:14–39](#)). More likely their reverence reflects the typical gestures of obeisance that would be offered to any ancient king.

What Do You Think?

How do we convince others that a “mere human” is worthy of being worshipped?

Digging Deeper

Before engaging in such a conversation, how do we ensure that everyone in the discussion shares the same definition of *worship*?

11b. And when they had opened their treasures, they presented unto him gifts; gold, and frankincense, and myrrh.

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, imported from southern Arabia and what today is known as Somaliland. Matthew surely sees the actions of the wise men as a fulfillment of prophecies such as [Isaiah 60:1–9](#).

The number of visitors is unknown. The common view is that there were three, which corresponds to the number of gifts. Even if only three dignitaries came to see Jesus, they certainly would have traveled with a large retinue of servants and security officers. Oddly, none of the Jewish advisers to Herod seemed

to have been interested in this new king, since there is no record of their joining the foreign men in seeking Him.

What Do You Think?

What can we do to connect better our Christmas gift-giving with that of the wise men's gifts to baby Jesus?

Digging Deeper

How will you deal with the tension between [Matthew 5:16](#) and [6:1](#) in this regard?

D. The Return Home (v. 12)

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

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. Periodic insurrections were not unknown in this time and place (compare [Acts 5:36–37](#)), and Herod was infamous for eliminating opposition.

What Do You Think?

How will you know when you should avoid someone rather than trying to confront or witness to him or her?

Digging Deeper

Which among [1 Corinthians 15:33](#); [Galatians 2:11–21](#); [2 Thessalonians 3:6](#); [Titus 3:10](#); and [3 John 9–10](#) is most compelling to you in this regard? Why?

A DREAM COME TRUE

A Muslim friend of mine who was just beginning his walk with Jesus struggled with taking the final step because his mother did not approve of his affiliation with Christians. Once while he was contemplating Christianity, his mother traveled to a faraway city.

One night in that strange place, she got lost. Confused and afraid, she sat down on the corner and began to cry. She prayed that if the Jesus her son spoke about were real, He would help her get home. She then felt hands on her back, pushing her gently in one direction, all the way to her friend's house. She never saw anyone behind her.

This woman returned to her son full of excitement and sure that Jesus himself had guided her. He had answered her prayer. She joined her son in his new faith.

God uses different methods to reach different people. Even so, His communication to the wise men through the star and then a dream was only a start. They needed more information later (see [Romans 10:17](#); [Hebrews 1:1–2](#)). Where are you along this path? Where *should* you be?

—L. M. W.

III. Fleeing to a Strange Land

([MATTHEW 2:13–15](#))

A. The Warning (v. 13)

13a. 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.

The angel of the Lord had earlier appeared to Joseph in a dream to inform him that Mary's pregnancy was indeed miraculous ([Matthew 1:20–24](#); see lesson 2). This time the angel 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 at that time. Traffic between Israel and Egypt was common, and Joseph could easily find work and support there without drawing too much attention. The wise men's gifts, especially the gold, 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 by killing the Christ, whom God had sent? 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.

B. The Flight to Egypt (vv. 14–15)

14–15. When he arose, he took the young child and his mother by night, and departed into Egypt: 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.

Prophecies are often explicitly cited in Matthew's Gospel. For instance, [Matthew 1:23](#) connects the angel's announcement to Joseph with [Isaiah 7:14](#) (compare [Matthew 2:6](#)). The verses before us quote [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 total plan of salvation.

What Do You Think?

Which do you have the most problem with: jumping the gun and starting too soon or procrastinating and starting too late?

Digging Deeper

How can you solve this problem?

SACRIFICIAL FAITH

When the Bible college where I work relocated from a small town to a larger city a couple of hours away, the faculty and staff faced a huge decision. Would they also move?

Many had children in schools in the area. The cost of living was higher in the city, and a booming housing market meant they'd get less house for more money. They believed that the move would be good for the college and its students. But did they believe it enough to make changes in their personal lives?

Most of the faculty and staff did decide to go. They stepped out in faith. They acted in the assurance that God would work through the move and would provide for their families in the city. They believed in the mission of the school enough to sacrifice for it.

It is easy to sit back and say we'd give up everything for Jesus. But when we have the opportunity to sacrifice, do we take it?

—L. M. W.

Conclusion

A. Expect the Unexpected

Matthew's account foreshadows a deep tragedy of Christ's ministry: those who should have been most prepared to accept Him did not ([John 1:11](#)). Instead, pagan astrologers welcomed Him with worship and expensive gifts!

This story is filled with the unexpected. No one expected pagan wise men to appear at Herod's palace with congratulations on the birth of a royal child, especially since no such child had been born in Jerusalem! The wise men certainly did not expect to find the king of the Jews in a peasant's house outside the capital. Jews did not expect the Christ to be born into danger so that His parents would need to flee to Egypt to protect Him. Most significantly, one would assume that the chief priests and appointed king of Judea would welcome the newborn Messiah.

Matthew's account thus demonstrates the need to remain open to the unexpected. It encourages us to watch for God in action, even when (or especially when) He acts through people we might not anticipate. We still need eyes to see and ears to hear ([Matthew 13:16-17](#)).

B. Prayer

Father, help us to interpret Your Word correctly and to listen carefully for Your voice. Give us the strength to follow Your call whenever and however it comes. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

C. Thought to Remember

Those who faithfully seek Jesus find Him.

INVOLVEMENT LEARNING

Enhance your lesson with KJV Bible Student (from your curriculum supplier) and the reproducible activity page (at www.standardlesson.com or in the back of the KJV Standard Lesson Commentary Deluxe Edition).

Into the Lesson

Option. Before learners arrive, place in chairs copies of the “Worship Around the World” exercise from the activity page, which you can download. Discuss results to begin class.

Challenge students to think of synonyms for the word *venerate*; write ideas on the board as they are voiced. Be sure to add *adore*, *revere*, and *ascribe worth* if no one mentions them. Then divide the class into small groups and ask groups to create lists of things that are venerated in today’s culture. After a few minutes, have groups compare lists in whole-class discussion.

Lead into the Bible study by saying, “I think we can agree that some people are confused about who they should worship. But some of those we will study about today got it right. Let’s see why.”

Into the Word

Have students take turns reading [Matthew 2:1–2, 7–15](#) aloud. Say, “There are many Old Testament prophecies about Jesus’ birth. Let’s see if we can match some of those prophecies to events surrounding Jesus’ birth.”

Ask a learner to read [Jeremiah 23:5](#) aloud and another learner to read [Numbers 24:17](#) aloud. Ask, “What verse from today’s Scripture do these two prophecies match up with?” (*Answer: Matthew 2:2*). Follow the same process for [Isaiah 60:3, 9](#) and [Psalm 72:10](#) (*Answer: Matthew 2:11*) and [Hosea 11:1](#) (*Answer: Matthew 2:15*).

Option. For deeper study of Old Testament predictions of the Messiah, distribute copies of the “Old Testament Prophecies” exercise from the activity page. Have learners work in study pairs or triads to complete as indicated. After an appropriate amount of time, reconvene for whole-class comparisons of conclusions.

Next, divide the class in half. Designate one of the halves to be **Wise Men’s Group** and the other half to be **Herod’s Group**. If the halves are too large for the exercise to follow, form smaller groups with identical names.

Distribute handouts (you prepare) of the following questions to the **Wise Men’s Group**: 1—What kind of “GPS” did the wise men rely on? 2 —What was their physical posture in worship? 3—What gifts accompanied their worship? (*Answers are in Matthew 2:9, 11a, and 11b, respectively.*) Concurrently, distribute handouts (you prepare) of the following questions to **Herod’s Group**: 1—What instructions did Herod give the wise men? 2 —What was Herod’s stated motive in giving those instructions? 3—What was his real motive? (*Answers are in Matthew 2:8a, 8b, and 13, respectively.*)

When groups finish, check for accuracy during whole-class discussion. Use the commentary to correct misconceptions and fill in gaps. Ask students to summarize the similarities and differences among the motives of the wise men and King Herod.

Make a transition to Into Life by saying, “Let’s see what the wise men can teach us regarding the connection between *who* to worship and the *why* and *how* of that worship.”

Into Life

Write these two phrases on the board as column headers:

What’s So / So What?

In whole-class discussion, ask, “What are the stated facts regarding the wise men’s worship of Jesus?” Jot responses under the *What’s so* column. After there are no more responses, continue by pointing to each of those responses in turn as you ask, “How might this be one model for our worship?” Jot replies under the *So what?* header. Make sure that the concepts of joy, humility, and sacrifice are addressed in both

columns. Close by singing “We Three Kings”; distribute handouts of lyrics so class members can sing all five stanzas.

ACTIVITY PAGE

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