

A Regal Response to Holy Light

Bible Background • MATTHEW 2:7–15

Printed Text • MATTHEW 2:7–15 | Devotional Reading • EXODUS 1:8–22

Aim for Change

By the end of this lesson, we will EXPLAIN how the wise men point to the universality of Jesus' mission, GRIEVE for those who suffer innocently due to the world's brokenness and sin, and JOIN with peoples of every ethnicity and culture to worship Jesus, the King of all nations.

In Focus

Rather than exchanging gifts, Kathy's family went on a Christmas tour of the Holy Lands, beginning in Egypt. They did all the touristy things—seeing the great pyramids, sailing up the Nile River, and even getting on camels for pictures. Their tour guide focused on the time the Israelites were enslaved in Egypt, but Kathy was thinking of Mary, Joseph, and young Jesus seeking sanctuary here while King Herod was carrying out his plan to murder any potential rival king. Kathy followed the tour guide through a market teeming with brown and black people, some matching her own skin tone. She thought that the white people often portrayed in Bible art would surely stand out in a crowd like this. A more historically accurate portrayal of the holy family would blend right in, here in Mother Africa.

Kathy's son, Stephen, had begun saying that Jesus was only for white people. "Not only was Jesus first imposed on us by slave owners," Stephen would say, "He also doesn't seem to care about black issues like police brutality, colorism, or badly funded schools." Here in Egypt, though, Kathy could see that idea was wrong. Jesus was no "white Savior"; He was everyone's Savior. That night she shared her photos and thoughts with Stephen. Kathy's trip to Egypt and Israel made her feel even closer to Jesus.

What happens when we view historic happenings through only one cultural lens? How do we make sure we are not blind to the unique perspectives of other cultures' lenses?

Keep in Mind

"They entered the house and saw the child with his mother, Mary, and they bowed down and worshiped him. Then they opened their treasure chests and gave him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh" (Matthew 2:11, NLT).

Words You Should Know

A. Enquired Diligently (Matthew 2:7) akriboo (Gk.)—To perfectly follow a law; to thoroughly understand a subject

B. Young Child (v. 11) paidion (Gk.)—The life stage after infancy

Say It Correctly

Antipater. an-TEE-pah-tare.

Magus. MAY-gus.

KJV

Matthew 2:7 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.

NLT

Matthew 2:7 Then Herod called for a private meeting with the wise men, and he learned from them the time when the star first appeared.

8 Then he told them, "Go to Bethlehem and search carefully for the child. And when you find him, come back and tell me so that I can go and worship him, too!"

9 After this interview the wise men went their way. And the star they had seen in the east guided them to Bethlehem. It went ahead of them and stopped over the place where the child was.

10 When they saw the star, they were filled with joy!

11 They entered the house and saw the child with his mother, Mary, and they bowed down and worshiped him. Then they opened their treasure chests and gave him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh.

12 When it was time to leave, they returned to their own country by another route, for God had warned them in a dream not to return to Herod.

13 After the wise men were gone, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream. "Get up! Flee to Egypt with the child and his mother," the angel said. "Stay there until I tell you to return, because Herod is going to search for the child to kill him."

14 That night Joseph left for Egypt with the child and Mary, his mother,

15 and they stayed there until Herod's death. This fulfilled what the Lord had spoken through the prophet: "I called my Son out of Egypt."

The People, Places, and Times

Herod. The Herod featured in today's Scripture passage is known as "Herod the Great." He was a descendant of Antipater, an Edomite who converted to Judaism in the 2nd century BC. An exceptionally cruel king, Herod ordered the murder of one of his wives, mother-in-law, brother-in-law, uncle, and at least three sons. Although the Jews did not like him because of his friendliness with the Romans, he brought enough stability to Galilee and Judea that he gained some independence from Rome for the Jewish people. He is also remembered as a great builder. His biggest achievement was renovating the second temple in Jerusalem, which was not completed until 68 years after his death.

Magi. The words “wise men,” translated Magi (singular: magus), refer to a group of men who may have studied the stars. Because the Bible says they came from the East, many scholars believe they were Babylonian astrologers. The wise men first come to Jerusalem because of a star, a special manifestation from God to indicate a Jewish king’s birth. They then come to Bethlehem following the star again and find Jesus. Tradition says there were three of them, but Scripture never gives a number. The idea that there were three of them comes from the number of gifts they offered to the Christ Child (v. 11).

Background

Matthew 2 opens with wise men coming from the East in search of the newborn King of the Jews. Although we are familiar with the nonbiblical story of three wise men, Scripture says that they were all from the East. To people of New Testament days, that would probably have been from Persia, modern-day Iran. This was a center of much belief in astrology. The Bible makes very clear that the study of horoscopes is wrong (Deuteronomy 4:19). It ascribes divine plans to the created stars and moon. Yet God uses His creation to unexpectedly bring people to Himself. In calling these Gentiles from far away, God showed that Christ came for us all.

The wise men were astrologers and saw some sort of unusual star (possibly a conjunction of planets) that indicated to them that a new king of the Jews was born. So they traveled to Jerusalem, the capital, where they expected to see this baby. They almost certainly arrived in a great caravan with many servants. Hearing that a new Jewish king has been born, Herod instantly knows this must be the Messiah. The jealous and power-hungry king asks his scholars where the Messiah was predicted to be born.

At-A-Glance

1. Foreigners Before a King (Matthew 2:7–8)
2. Foreigners Before the King (vv. 9-11)
3. The Messiah in a Foreign Land (vv. 13-15)

In Depth

1. Foreigners Before a King (Matthew 2:7–8)

The paranoid King Herod took no chances on a potential rival, even if it was just a baby. After Herod’s scholars told him where the Messiah was to be born, he has a private meeting with the wise men. He tells them to bring him back the news of the Messiah’s whereabouts after they find Him. Herod says this is so he can worship Him, too. Of course, Herod has no such intentions. We see in this story different responses to Jesus. In Herod, we see outright opposition. Even though Herod is king of the Jews, he does not rejoice at his promised Messiah’s birth. He sees Jesus, instead, as a rival, one who could take control away from him. Then we see the wise men—foreigners without much biblical understanding—and yet these were the ones who set aside everything else in their lives to truly know Him.

Herod knew a great deal about the Messiah. Why would anyone who knows about Jesus Christ, sit on the information rather than respond positively to it?

2. Foreigners Before the King (vv. 9-11)

After leaving Herod, the wise men continued their search. As they traveled, the star reappeared and guided them from Jerusalem to Bethlehem. By the supernatural light of that star, the wise men found the Perfect Light, Jesus.

Mary and Joseph were married and living in a house in Nazareth (Luke 2:39). When the wise men arrived, they immediately knelt and worshiped the holy Child. The wise men worshiped Christ before He performed any miracles, preached any sermons, or healed any sick. Their worship was based solely on who He was, not what

He did. They honored Him with special gifts worthy of His divine station (v. 11). We should all do as the wise men: find Jesus, accept Him as Lord and Savior, and worship Him!

The Magi did not listen to what King Herod told them to do. A higher authority spoke to them through a dream and told them not to return to Herod. God warned them and they obeyed His warning, returning home a different way.

Share about a time you had to disregard an authority figure to follow God's guidance instead.

3. The Messiah in a Foreign Land (vv. 13-15)

After the wise men departed, God also warned Joseph about Herod's plan. In a dream, Joseph learned that Herod was searching for the child with the intent of killing Him. Joseph was instructed to pack up and move his family to Egypt. When Herod found out that the wise men were aware of his scheme and had left the country by another route, he was furious (v. 16). He ordered his soldiers to go to Bethlehem and kill every male two years old and under. This tragedy fulfilled another prophecy. The destruction caused by sinful, evil humans sets a sorrowful stage that God will soon turn to joy (Jeremiah 31).

Joseph follows the angel's directions and moves to Egypt, returning home only when Herod was dead. Because Jesus' childhood followed this journey, Matthew notes that He fulfills yet another prophecy of coming "Out of Egypt."

How have you noticed God's protection in your life as you followed His direction?

Search the Scriptures

1. What information did Herod want from the wise men? Why did King Herod say he wanted it? (Matthew 2:8)
2. How did Jesus' flight to Egypt help prove He is the Messiah? (v. 15)

Discuss the Meaning

1. Both the Magi and Herod have a high social standing in their lands. Why is their reaction to Jesus' birth so different?
2. Even though God tells His people not to trust astrology, He uses His creation to communicate with the Magi. What does this reveal about God's nature?

Liberating Lesson

The Enemy is happy to remind us of any excuse to cut ourselves off from one another, creating distance and mistrust between groups that could enjoy unity. Believers must work to bring healing and reconciliation in the areas of racial, cultural, and religious division. How does the Gospel especially resonate with minority, refugee, immigrant, or foreign voices?

Application for Activation

The Magi came to Jesus and worshiped their way, by bowing to the ground and giving gifts. Are you welcoming to other cultures' worship traditions in your church? Jesus' family left their ancestral land and lived in another country. How would you continue to worship God and be a witness of the Gospel in a foreign country? Work with a local charity or immigrant population to invite immigrants to lead a worship service at your church.

Follow the Spirit

What God wants me to do:

Remember Your Thoughts

Special insights I have learned:

More Light on the Text

Matthew 2:7Then 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.

Having discovered where this King would be born, Herod called the wise men unto him “privily,” or secretly. From other usages of the word (Matthew 1:19; Acts 16:37), we can infer that the word implies trying to avoid a public outcry. Jerusalem is already in an uproar over the Magi’s arrival (Matthew 2:3). We read further that he inquired of them the exact or specific time of the star’s appearance. Why does he want to know the time the star appears? The Magi understood that the star had risen at the time of the child’s birth. By Herod’s later acts, we can surmise that the Magi saw the star up to two years prior (v. 17). The verb “enquired diligently” (Gk. akriboo, ah-kree-BOW-oo) is related to the adverb “diligently” (Gk. akribos, ah-kree-BOCE) in v. 8. It is related to ideas of perfectly following a law or thoroughly understanding a subject. Instead of spending his efforts to thoroughly understand the Messianic prophecy, which he knew, Herod diligently listens to what the Magi tell him so that he can destroy the baby he perceives as a rival to his throne. At least to some extent, Herod believes the Magi are tipping him off to the coming of the Messiah. This is an event the Jews have been eagerly anticipating for centuries. Now Herod learns that the Messiah has come and instead of joy, this fills him with murderous dread. Note also that Herod wants to get the child before He could be of any physical or political threat to him. He is now going to use these men of wisdom to do his dirty work.

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.

The wise men leave Herod for the six-mile journey south from Jerusalem to Bethlehem. Herod’s instruction to “search diligently” is disrupted by the star, which at this point truly becomes a guiding star for the first time. The reappearance of the star confirms the correctness of looking for the child in Bethlehem, and it guides the wise men to the specific location. An important word here is the Greek word proago (pro-AH-go), which is translated “went before.” The star is now seen as a princely messenger leading an audience into the presence of a powerful king. They were led by the light, not by their own wisdom.

We are told that the sight of the star made the Magi “[rejoice] with exceeding great joy.” The word “rejoice” comes from the Greek word chairo (KHYE-ro) which means “to be cheerful or well-off” (cf. Philippians 4:8). Not only does Matthew use the word chairo, but he adds sphodra. The Greek word sphodra (SFOD-rah) is translated in the King James Version as “exceeding.” As used here, it really means violently or vehemently. As if these were not enough, Matthew also adds another Greek word, megas (MEH-gass) which literally means big. Translated, they were high in the spirit or they became loud in a mighty way.

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.

Just as persistent a tradition as there only being three wise men is the tradition that they were at the stable the very night Jesus was born. Some traditions celebrate Epiphany or Kings Day to remember the coming of the wise men, separating it from the shepherds coming the night He was born. Still, this is observed on January 5, which allows only twelve days for the Magi's travels. This verse gives evidence that this was not so. The Magi enter a house (Gk. oikia, oy-KEE-ah), which refers to the abode or residence of the family— there is no animal manger in sight. Further, it has been almost two years since Jesus' birth. He is a "young child" (Gk. paidion, pie-DEE-on), rather than the "babe" (Gk. brephos, BREH-foce) the shepherds met (Luke 2:16). Although paidion can be used to refer to infants (Luke 1:59; 2:21), it is more widely used to refer to young children who can walk and talk (Matthew 11:16; Luke 9:47).

It was customary in the ancient East for those who came into the presence of royalty or who sought the favor of the monarch, to present gifts. For example, the Queen of Sheba brought a small fortune to Solomon when she came to hear his wisdom (1 Kings 10:1-2, 10). The "treasures" opened by the Magi were treasure chests containing their valuables. From these, they presented the child, King Jesus, with gifts that were prophetic symbols of the roles He would fulfill in His lifetime. The gold was a gift presented to royalty, thus symbolizing Jesus' role as the long-awaited King of the Jews, the Messiah. The word for "frankincense" (Gk. libanos, LEE-bah-noce) refers to a tree and the incense made from its sap. The gift of frankincense suggested the divinity or the priesthood of the Child, as it was an incense burned on altars. Myrrh (Gk. smurna, SMOORnah) is similarly extracted from tree resin and was an ointment used for burial in many African traditions. Myrrh is a much-valued spice or scented oil that is still used in many parts of Africa and Asia. Myrrh suggested the role Jesus would play as the One who would die for the sins of the world (John 1:29; 11:49-52). Note that while the Magi now physically opened their treasures, they would not have been opening up these treasures if they had not first opened their hearts to God's revelation. They gave Him gifts that were valuable to them and honored Him, as we should in our worship.

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

This verse deals with the intervention of the Lord into the wise men's lives to save them from serving as instruments of Herod's work. We are told that the Lord spoke to them. There was a divine intimation that gave them firmness to deal with the business. For the first time in all of these signs and their long journeying, God speaks directly to the Magi. God tells them not to return to Herod. Going back to Herod would have been appropriate according to human thought. It would have been in accord with their perception of themselves as men of honor. Further, since Herod was king, he might have rewarded them immensely for their work. But God gave them a strict injunction. When God gives instructions, they must be followed.

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:

For a second time, the angel of the Lord appears to Joseph in a dream. Joseph is just as faithful to obey God's message this time as he was the last. Abraham went by faith even though he didn't know where God was leading, so Joseph is going by faith even though he doesn't know how long the journey will last. While in Egypt, Joseph must always be ready for God's word to come, telling him to return to the homeland. Again the word "until" indicates a continued need to look and listen closely for God's guidance (cf. v. 9). For secrecy, they leave "by night," though not necessarily that very night.

The Holy Family must leave for Egypt because Herod wants to “destroy” (Gk. *apollumi*, ah-POLL-loo-me) Jesus. This word can have a variety of meanings. Throughout Luke 15, the word is used to mean “lost,” but in other contexts, the word clearly has more dire connotations. The Pharisees will also want to “destroy” Jesus (Matthew 12:14), a plot that culminates in His crucifixion. Herod here wishes to kill Jesus. He sets himself up directly at odds with Christ and His mission. Christ has come to free us from such tyranny, promising that “the Son of man is come to save that which was lost [*apollumi*]” (Matthew 18:11).

Egyptian territory at that time was a journey of at least 200 miles from Bethlehem. God specifically tells Joseph to go there instead of any closer destination. While going north to Syria was possible, it might have been a dangerous path because it went through Jerusalem, where Herod lived. The holy family could have also gone west to the Mediterranean Sea and set sail as far away from Herod as they wished, but that is not what God instructed. Egypt at this time, while out of Herod’s jurisdiction was still under Roman rule, much like Judea except that the province reported more directly to the emperor than Herod did. By fleeing to Egypt, however, Jesus would fulfill prophecy Matthew tells us (v. 15).

Again Joseph displays his obedience to God. He gives prompt, diligent care and protection to Mary and Jesus. He sets a living example of how to respond to God’s commands. His example remains as a model of the importance of exhibiting righteous behavior, for church members before each other and especially for Christian parents before their children.

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.

Matthew’s use of Hosea 11:1 as a messianic prophecy causes questions to arise just as they did for Isaiah’s prophecy about Emmanuel. The context must drive our interpretation of the text. The prophet Hosea was speaking to the nations of Israel and Judah soon before the Northern Kingdom’s fall to the Assyrians. He warned of the Assyrian invasion and the Babylonian exile. After speaking of the sorrow the Israelites will endure in exile, Hosea 11 begins with God’s words to His people. He reminds them of their history together, of His great love for them that brought them out of slavery in Egypt. “Out of Egypt have I called my son,” was not a prophetic prediction of the future. It had already happened. In the next line of Hosea, God laments that even after He brought them out of Egyptian slavery, the Israelites insisted on worshipping Baal in Canaan (Hosea 11:2). In taking this verse as messianic prophecy, surely Matthew does not mean to imply that this whole section of Hosea describes the Messiah’s coming.

Rather, the connection that God is revealing through Matthew’s Gospel is that Jesus is the perfect embodiment of Israel. Just as Israel came out of Egypt, so Jesus comes out of Egypt. Further, just as the patriarchs and Israel had to flee from the threat of death, so did Jesus. Moving from place to place repeatedly, especially at a young age, makes one feel they do not have a home. Because of this, Jesus knows the nation’s sorrows. This is another way that Christ fulfills Isaiah’s prophecy of being “acquainted with grief” (Isaiah 53:3) and how He accomplishes the Messiah’s role of living our temptations so that He can be a compassionate High Priest (Hebrews 2:18). Jesus’ personal history mirrors Israel’s cultural history. Matthew sets up a contrast in highlighting the Hosea prophecy, too. Unlike Israel as Hosea goes on to describe them, Jesus does not worship idols and suffer the punishment of exile. Jesus follows God in the way Israel was supposed to. While Jesus’ experiences mirror those of Israel, His reaction to the experiences is perfect. Because He perfectly endured all these trials, He is worthy to be our Savior.

Daily Bible Readings

MONDAY

Midwives Frustrate Pharaoh's Decree
(Exodus 1:15–22)

TUESDAY

God Answers Solomon's Dream
(1 Kings 3:5–14)

WEDNESDAY

Insight into the Meaning of Dreams
(Daniel 1:8–17)

THURSDAY

In Christ No Divisions Allowed
(Galatians 3:25–29)

FRIDAY

Gracious Ruler to Come from Bethlehem
(Micah 5:1–5)

SATURDAY

Successful Return from Egypt
(Matthew 2:19–23)

SUNDAY

Safe in the Midst of Danger
(Matthew 2:7–15)