

Sought

God provides salvation to those seeking Him.

Searching for treasure intrigues us. Take, for example, the program *Antiques Roadshow*. With its appraisals of potentially valuable items, the show appeals to viewers as part history lesson, part adventure, and part treasure hunt.

What kind of treasure would motivate you to invest your time and resources into a search? Throughout history, religious objects have been a common focus of treasure hunters. For example, the legendary search for the holy grail, the cup used at the last supper, has captured people's attention for centuries. The first grail story appeared in written form in the twelfth century. According to legend, the grail became the principal quest of King Arthur and his knights. The mystery of the grail as a source of spiritual experience has continued into more recent times in the literature of C. S. Lewis.

Another quest for an artifact revolves around the ark of the covenant. The tabernacle craftsman Bezalel constructed this wooden chest and overlaid it with pure gold in accordance with the Lord's design (Ex. 37:1-9). The ark has been the subject of documentaries and movies like *Raiders of the Lost Ark*. It apparently disappeared when the Babylon conquered Jerusalem and destroyed the temple in 587-86 BC (2 Kings 25:1-17). Some Bible scholars associate its disappearance with Ezekiel's report that "the glory of the LORD" departed the temple when Jerusalem fell (Ezek. 10:1-22). What ultimately happened to the ark remains a mystery.

What motivates people to invest great time, expense, and energy into searching for material treasures that may never be found? Is it a longing for material wealth, to uncover history, or, in the case of religious relics, to establish a closer relationship to God? While such searches naturally intrigue us, objects have no bearing on being right with God. What matters is our earnest desire to encounter God Himself.

The wise men in Matthew 2 recognized the importance of a personal encounter with the newborn King. Thus, they began an arduous journey to find Him. Guided by the star God placed in the sky, they eventually fulfilled their quest in Bethlehem. The wise men's experience reminds us that God still guides those who earnestly seek Him. Seekers today can still meet the living Lord and find the greatest treasure of all—eternal salvation.

UNDERSTAND THE CONTEXT

MATTHEW 1:1–2:12

Several themes stand out in the first two chapters of Matthew. First, Matthew emphasized that Jesus' birth fulfilled Old Testament Scripture. Second, he focused on who Jesus is—the Christ or Messiah. Third, by including persons whom first-century society viewed as inferior in his genealogy, especially women, Matthew showed that Jesus came to save all people. Finally, Matthew contrasted Christ the true King with the tyrannical King Herod.

Because Matthew wrote to a largely Jewish audience, the fulfillment of Old Testament prophecy was vital for explaining Jesus' mission. Two such quotations appear in this passage. In 1:23, Matthew quoted from Isaiah 7:14 as a prophecy of Jesus' virginal conception. Then, in 2:6 he cited Micah 5:2, a prediction of the Messiah's birth in Bethlehem.

Next, Matthew focused on Jesus' identity (1:1). The name *Jesus* emphasizes His role as Savior (1:21), and He is also the Christ, the Greek equivalent of the Hebrew term "Messiah." Further, He is called the Son of Abraham and the Son of David. Matthew also called attention to Jesus as Immanuel, a designation meaning "God with us" (1:23). With these passages, Matthew was emphasizing Jesus' humanity, deity, and identity as the Messiah.

In Jesus' genealogy (1:1-17), Matthew established Him as a legitimate descendant of David, thus supporting His claim as the Messiah (Jer. 23:5-6). He arranged this genealogy into three sets of fourteen generations (1:17). His pattern may be an example of *gematria*, which conveys a message by assigning numerical values to the letters of the alphabet. The numerical value for the name *David* in Hebrew is fourteen, suggesting again that Matthew may have been highlighting Jesus' Davidic lineage.

Matthew's genealogy also included women and Gentiles. He specifically mentioned four women in addition to Mary: Tamar, Rahab, Ruth, and Uriah's wife. Tamar's ethnic identity is unclear, while Rahab lived in Jericho when Joshua conquered the city. Ruth was a Moabitess, and Bathsheba, Uriah's wife, most likely was a Hittite. These four also have been seen as representing the sinners Jesus came to seek and to save. Like Mary, they also have been viewed by some as unchaste. Matthew, though, clearly refuted Mary's infidelity by focusing on Jesus' virginal conception (1:18-25).

Finally, Matthew contrasted Christ with evil King Herod (2:1-12). The treasures the wise men brought were typically associated with royalty, but they recognized the true King with their arduous search. In contrast, Herod only pretended devotion (2:8) and sought to destroy this One he considered a threat (2:13).

EXPLORE THE TEXT

THE ARRIVAL (Matt. 2:1-3)

After Jesus' birth, wise men followed a star that led them to Jerusalem. While there, they inquired about the birth of a new King who would rule the Jews. Herod was troubled by the news, which also troubled all of Jerusalem.

VERSE 1

After Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea in the days of King Herod, wise men from the east arrived in Jerusalem,

The events of Matthew 2:1-12 occurred sometime **after Jesus' birth**, though we don't know precisely how long. Because Herod died in 4 BC and because Jesus' birth occurred approximately two years before Herod ordered the massacre of children in Bethlehem (Matt. 2:16), Jesus' birth has been dated around 6 or 5 BC.

The **King Herod** in this narrative was Herod the Great. He became ruler of Judea in 40 BC and had squelched all opposition by 37 BC. Herod possessed wealth and administrative skills. Even his enemies admired his building projects, including a remodeled temple in Jerusalem. Herod, however, loved power, imposed heavy taxes, and resented how many Jews viewed him as a usurper to the throne. In the final years of his reign, he suffered an illness that intensified his paranoia. His fits of rage and jealousy motivated Herod to kill his wife Mariamne, close associates, and at least two of his sons.

Mary gave birth to Jesus in **Bethlehem of Judea**. This village, whose name means "house of bread," is located about five miles southwest of Jerusalem and played an important role in Old Testament history. Jacob's wife Rachel died and was buried on the way to Bethlehem (Gen. 35:19). Various events in the Book of Ruth occurred in and around Bethlehem (Ruth 1:1-2,19,22; 2:4; 4:11). This humble village also served as David's hometown and the place of his anointing (1 Sam. 16:1-13). It was appropriate then that God chose Bethlehem for the birth of the messianic King from David's line! From the "house of bread" came the Bread of life, who satisfies the deepest spiritual hunger of all who seek Him (John 6:32-35).

Unfortunately, we cannot identify the **wise men** ("Magi," NIV) with precision. The term *magi* is essentially a transliteration of the Greek word into English. Centuries before Christ's birth, the word designated a priestly class of Medes who possessed the power to interpret dreams. Later the term loosely identified a variety of individuals interested in such things as dreams, magic, and astrology.

Some scholars view these seekers as a combination of philosophers and priests who mixed astronomical observation with astrological speculation. They possessed prominence in their homeland, where they played both political and religious roles. The fact that God led these men to visit His Son reveals His desire to save Gentiles from their futile religions. Their visit also confirms that leaders in other religions and lands recognized Jesus as the expected King. Some scholars also believe that the wise men, in an extraordinary display of faith, acted in response to a fragment of Scripture that their people had received centuries earlier through Balaam (Num. 24:17).

The tradition that the wise men were kings developed as far back as the early third century. The idea that they numbered three probably derived from the mention of their gifts. By the end of the sixth century, the names Melkon (later Melchior), Balthasar, and Gaspar had been attached.

Just as we can't identify the wise men with certainty, we also don't know for sure where they came from. Matthew only recorded that they arrived **from the east**. They may have traveled from Babylon, Persia, or the Arabian Desert. Thus their journey may have taken as long as two years.

Many Jews, like Ezekiel, had been exiled to Babylon. Later after the Persian King Cyrus allowed captives to return to their homelands, many Jews chose to remain in Persia. Thus, these wise men could have known something about Jewish messianic expectations. Whatever the specifics, their search brought them to Jerusalem where they encountered Herod the Great.

VERSE 2

saying, “Where is he who has been born king of the Jews? For we saw his star at its rising and have come to worship him.”

The Roman Senate granted Herod the title “King of Judea,” and his paranoid rages led him to murder members of his own family to protect his reign. Little wonder then that distress overwhelmed him when men arrived from a distant land stating their intent to **worship** a newborn King of the Jews! The wise men reported that they had seen this King's star **at its rising** (“in the east,” KJV; “when it rose,” NIV, ESV). The translation *at its rising* might better explain how God directed the wise men's attention to this new celestial body.

The term **star** can designate various astronomical phenomena, including planetary conjunctions, comets, or meteors. Matthew reported that this star moved through the sky to pinpoint Jesus' precise location. A devoted student of the Old Testament, Matthew also alluded to Numbers 24:17 and the fulfillment of God's prophecy through Balaam.

The wise men identified *worship* as their purpose in seeking this King. The Greek word specifically signifies bowing down or prostrating oneself to show

reverence to someone of superior rank. Given the wise men's background, such a purpose is remarkable. Whether they were aware of it or not, God was directing the search of these Gentiles.

VERSE 3

When King Herod heard this, he was deeply disturbed, and all Jerusalem with him.

When Herod learned of the wise men's search for a new King, this king of Judea **was deeply disturbed** ("was troubled," KJV, ESV). The Greek term refers to inward commotion, agitation, or dread. Herod's great fear led to the agitation of **all Jerusalem**. You may be familiar with the expression, "When momma's not happy, nobody's happy." While some Bible scholars believe the phrase *all Jerusalem* refers primarily to the religious leaders, no doubt the larger population realized that Herod's paranoia would translate to more cruelty and violence (Matt. 2:16-18). Jesus' rejection by leaders in Jerusalem at His birth foreshadows a similar repulsion that led to His crucifixion.

EXPLORE FURTHER

Read the article titled "Worship" on pages 1670-1672 of the *Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary, Revised and Expanded*. The article defines *worship* as "the human response to the self-revelation of the triune God" and lists three elements of worship (p. 1671). Which of these elements do you think characterized the wise men's worship? Explain your answer.

THE DIRECTION (Matt. 2:4-8)

Herod gathered Jewish scholars to find out where the Messiah would be born. They pointed to Micah's prophecy and identified Bethlehem as the promised birthplace. Herod then conveyed this information to the wise men. He also asked that they report back so that he could worship the King too.

VERSE 4

So he assembled all the chief priests and scribes of the people and asked them where the Messiah would be born.

Troubled by news of a recently born King of the Jews, Herod began to act. First, he needed to know where this King would be born, so he **assembled** the Jewish **scribes** and **chief priests**. During the Babylonian exile, the

scribes became the experts in God's written Word. They copied, preserved, and taught it to the people. By New Testament times, a professional group of scribes had emerged. They interpreted the Mosaic law and ruled in cases where people were accused of breaking that law. The chief priests functioned as heads over the twenty-four main orders of priests who lived in Jerusalem and the surrounding area. The majority of the scribes were Pharisees, while the chief priests belonged to the Sadducee party.

Since the wise men had asked for information about the location of the "king of the Jews" (Matt. 2:2), Herod sought the birthplace of **the Christ** ("the Messiah," NIV). The title *Messiah* is the Hebrew equivalent of the Greek title *Christ*. Both words mean "anointed one." Herod apparently equated the title "king of the Jews" with the title *Christ*. Although he attempted to identify with the Jews, even remodeling the Jerusalem temple, Herod revealed his ignorance of Scripture by seeking the help of scholars.

VERSES 5-6

"In Bethlehem of Judea," they told him, "because this is what was written by the prophet: And you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah: Because out of you will come a ruler who will shepherd my people Israel."

The religious leaders gave Herod what he needed in regard to the location of Christ's birth. These students of the Scripture recognized Micah 5:2 as a messianic prophecy and **Bethlehem of Judea** as the Messiah's birthplace. Nevertheless, they later opposed Jesus' teachings, proving that accurate knowledge of Scripture does not guarantee a right relationship with God.

The leaders identified Bethlehem's location as *Judea*, whereas Micah's prophecy placed it in **Judah**. In Roman times, Judea, Galilee, and Samaria composed the three main geographical divisions of Palestine. The province of Judea varied in size as its political circumstances changed. However, it always included Jerusalem. The southern area of the promised land, formerly called Judah, first received the designation *Judea* after the Babylonian exile.

Matthew's Old Testament quotation depicted the Messiah as a **ruler** ("Governor," KJV) who also would **shepherd** ("rule," KJV) God's people. The Greek term translated *ruler* could be applied to any kind of leader. In Bible times, the leaders of God's people typically held one of three anointed offices: prophet, priest, or king. Prophets represented God and delivered His messages to the people. Priests represented the people to God and offered sacrifices to Him on their behalf. Matthew showed that Christ fulfilled the roles of both prophet and priest. But the Gospel of Matthew also places a great deal of emphasis on Jesus' leadership role as King.

As Ruler, the Messiah also would *shepherd* God's people. The image of a leader as a shepherd appears throughout the Old Testament (Num. 27:15-17; 1 Chron. 11:2; 17:6; Jer. 3:15; Ezek. 34:8). This imagery implies guidance, compassion, and pastoral care. The final phrase of Matthew 2:6 comes from 2 Samuel 5:2, which depicts godly shepherding as one of the roles assigned to Israelite kings. Whereas Old Testament kings often failed in that assignment (see Ezek. 34), the Messiah would carry it out perfectly.

In quoting 2 Samuel 5:2, Matthew also may have been contrasting the false shepherds of Israel who provided no true leadership (see Matt. 23:2-7) with Jesus as the only Good Shepherd who lays down His life for the sheep (John 10:11). He also may have been contrasting a paranoid ruler like King Herod and Jesus, the Self-giving Messiah.

VERSES 7-8

Then Herod secretly summoned the wise men and asked them the exact time the star appeared. He sent them to Bethlehem and said, "Go and search carefully for the child. When you find him, report back to me so that I too can go and worship him."

Why did Herod want to identify **the exact time** ("what time," KJV, ESV) of the star's appearance? The Greek term translated *exact time* is written in English as *chronos*. From this Greek word comes terms like *chronic* and *chronology*. Based on what we know of Herod's nature, he was already plotting to destroy Jesus (Matt. 2:16). Herod apparently assumed that the star had first appeared at the time of Jesus' birth. This king of Judea met **secretly** ("privily," KJV) with the wise men lest anyone suspect his real motives.

After determining Jesus' approximate age from the star, Herod sent the wise men on a mission to Bethlehem. He instructed them to **search carefully** ("search diligently," KJV, ESV) for this **child**. The king expected the wise men to make a thorough search. The Greek word translated *carefully* also describes Luke's investigation in his gospel (Luke 1:3). In addition, Herod required the wise men to **report** ("bring me word," KJV, ESV) on the Child's location.

The king cleverly concealed his true motivation. He expressed a hypocritical desire to **worship** or pay homage to this Ruler. The same Greek word appeared in Matthew 2:2 to identify the wise men's reason for seeking the Child. But Herod engaged in a self-serving strategy. Instead of truly wanting to worship the Messiah, the overly suspicious king wanted to eliminate Him.

Herod's dishonesty here highlights his violent and deceitful nature. He apparently believed that he had successfully deceived the wise men because he sent no attendant with them. This king could scarcely have imagined that God would intervene to confound his plan (Matt. 2:12).

Like the chief priests and scribes, some people misunderstand truth, while others like Herod want to silence it. The religious leaders could provide Herod with facts; however, their later response to Jesus demonstrated a failure to understand the true nature of His mission. He came not to reign as an earthly king but to save people from their sins (Luke 19:10).

EXPLORE FURTHER

Read the article titled “King, Christ as” on pages 962-963 of the *Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary, Revised and Expanded*. In what sense is Christ operating as a King in our world today?

THE DISCOVERY (Matt. 2:9-12)

As the wise men headed toward Bethlehem, the star reappeared and led them to the house where they found Jesus. The wise men worshiped Christ and presented Him with gold, frankincense, and myrrh. Having been warned not to revisit Herod, the wise men returned home by a different route.

VERSES 9-10

After hearing the king, they went on their way. And there it was—the star they had seen at its rising. It led them until it came and stopped above the place where the child was. When they saw the star, they were overwhelmed with joy.

After resuming their journey, the wise men again saw the **star they had seen at its rising** (“star, which they saw in the east,” KJV; “star they had seen when it rose,” NIV). For the first time, however, Matthew reported the star’s movement. We do not know whether it had moved previously. If not, its lack of movement may explain why the wise men stopped in Jerusalem. They may have observed the star above Judea and assumed that the ruler would be born in the Jewish capital.

In any case, the movement of the star affirms its divine origin. While attempts to associate this star with various astronomical phenomena prove intriguing, God obviously placed it in the sky at this specific time to lead these worshipers to the Messiah. Its appearance was a supernatural event.

The moving star directed the wise men to **the place where the child was** (“where the young child was,” KJV). The term translated *child* can designate anyone from an infant to a half-grown boy. In Matthew 2:9, however, it differs from the Greek word for “baby” in Luke 2:12. The word that Luke

chose clearly refers to a newborn infant. So, the text indicates that Jesus was older than an infant when the wise men arrived.

When the star stopped above the Messiah's location, the wise men felt **overwhelmed with joy** ("rejoiced with exceeding great joy," KJV; "were overjoyed," NIV; "rejoiced exceedingly with great joy," ESV). This literal piling up of words accentuates the intensity of their joy. After their long, arduous journey, they had finally reached their destination. And as verse 11 reveals, that destination was not primarily a place, but a Person.

VERSE 11

Entering the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother, and falling to their knees, they worshiped him. Then they opened their treasures and presented him with gifts: gold, frankincense, and myrrh.

Following God's guidance through the star, the wise men found Jesus not in the stable, but in a **house**. The fact that the family had moved to a more permanent residence provides another indication of an interval since Jesus' birth. The wise men responded appropriately **by falling to their knees** ("fell down," KJV, ESV; "bowed down," NIV) and worshiping this Child.

The Greek verb rendered *falling to their knees* means "to fall from an erect to a prostrate position." The word **worshiped** also carries the sense of kneeling or prostrating oneself in reverence. Ancient people demonstrated this attitude and action in the presence of superiors.

The wise men demonstrated worship not only by prostrating themselves, but also with their **treasures**. Like King David in the Old Testament, the wise men's worship included something of value (see 2 Sam. 24:24). The word for *treasures* refers to valuables or items associated with wealth. The term can also designate the receptacle or repository in which valuables are kept.

Offering gifts was especially important in the ancient East when approaching an individual of superior rank (Gen. 43:11; 1 Kings 10:2). The wise men gifted Christ with **gold, frankincense, and myrrh**—gifts fit for royalty. Gold, then as now, was prized for its beauty and value. Obtained from the bark of certain trees in the balsam family, frankincense is a glittering, odorous gum that was used in making perfume for the tabernacle's most holy place (Ex. 30:34-36). Myrrh, a highly valued spice and perfume used for anointing oil and embalming, came from a tree indigenous to Arabia and a few other places.

Looking back, we can recognize symbolism in these gifts that the wise men probably could not see: gold suggests royalty, incense relates to Christ's divinity, and myrrh represents His death and burial. In addition, these gifts

likely provided needed finances when Herod's search for the Child forced them to flee to Egypt for a time (Matt. 2:13-15).

VERSE 12

And being warned in a dream not to go back to Herod, they returned to their own country by another route.

God's guidance by a star brought the wise men to the Messiah. Now, His guidance in a **dream** led them home by an alternate route. In the dream, God warned the travelers against reporting to Herod. In both the Old and New testaments, God revealed His plans and purposes through dreams. Although God forbade the Israelites from using the divining practices of the surrounding nations, He sometimes communicated through dreams. The Lord, however, also provided a test by which to validate the authenticity of the dreamer, as well as the prophet (Deut. 13:1-5).

Biblical scholars have identified three kinds of dreams in Scripture. The most complex type required an interpreter. For example, King Nebuchadnezzar's dreams in Daniel 2 and 4 could not be understood without the Lord's revelation. A second kind used symbolism but may or may not have required an interpreter. Joseph's dreams (Gen. 37:1-11) fit this category. The third type lacked symbolism and was clearly understood. The wise men's dream and Joseph's dream about fleeing to Egypt (2:13) fit this category.

The wise men obeyed God's warning and did not return to Herod. These foreigners took a risk in disobeying a king, but they actually chose to obey a far greater King. Obviously they were more awed of God than of an earthly ruler (see Acts 4:13-20).

Jesus can be found by those seeking Him. In today's verses, even unlikely devotees recognized this One born into obscurity as the true King of Israel. This Child born under suspicions of illegitimacy (see Matt. 1:18-19) was truly God's legitimate Appointee. While Jewish religious leaders missed God's Messiah, Gentiles sought Him out. Wise people today still seek this King of kings and receive His salvation.

EXPLORE FURTHER

Read the article titled "Salvation" on pages 1403-1404 of the *Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary, Revised and Expanded*. God still offers salvation freely to all who accept Jesus as their Lord and Savior. Like Herod, are we seeking to exalt ourselves or, like the wise men, are we seeking to exalt the Lord? What evidence in your life supports your answer?