

The Magi Pay Obeisance to Jesus: Pipto Proskuneo: They “Throw Themselves Down & Worship Him,” Presentation of Gifts: Gold Frankincense, & Myrrh, an Endowment of Great Wealth, Matt 2:11; Gabriel Warns Magi to Ignore Herod & Return to Parthia, 2:12a

The words “fell down” are one word in the Greek, the aorist active participle of the verb **πίπτω** (*piptō*). This word is defined generally “to fall down” but here it is in the context of worship, the aorist active indicative of **προσκυνέω** (*proskuneō*) which gives *piptō* a more emphatic application.

The passage mentions the verb worship in verse 2 where the Magi tell Herod they “have come to worship Him, the “King of the Jews.” I mentioned in our study of verse 2 that the verb *piptō* also occurs in verse 11: “they fell down to worship Him.”

A gentleman in our congregation whose Bible is a German translation, mentioned to me that the word it uses to translate *piptō* actually means “to throw oneself down.” I was curious when he told me this of what the exegesis of the word *piptō* in verse 11 would reveal. Well, consider these references:

πίπτω. Outside the New Testament. From the basic meaning “to fall,” “to fall down” (Homer, *Iliad*; Hesiodus, *Opera et Dies*) there developed several different possibilities of use. When the reference is to men the fall may often be intentional, i.e., “to throw oneself,” Homer, *Iliad*, 13, 742, “to throw oneself down,” Euripides, *Hecuba*, 787. (p. 161)

In the New Testament. In most of the instances in which men are said to fall in a literal sense, the reference is to casting themselves down, or intentional falling. ... the reference is to the worship which should be rendered to deity, also Matthew 2:11. [In contexts where *piptō* is used in association with *proskuneō* the former is used in the aorist participle while the latter is the finite verb.]¹ (p. 163)

πίπτω. Fall down, throw oneself down (and worship). The meaning *fall down, throw oneself down* (intentional falling) occurs 12 times in the context of “worship” (*προσκυνέω*). In six of these instances God is worshiped (1 Cor 14:25; Rev 4:10; 5:14; 7:11; 11:16; 19:4) and twice angels (Rev 19:10 and 22:8). The wise men *fall down* before the child and worship him (Matt 2:11). The devil says to Jesus: “if you *fall down* and worship me” (4:9).²

πίπτω. In the Bible ... sometimes the word refers to a fall. Usually one falls on one’s face to venerate someone; directed toward God, this prostration is an act of adoration (Matt. 2:11).³

πίπτω. To fall. Of persons, meaning to fall down or prostrate, used in an absolute sense. Joined with *proskuneō*, to prostrate, worship (Matt 2:11).⁴

¹ Wilhelm Michaelis, “πίπτω,” in *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, eds. Gerhard Kittel and Gerhard Friedrich, trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1968), 6:161; 163.

² Horst Balz and Gerhard Schneider, eds., *Exegetical Dictionary of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1993), 3:90.

³ Ceslas Spicq, *Theological Lexicon of the New Testament*, trans. James D. Ernest (Peabody: Hendrickson Publishers, 1994), 3:105

⁴ Spiros Zodhiates, ed., *The Complete Word Study Dictionary: New Testament*, rev. ed. (Chattanooga: AMG Publishers, 1992), 1159.



The men who entered the quarters of Joseph and Mary were most likely Jews whose ancestors were among the deportees of the various dispersions covering the past 700 years. Accompanying them were Parthian Gentiles who had been converted to Judaism by the centuries-long influence of the Empire's Jewish population.

Again we find the paradox of Gentiles recognizing Jesus as the Messiah while Palestinian Jews, including the theological hierarchy of priests and scribes, have ignored His presence for over a year.

And please note before whom they throw themselves down and worship. They go right past Mary and worship the Child. They did not say, "Madam, how are you," or "by your leave," nothing. They knew the true Celebrity in the room and it was Jesus and "they threw themselves down prostrate and worshipped Him."

After having paid to the Lord proper obeisance, the Magi followed a custom of presenting gifts to royalty. This was not unusual except in the extreme intrinsic value each gift possessed. They were gold, frankincense, and myrrh:

They come, eastern fashion, with full hands, as befits those who enter into the presence of a king. The gifts would be products of the givers' country, or in high esteem and costly there.⁵

Each of these gifts has both material and theological implications:

1. **Gold (χρυσός *chrusos*):** According to Scofield, gold is a type that "represents deity in manifestation—divine glory."⁶ A broader discussion of the subject is provided by J. G. Baldwin:

CLASSICAL. The Greek word is a borrowing from the Near East, Hebrew *harus* [חָרָס], Assyrian *hurasu*. This may reflect the fact that gold was rare in Greece before Alexander the Great captured Persia's stores of gold, but in Egypt, West Arabia, in the mountains of Armenia and Persia gold was widely used and the goldsmith's art perfected from the third millennium B.C. (p. 95)

OLD TESTAMENT. Since royalty throughout the ages made use of gold for crowns and thrones, gold became an appropriate gift for a king (Psalm 72:15). Because gold is indestructible it becomes a symbol of great value and enduring worth (Proverbs 8:18f).

NEW TESTAMENT. In the New Testament the danger of covetousness and the association of idolatry colour the thinking of several writers. On the other hand, gold is presented to the infant Jesus (Matthew 2:11), and symbolizes lasting value (1 Corinthians 3:12) and heaven's perfection (Revelation 21:18, 21).⁷ (p. 96)

This excerpt documents the vast availability of gold in the Parthian Empire of 4 B.C. and available to the Magi to bestow on the infant Jesus. The gold represented the royalty and deity of Christ.

2. **Frankincense (λίβανος *libanos*):** This is a fragrant gum distilled from incisions in the tree. It was among the ingredients of the incense burned at the altar of incense in the tabernacle and temple. Its presentation by the Magi to the Lord was symbolic of His divinity and impeccability.

⁵ Alexander Balman Bruce, *The Expositor's Greek Testament*, (repr., Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1974), 1:73.

⁶ C. I. Scofield, ed., *The Scofield Study Bible: NASB*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 122n25:1ff.

⁷ J. G. Baldwin, "χρυσός," in *The New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology*, ed., Colin Brown (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1976), 2:95–96.



3. **Myrrh (σμύρνα *smurna*):** This is the gum of an Arabian tree, *Balsamodendron Myrrha*, used for embalming the dead; burnt as incense; used as an unguent or salve.⁸ It spoke of the destiny of the Christ Child in carrying out the salvation plan of God through substitutionary sacrifice.

Each of these gifts was given in abundance and each had high monetary value aside from their theological implications. The impact of these gifts cannot be overstated because of the part they played not only in preserving the Lord's life in the face of Herod's homicide of Bethlehem boys but also in the public ministry of Jesus.

The Magi had accomplished their year-long mission of finding the "King of the Jews," paying homage, and presenting Him with treasures, the noun **θησαυρός (*thēsauros*)**.

Thēsauros is in the plural here and means "treasures," but the size of the gifts allow it to take on a secondary meaning of "wealth."

The Magi's gifts (gold, incense and myrrh) were the most valuable, transportable and marketable items of the day, ideal for sustaining Mary and Joseph in another country.⁹

The Magi have given the Lord a life-long endowment that will serve to finance His ministry. However, its first and more urgent use will be to underwrite Him and His family's flight to Egypt ahead of Herod's macabre scheme to execute every child under the age of two in the city of Bethlehem.

Matthew 2:11 - When they entered the house they saw the Child with Mary His mother; they threw themselves down prostrate and worshipped Him. Then opening their treasures, they presented Him gifts of great wealth: gold, frankincense, and myrrh. (CWL)

v. 12 - And having been warned by God in a dream not to return to Herod, the magi left for their own country by another way. (NASB)

Verse 12 begins with the aorist passive participle of the verb **χρηματίζω (*chrēmatizō*)** which means to provide knowledge designed to provoke thought. The information was transmitted by means of a dream, one of four ways that believers received divine communication in the dispensation of Israel.

Other vehicles of communication were visions which occurred while a person was awake, angels who functioned in the angelic college of heralds, and theophanies, the visual appearance of Jesus Christ as a man, an angel, i.e., the "Angel of the Lord," or a phenomenon of nature, e.g., the burning bush, the pillar of a cloud, and the pillar of fire.

⁸ Henry George Liddell and Robert Scott, "σμύρνα," in *A Greek-English Lexicon*, rev., Henry Stuart Jones and Robert McKenzie (New York: Oxford University Press, 1968), 1620.

⁹ *NIV Archaeological Study Bible: An Illustrated Walk through Biblical History and Culture* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005), 1561n2:11.



Communication by means of a dream occurs while the person is asleep which indicates that the Magi bivouacked on the outskirts of Bethlehem following their audience with the Lord.

During the night they were warned by an aorist passive participle which is circumstantial, meaning it is dependent upon the main verb which is identified by the indicative mood. The action of the aorist participle precedes the action of the main verb which is the aorist active indicative of the verb ἀναχωρέω (*anachōreō*), translated “to leave,” “to depart,” “to withdraw,” or “to get out of Dodge.”

The reason this is a warning is because the Magi obviously plan to fulfill Herod’s mandate to report back to him the location of the Messiah: “... when you have found Him, assuming that you do, report back to me, for the purpose that I, too, may come and worship Him” (Matthew 2:8b).

The dream enables the Magi to realize that there is something sinister about Herod’s order to inform him of the Lord’s presence. If the Magi were to remain in Bethlehem awaiting Herod’s arrival they would soon discover that he would have sent instead a raiding party to commit regicide on the “King of the Jews,” Jesus Christ.

The Magi would have engaged them in defense of Jesus, an action that could very well have fomented war between Parthia and Rome. Instead, the Magi, aware that Herod is to be avoided, decide to immediately order a withdrawal of their entourage and return to Parthia by “another way.”

