

“Idolatry or Worship?”

Matthew 2

Over the last few weeks, during this Christmas series, we have focused on the reason *why* Jesus has come into the world. In the first week, looking at John 12:44-50, we heard Jesus teach the people that he came to save sinners. In that chapter, we saw a contrast between people who worshipped him and people who rejected him. Yet Jesus summons all to turn to him and find rescue. Then, Mark preached a message from Zaccheus, where Jesus states that he came to seek and to save the lost. He came to save individual sinners! Then last week, I preached from 1 Timothy 1, showing us that Jesus came to save foremost sinners.

All of this should sound like good news. We should be encouraged every week when we hear these truths. Jesus is gracious. Jesus is loving. Jesus is glorious! We are the worst sinners we know and yet Jesus is superior and gives everlasting grace. But, you know what? Many people hate this message. And the reason we hate it is because Jesus' rescue means that he comes to also confront and crush the idols we have in our lives. When I say “idol,” some can think that I'm talking about a carved statue of some sort. The biblical term doesn't simply refer to carved things. Idols refer to anything we value above God. We can idolize toys, money, cars, status, various pleasures. This goes back to Romans where Paul says we “worship and serve the creature above the Creator.” We give greater worth to these other things, and as a result, we end up serving these things.

So, if you live for money, you'll do many things to get more, save more, gain more – and you'll justify stinginess even if God commands you to give to others because your idol says to keep it. Or, think about last week's message about taking off our masks. Our masks hide our idols. But Jesus came to remove the masks. And, if we don't want to show our idols, we can become *very* angry.

This is actually what we see in Matthew 2. Here in this chapter, Matthew compares and contrasts Herod (and Jerusalem's) worship with that of the magi. And so we see that Jesus' Advent confronts our idols, and it's not always pretty when our idols are confronted. I want to bring that out because as we think about Christmas, we can tend to think of this nice picturesque scenario of a little baby in his mom's arms. Jesus came to save! But this baby was making war on our false worship – on things we love that are sinful. And to Herod, Jesus was the King coming to take away what Herod lived for. **The overarching point of this chapter is to reveal our idolatrous hearts and call us to true worship.** With that understanding, let's dive right into chapter 2.

1. King Herod's idolatrous heart is revealed due to Jesus' Kingship.

Verse 1 tells us that Jesus was born during the days of Herod the king. Now, the question is, “Who is this Herod?” There are several different “Herods” who were part of the same ruling dynasty. The one that Matthew mentions is the one who was king in Jerusalem, under Roman authority. This Herod is Herod the Great. Here's what a man named D.A. Carson writes of Herod the Great: Herod the Great. . . was born in 73 B.C. and was named king of Judea by the Roman Senate in 40 B.C. By 37 B.C. he had crushed, with the help of Roman forces, all opposition to his rule. . . . [He] was wealthy, politically gifted, intensely loyal, an excellent administrator, and clever enough to remain in the good graces of successive Roman emperors. His famine relief was superb and his building projects (including the temple, begun 20 B.C.) admired even by his foes. But he loved power, inflicted incredibly heavy taxes on the people, and resented the fact that many Jews considered him a usurper (Gaebelein, p. 84). Another commentator writes, “As he grew older, he became

increasingly paranoid about threats against his person and throne. He had numerous sons, wives, and others close to him put to death because he feared plots to overthrow him.

Here's Herod. Enter the magi. Now we see how the entrance of Jesus affects this earthly king.

a. Herod's idolatry is first exposed (vv. 2-4).

From an external perspective, Herod had the life. And this power and prestige seems to be what we would call Herod's "idol." I know "idol" sounds like a word describing little objects that we make to worship. But idolatry simply refers to ascribing greater worth to something than we would to God. Or, to put it another way, Herod's lower-case savior was power and prestige. His identity and satisfaction came from being king. That was his life.

We see that in his interaction with the magi. They come into the story and declare that they're looking for the King of the Jews. Wait a second! Didn't we just read that Herod was king? How can it be that another King is born? This message must have sent Herod into an internal fit. It confronted the idol of Herod's life. We see this by looking at verses 3-4: ³When Herod the king heard this, he was troubled, and all Jerusalem with him; ⁴and assembling all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Christ was to be born.¹

Look at how Matthew describes Herod's internal state. Herod was "troubled." This word for "troubled" means "to cause acute emotional distress or turbulence—to cause great mental distress."² Here's a man who brought together the funds to do temple work, but he really didn't care about a temple. Here's a man who had political and religious control, but he didn't care about the people's well-being nor did he care about their spiritual state. He cared about himself.

But this wasn't the case for only Herod. Matthew says that all Jerusalem was troubled by the news as well. I believe this means that a large representative group was troubled. The magi came to Jerusalem, and neither Herod nor the religious leaders want to go to search the Messiah out. They stay in Jerusalem – unmoved, but trembling internally.

So, Herod, not wanting anyone to take away from his power, he inquired from the chief priests and scribes as to where the Messiah was to be born. We know this isn't for any good reason. He wanted to keep his rule for as long as possible. Don't skip over the emotional tension these verses elicit. Here's a king who's given to fits of rage. Here are Sadducees who didn't really think much about the entrance of the Messiah. Here are Pharisees who thought the Messiah was going to come later. Enter wise men. Enter internal turmoil.

b. Herod's idolatry masked (vv. 7-8).

We really shouldn't be shocked by what Herod does next. Let's look at verses 7-8: ⁷Then Herod summoned the wise men secretly and ascertained from them what time the star had appeared. ⁸And he sent them to Bethlehem, saying, "Go and search diligently for the child, and when you have found him, bring me word, that I too may come and worship him."³

¹ [The Holy Bible: English Standard Version](#) (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2016), Mt 2:3–4.

² Johannes P. Louw and Eugene Albert Nida, *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament: Based on Semantic Domains* (New York: United Bible Societies, 1996), 314.

³ [The Holy Bible: English Standard Version](#) (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2016), Mt 2:7–8.

Herod is calculatedly deceptive. Here is someone who is wise like a serpent, but he's not innocent like a dove. He now knows where the Messiah is. But he wants to know the timing of the birth of the Messiah. So, he secretly calls the wise men to himself. Herod also calls the chief priests and scribes. Right here we see him trying to protect this little idol of control by trying to control the circumstances around him. Do you ever do that when things seem out of control? Here, Herod wants to know how old this baby is. He's narrowing down the information. He wants to know what he's dealing with?

Now Herod says to the wise men, "Go and search diligently for the child, and when you have found him, bring me word, that I too may come and worship him."⁴ How sickening. Herod's baldly lying. He wants the wise men to do the work for him. Of course he wants them to go and search carefully for the young Child. And, obviously he wants them to come back to him to tell him where this baby is. But he doesn't want to know so he can worship the child. He wants to know so that he can maintain his idolatry and get rid of the One worthy of worship.

Listen, Herod knows he ought to worship this King, but Herod's idolatry is strong. As we move forward in this story, we see the sad decline from idol targeted to idol confronted to idol masked to idol fighting to stay in control. This reminds me of the Apostle James' words regarding sin: Then desire when it has conceived gives birth to sin, and sin when it is fully grown brings forth death.⁵ By the way, this is the same reality in all of our lives, too, right? Even though we may not sin in the same way, our sin is idolatry and always leads to destruction. I pray we'd all get this. None of us are immune from temptation and destruction. I pray that each person here wouldn't follow Herod's ways but would worship Jesus and let go of those idols of our lives!

The apostle James' description aptly describes the situation that follows in this story: sin leads to death. And it leads to death because we never win when we are without God! Either we submit to God and find freedom – we are open and transparent and humbled before him – OR, God crushes our idol while we pridefully hold on. This is what happened to Herod.

c. God's idolatry-thwarting, mask-removing, idol-crushing power revealed (vv. 12-20).

Instead of God melting this heart of stone, God warns the wise men and also Joseph. We see this in verses 12-13: ¹²And being warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they departed to their own country by another way. ¹³Now when they had departed, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream and said, "Rise, take the child and his mother, and flee to Egypt, and remain there until I tell you, for Herod is about to search for the child, to destroy him."⁶

Through Protection. Do you see the proactive protection of God? Herod wants to kill this baby; therefore, Herod, this earthly king, foolishly wages war against God Himself, the Creator over all. God warns the magi in a dream to flee. An angel of the Lord tells Joseph to take the child and his mother to Egypt. Joseph is to stay in Egypt until the angel tells him it is safe to go back home.

The way Matthew writes emphatically declares that the protection of the child is the #1 priority. When Matthew writes "the child and his mother," that wasn't common writing of the day. It would have been "mother and child," but Matthew is emphasizing that the child must be protected. Everything is about this child. And all of this fulfilled yet another prophecy. As I said last week, each prophetic fulfillment should cause us to take this story more seriously! Matthew is revealing to us that Jesus is the One Messiah. All of these

⁴ [*The Holy Bible: English Standard Version*](#) (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2016), Mt 2:8.

⁵ [*The Holy Bible: English Standard Version*](#) (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2016), Jas 1:14–15.

⁶ [*The Holy Bible: English Standard Version*](#) (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2016), Mt 2:12–13.

details matter in bolstering our confidence in Him as the Messiah and to praise His name! That's the point of Matthew.

By the way, in emphasizing the Savior's protection, Matthew is revealing that our salvation resides in Him! Amen? Agree? Do you? I wonder if there could be people here who are like Herod. We want the #1 priority in the story to be us. We want to be glory stealers in the turf war with God. But God will have none of that. He'll confront the Herod-like thoughts and attitudes straight-on because we need Him! Unlike Herod, who sought to destroy this child (thinking his glory was greater than the child), the magi and Joseph and Mary do all to protect this child and worship Him. In doing so, they find protection from Herod!

So, we see that God thwarts idolatry through the protection of the magi and Mary and Joseph. But now we see that God thwarts Herod's idolatry through divine sovereignty over sin.

Through Divine Sovereignty (over sin). Let's read verses 14-18 together: ¹⁴And he rose and took the child and his mother by night and departed to Egypt ¹⁵and remained there until the death of Herod. This was to fulfill what the Lord had spoken by the prophet, "Out of Egypt I called my son." ¹⁶Then Herod, when he saw that he had been tricked by the wise men, became furious, and he sent and killed all the male children in Bethlehem and in all that region who were two years old or under, according to the time that he had ascertained from the wise men. ¹⁷Then was fulfilled what was spoken by the prophet Jeremiah: "A voice was heard in Ramah, weeping and loud lamentation, Rachel weeping for her children; she refused to be comforted, because they are no more."⁷

In this passage, we read two passages from the Old Testament. What Matthew reveals is that even through the sin of Herod, God's plans were moving forward as prophesied. I love reading things like this. Herod, in a tizzy-fit is trying to do all he can to destroy the Messiah, and God in Heaven says, "This is going all according to plan." In human's attempt to destroy Jesus, it actually led to the salvation of the very humans who wanted Him dead!"

So, we see that Herod wanted Jesus dead, and so the angel tells Joseph to go to Egypt. This fulfilled the prophecy: "Out of Egypt I called My Son." We also see that Herod lays waste to infants in Bethlehem, but even that fulfilled the prophecy of the Messiah as revealed in Jeremiah 31:15. I want to focus on the second prophecy. It should be no surprise that Herod was angered when he realized he was deceived by the wise men. But I doubt that Herod's plan changed all that much. His idolatry is simply even more revealed by his anger. But he tries to make himself to think that he's still in control. So, based on his knowledge of when the star appeared and also the prophecy of where the Messiah would be born, he calls for men to go to Bethlehem and slaughter all male children under the age of two.

And, as one man writes, "The action of mass murder was motivated by Herod's attitude of refusing to let Jesus be his ruler" (Laferton, p. 37). One author writes this about while talking about Herod: "When it comes to the turf of our own lives, we are all mini-Herods. That doesn't lead us to ruin people's lives through committing mass murder. But our refusal to let Jesus be our ruler does lead us to ruin others' lives in smaller, less noticeable ways. The person whose heart we selfishly broke, who can't quite put it behind them. . . . The person we trod on to get a promotion at work, who's now twisted by bitterness. . . . I wish this didn't describe me. I wish I could look at my life and truthfully say I've never acted in those ways. But when I'm honest, I know that I can't. I'm guessing you can't, either" (Laferton, pp. 38-39).

Years ago, in college, I had a professor who spoke about our hearts being like a teabag. If you put a teabag in cold water, it would take a *long* time for the tea to seep out. But if you have hot water, that water turns color

⁷ [*The Holy Bible: English Standard Version*](#) (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2016), Mt 2:14–18.

quickly. Does the hot water create tea or does it simply activate what's already in the bag? Sometimes, when we go through hard circumstances, or when we're angry about things, we want to blame external circumstances. But that anger simply reveals our heart. The heat of life came into our lives and we revealed where our heart was. This is what we see with Herod. He's an example of a heart bent on his idols, which leads him to reveal his foolish anger. And, you know what? Jesus, the little baby, is the one who is confronting his idolatry.

Here we see that we humans either worship Jesus or reject Jesus. Rejection of God leads to greater sin and death. If you're living like a mini-Herod, please repent! Look to Christ and find satisfaction and protection in worshipping the Savior.

Through Death. Sadly, Herod never found protection, and God still revealed His power over Him. It's not without notice that we read in verses 15, 19 and 20 that Herod is dead. That's it. He's gone. He's off the scene. He tried with all of his might, but God is God and Herod was not. Jesus is King of kings, but Herod was not. He could grasp for power, but power was taken. His idol went with him to the grave, and he cannot go to the throne of God in the judgment and say, "Look what I did. I keep my idol to the end. Didn't I do well?" That idol will be used against Him.

In Herod's life, we see that Jesus' birth confronts his idols and reveals that Jesus is greater! What about you? I pray our idols are destroyed by His grace. This is exactly what we see with the other characters in the remaining parts of this chapter. While Herod and the city of Jerusalem is bound in fear-based idolatry, Jesus, the magi and Mary and Joseph are set free to worship and follow in God's sovereign plan!

2. The magi's worship is compelled by Jesus' kingship.

This is the contrast Matthew is creating in this chapter. There is Herod and Jerusalem. But since Jesus is the Savior of the world, through whom all nations will be blessed, Matthew emphasizes people you'd least expect, coming from outside Israel. They are the magi.

The magi were Gentiles coming to worship the Messiah. Deuteronomy 7:6 says, "The Lord your God has chosen you to be a people for his treasured possession, out of all the peoples who are on the face of the earth."⁸ How could the magi come to worship the Messiah when the Jewish leaders weren't worshipping Him? If the Messiah really had come, then the Jews would know. Or would they? Matthew reveals the hardness of the religious leader's hearts. The religious leaders didn't know. They were rejecting God. With the magi's entrance, Matthew reveals the Old Testament prophecies that speak to people from all over the earth coming to worship God. As one commentator notes: So we learn already at this early stage of the life of Jesus that the allegiances he will create will extend far beyond the boundaries of Judaism, while at the same time he will threaten and alienate many within those boundaries.⁹

The Magi were astrologers. What is a "magi?" It's actually difficult to pinpoint. The term "magi" referred to many different types of things. But I like what one commentator wrote, "the term loosely covered a wide variety of men interested in dreams, astrology, magic, books thought to contain mysterious references to the future, and the like. Some Magi honestly inquired after truth; many were rogues and charlatans. . ." (Gaebelein, p. 85). This is all fascinating to Matthew's retelling of Jesus' birth because again Matthew wants us to see the types of people Jesus saves! Let me read to you from Isaiah 47: You are wearied with your many counsels; let them stand forth and save you, those who divide the heavens, who gaze at the stars, who at the

⁸ [*The Holy Bible: English Standard Version*](#) (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2016), Dt 7:6.

⁹ Craig Blomberg, *Matthew*, vol. 22, *The New American Commentary* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1992), 61.

new moons make known what shall come upon you. Behold, they are like stubble; the fire consumes them; they cannot deliver themselves from the power of the flame. No coal for warming oneself is this, no fire to sit before!¹⁰

What does this have to do with the magi? Well, based on the context, and based on the nature of the magi, they studied the stars. The star caught their attention and then it caused them to search for the Truth. But note this, they were those types of people that God says He is going to punish. These magi are an unlikely bunch to be worshipping the Messiah. They're Gentiles, and they're astrologers.

The Magi knew the prophecies. First, they knew about the star in the east. In verse 1, we are told that wise men (literally, magi) from the east came to Jerusalem. Numbers 24:17 says, "I see him, but not now; I behold him, but not near: a star shall come out of Jacob, and a scepter shall rise out of Israel. . ."¹¹ Here, all the way back in the days of Moses, we have a prophecy of a star. So, in verse 1 of Matthew 2, we immediately get the idea that while at first glance we wouldn't think the magi likely candidates for worshipping the Messiah, they certainly fit the prophecies.

Now we're told that the Magi came to Jerusalem. Why Jerusalem? Jerusalem is the capital for the Jewish people. But why go to the capital? Well, we see that in their next statement: "Where is he who has been born king of the Jews?"¹² Where do kings live? They live in the capital city.

Amazingly, they knew about a King to come. In seeing one star that was noticeably different, they begin to ask more questions. We can confidently assume they searched the Old Testament Scriptures. The phrase "King of the Jews" refers to Old Testament prophecy. The magi would have known verses teaching this or else they wouldn't have said "King of the Jews." Now, let's just stop and be amazed at this because this is simply phenomenal. Here are Gentile magi whom God revealed His prophetic star to. He confronted them in their life. And, then it got their attention and they sought the Scriptures.

This is how God works with all of us! God even works through our sin and foolishness to reach into our lives draws us away from our idolatry and false identities so that we would love Him! I still remember when I believe I was saved. I was a young boy at a camp. I wasn't enjoying things. I wasn't paying attention to sermons. But a friend, one day, asked me if I was saved. God used that question to penetrate my heart and cause me to respond to Him in faith. I wasn't seeking Him. He sought me! Praise God that He's worked that way in our lives. Do you realize that you weren't searching for God, but He was seeking you, believer? The magi are some examples of the God who seeks and saves those who are lost. Then and only then do we start searching for Him!

Getting back to the magi, they head to the capital where kings usually reside and they say, "Where is he who has been born king of the Jews?"¹³ For whatever reason, in their studies, they need some help. They made an assumption that wasn't correct. The King wasn't in Jerusalem. He was elsewhere.

The Magi were granted the location of the Messiah. Yet, the religious leaders have an answer. According to the prophet Micah, the Messiah was to be born in Bethlehem. While we see Herod's idolatrous heart revealed in this text, we also get a glimpse into the magi's desires.

¹⁰ [The Holy Bible: English Standard Version](#) (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2016), Is 47:13–14.

¹¹ [The Holy Bible: English Standard Version](#) (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2016), Nu 24:17.

¹² [The Holy Bible: English Standard Version](#) (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2016), Mt 2:2.

¹³ [The Holy Bible: English Standard Version](#) (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2016), Mt 2:2.

Let's read verses 9-12 together: ⁹ After listening to the king, they went on their way. And behold, the star that they had seen when it rose went before them until it came to rest over the place where the child was. ¹⁰ When they saw the star, they rejoiced exceedingly with great joy. ¹¹ And going into the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother, and they fell down and worshiped him. Then, opening their treasures, they offered him gifts, gold and frankincense and myrrh. ¹² And being warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they departed to their own country by another way.¹⁴

The magi were deceived by king Herod, but through the deception of king Herod, God was still guiding these magi to worship Jesus. This is their focused desire. According to D.A. Carson, the magi's own "statement suggests homage paid to royalty rather than the worship of Deity. But Matthew, having already told of the virginal conception, doubtless expected his readers to discern something more – viz., that the Magi "worshiped" better than they knew" (Gaebelein, p. 86).

They go on their way to worship the King, and then the star is seen again. Isn't this interesting? At this point, we see that when the star appeared, the magi "rejoiced with exceedingly great joy." Get these descriptive words. Rejoice, exceedingly and great! What a contrast this creates with Herod. Herod was troubled internally, but the magi rejoice exceedingly with great joy! For some, the entrance of Jesus created turmoil because their idols were confronted and they wanted to hold on to their own turf and keep wearing their masks. For the magi, they were learning that the entrance of Jesus was the fulfillment of their longings. Therefore, there's a natural response to understanding and knowing Jesus: JOY!

If your heart isn't gripped and amazed by the fact a baby came to earth to save the world, plead for mercy. The magi who didn't have a heritage of looking at prophecies rejoiced exceedingly with great joy! They were confronted by God in their idolatry of astrology and God revealed the King of the Jews to them and they were amazed. Everyone ought to respond the same way!

Now we move to verse 11: ¹¹ And going into the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother, and they fell down and worshiped him. Then, opening their treasures, they offered him gifts, gold and frankincense and myrrh.¹⁵ Notice that Matthew maintains a specific type of wording here. The child comes first then the mother. Matthew is again emphasizing that this child is the central emphasis! The magi aren't coming to worship Mary. They're coming to pay homage to the Child. This child who was born King deserved the adulation.

Matthew is again contrasting the magi with Herod and the people of Israel. But Matthew's reaching us today. Will you worship Jesus? Will you bow down and worship Him? Magi were idolaters. But to these types of people, God made the Messiah known. Don't you think that should bring hope to us as well? After all, who are we? Most of us know that we are weak, frail and sinful people. We often want to act like Herod and worship ourselves and protect the idols of our lives that we cling to with fervency. But Jesus' birth and the story of the magi reveals that God, in His great power, shatters our self-centeredness and draws people to Himself – even people like us who are relative nothings in this world. We were blasphemers. We were nothing but idolaters. We're the greatest sinners we know! But God in His great mercy has set many of us free. By the way, think of Matthew writing this. Matthew was a scoundrel and a tax collector. He had been set free by Jesus, too, in a different-yet-similar way as the Magi. In this story, He reveals that people like him are saved by the Messiah Jesus!

But I want you to see a little more here. You see, in Matthew telling us about the Magi, he's foreshadowing the end of Jesus' life. This one who was declared King of the Jews was also declared King of the Jews at His

¹⁴ [*The Holy Bible: English Standard Version*](#) (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2016), Mt 2:9–12.

¹⁵ [*The Holy Bible: English Standard Version*](#) (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2016), Mt 2:11.

death with a sign hanging over Him in multiple languages. The Jewish people wanted the sign down. They didn't want it said that they killed their Messiah. But they did. And, not only them, but it was a result of our sin as well that God's wrath poured out on Christ. But God's wrath poured out on Jesus so that those who believe would be saved from God's wrath! And, Jesus' resurrection affirmed that He truly is the King of the Jews. Then Jesus ascended to Heaven as the God-Man King. As a result of this, the Scriptures tell us over and over again that Jesus came not only to save the Jews and rule over them but to save people from every tribe and nation and tongue. Hear Revelation 7:9-10: ⁹ **After this I looked, and behold, a great multitude that no one could number, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, clothed in white robes, with palm branches in their hands,** ¹⁰ **and crying out with a loud voice, "Salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb!"**¹⁶ He came to save sinners, Jews and Gentiles!

What else can we do when we understand our Savior? Instead of clinging more to our idols and dying like Herod, we let go of the idols, and cling to our eternal Savior – because our lives don't revolve around power, acclaim, money, attention (or anything else). Jesus is our life! He came to earth. We didn't seek Him. He sought us.

From this point in Matthew's recordings, Matthew skips over a couple decades and moves into Jesus' public ministry, but the first two chapters are paving the way to help us see that the Messiah *has* come. He's fulfilled the prophecies of His birth. He's here! **The lives Jesus has touched in infancy is just a sign of what he will do. He is going to confront people's idolatry again and again – and not only the idolatry in the 1st century, but the idolatry in the hearts of people throughout all centuries. Has he confronted yours? Will you respond like Herod or the magi? Do you choose idolatry or worship?**

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¹⁶ [The Holy Bible: English Standard Version](#) (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2016), Re 7:9–10.