

Matthew

Chapter 2

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MATTHEW CHAPTER 2

Matthew's infancy stories are different from Luke (who does not record the visit of the Magi, the flight to Egypt, and the slaughter of the innocents). Matthew stresses God's protection of the child Jesus. Chapter 2 shows that God works His will despite opposition from evil forces.

THE VISIT OF THE MAGI AND THE SURPRISE OF HEROD (2:1-12)

The chapter begins with the visit of the Magi—the mysterious wise men from a distant land who have come to worship the newborn king. By their visit, Matthew will show that Jesus is Lord of all people—both Jews and Gentiles since important men came from a distant Gentile country to worship the infant Jesus.

On the other side, it is the chosen people, the Jews, and their king Herod, who neglect Christ, while the Gentiles come to worship Him. Even the religious leaders, who knew the most, still failed to act upon what they knew (2:5). Herod and the people of Jerusalem are surprised with the visit of the Magi and the king inquires where this new king will be born.

Matt. 2:1 Now after Jesus had been born in Bethlehem of Judea, in the days of Herod the king, behold, Magi arrived from the East into Jerusalem,

Now after Jesus had been born Jesus had already been born when this episode occurs. How long before, we do not know.

in Bethlehem This is the first indication of a place name in Matthew. He now tells us where Jesus was born—Bethlehem, the city of David, as opposed to another Bethlehem located in the Galilee (Joshua 19:15). Bethlehem, the “house of bread,” is located five miles south of Jerusalem. The city had strong associations with King David (Luke 2:4,11) which is another indication that Jesus is the Messiah.

of Judea This indicates the southern part of the Holy Land as opposed to Samaria. Judea can also refer to the territory east of Jordan (19:1).

in the days of Herod the king Herod the Great (73 B.C. to 4 B.C.) was not a Jew—his father an Idumean and his mother Arabian. The Roman senate had made him king of Judea in 40 B.C. Although Herod was a great builder (including the enlargement of the temple) and had been occasionally generous to the Jewish people he eventually lost favor with them. His mixed lineage with his Edomite blood would have made him unacceptable to the people (see Malachi 1:4).

Herod became increasingly cruel toward the end of his reign. Thinking that his own family was about to overthrow him he murdered one of his wives (Mariamne), her mother, two of her sons, and his own eldest son. This led the Roman Emperor Augustus to comment that it would be safer to be Herod's pig (*hus* in Greek) than his son (*huios*).

Generally he is thought to have died in the year 4 B.C. but E. L. Martin (*The Birth of Christ Recalculated*, 1978,) has recently argued that Herod's death was in 1 B.C. and Jesus' birth in the late

summer of 2 B.C. The date of 1 B.C. for the death of Herod is also held by Jack Finegan in the revision of his standard work “Handbook of Biblical Chronology.”

Our system of dating, B.C. (before Christ) and A.D. (the Latin *Anno Domini*—in the year of our Lord), was worked out by a monk named Dionysius Exiguus at the beginning of the sixth century. This change in the calendar moved the western world away from the previous dating—according to the founding of Rome. He appears to have been about four years off in his calculations.

Herod was a tyrant but he earned the title of “the Great” by being a great builder. He rebuilt the temple in Jerusalem (20 B.C.), rebuilt Samaria (which he renamed Sebaste in honor of the emperor) and other significant works. The title “king” here and in verse three stands in contrast to the Magi’s reference to the king of the Jews.

behold, Magi The word Magi has four general meanings:

- (1) Members of the Persian priestly class
- (2) Possessors of supernatural knowledge and power
- (3) A magician
- (4) A deceiver or seducer

Here the word probably denotes astrologers, men who gained special insight into world affairs from their observation of the planets and stars (hence the common translation “wise men”) These men were students of the stars.

The emphasis in Matthew, however, is on the fact that they were Gentiles. To the Jews the Gentiles were to be foreign to God’s plan and purposes. In his gospel, Matthew will repeatedly call attention to the Gentiles responding where the Jews do not (8:11; 21:43). Though the Magi were not Jews, their knowledge about the king of the Jews was derived from some prior Jewish contact. It is only later Christian tradition that designates them as kings. Tradition also lists their number as three, and even assigns them names and personal characteristics.

The word “magi” is also used in Acts 13:6,8 of the magician Elymas (Bar-Jesus). In this case it is used in the sense of one who practices the magical arts. Our English word “magic” is derived from magi.

arrived from the East They came from the direction of the East, therefore they were moving West. Their exact location is left unstated. Three possibilities are usually given:

- (1) Parthia (Modern day Iran)
- (2) Babylon
- (3) Arabia

Babylon had a settled Jewish community and seems the most likely candidate (cf. Daniel 2:48; 5:11). It is also the place where the prophet Daniel had lived and recorded his many Messianic prophecies and visions (see especially chapter 9).

The Magi are unfamiliar the Micah passage in gives the birth place of the Messiah. This Scripture was cited by the High Priest and scribes. The Magi make the natural assumption that the new king was to be born in the capital city, not in some small village.

Later tradition pictured these wise men as kings, three in number matching the three different gifts they brought. The Armenian Infancy Gospel (late 6th century A.D.) gives them names: Gaspar, Balthasar, and Melchoir.

The visit of the Magi is commemorated in the celebration called Epiphany (January 6). This is also referred to as the Twelfth Day of Christmas.

into Jerusalem. Therefore they went to Jerusalem. They do not go to Herod, but are only summoned to do so (vs. 7) after he hears of their purpose (vs. 3). The fact that they come to Jerusalem rather than Bethlehem suggests the traditional idea of the star leading them is inaccurate.

Matt. 2:2 saying, “Where is he who has been born king of the Jews? For we observed his star at its rising, and we have come to worship him.”

saying, “Where is he?” This sentence is the only recorded utterance of the Magi. This is the first question recorded in the New Testament. Compare this to first question God asked Adam in the Garden of Eden, “Where are you?”

When Adam sinned he attempted to hide from God, but God came after the straying sinner and asked him his whereabouts. Now the answer to the sin problem, that brought about by Adam, is found in the One whom the Magi ask His whereabouts, “Where is He?”

who has been born king of the Jews? Jesus is the true king of the Jews. He is not “born to be king” but He is the newborn king. We find phrase “king of the Jews” again in the passion narrative when Jesus is ridiculed (27:11,29,37). In Matthew the phrase is *always* in the mouth of Gentiles.

The title of king has political overtones because of the Jewish expectation of a political Messiah. This, however, will go against the angel’s explanation of Jesus’ coming (1:21) and Jesus’ own understanding of His mission.

Here it has obvious Messianic significance. Herod will rephrase the question, “Where is the Christ to be born?” The scriptural answer is then given.

For we observed his star The ancients believed that comets and falling stars were omens of the fall of rulers. There are cases where some Roman emperors were banished because of the predictions by the astrologers. By this time, many Jews accepted this idea that the stars could accurately predict the future. Though these Magi were pagans, God used this method of revealing Himself in this one specific instance though the Scriptures clearly forbade any type of predicting from the stars (Deuteronomy 18:11; Isaiah 2:6; 47:11-15). True prophecy is described in Deuteronomy 18:15.

The star refers to some unknown astronomical phenomena that linked this star with the king of the Jews. The Magi do not explain the link. The star could have been some natural phenomena. Suggestions along this line include:

- (1) The conjunction of planets (Jupiter and Saturn came into line in 76 B.C. in the constellation of Pisces).
- (2) A comet (Halley's passed in 12-11 B.C)
- (3) A supernova (exploding star).
- (4) E.L. Martin attempts to account for this by the movement and standing still of Jupiter.

There is, of course, always the possibility, that the star was a strictly supernatural phenomenon and that people look in vain for some natural explanation.

Whatever the case may be, the Magi understood it as a sign of the fulfillment of the promise of a coming Jewish king. Hence, they set off for Jerusalem. Jesus is referred to elsewhere in the New Testament as "the rising star" (Luke 1:78; 2 Peter 1:19; Revelation 22:16). Compare 4:16.

Matthew may have had in mind the story of Balaam's prophecy of the rising star out of Jacob (Numbers 24:17) which was understood to refer to the coming Deliverer.

at its rising, This is not the direction (East). This is the unique astronomical feature that convinced them something special had happened.

and we have come to worship him." In the New Testament the word translated worship can be an act of reverence to a great man (18:26) or worship of God (4:10). From Magi's perspective it was probably an act of homage to a great king. Matthew's readers, however, know the real meaning better than the Magi themselves. Worship, in the proper sense, is restricted to God alone. Jesus is the manifestation of God's presence (1:23), He is the Son of God (2:15) and thus He is to be worshipped. Worship of Christ is an important theme in Matthew (used 10 times).

Matt. 2:3 When King Herod heard this, he was disturbed, and all of the Jerusalem with him.

Note on a variant reading: One manuscript does not have *all*.

When King Herod heard this The repetition of the word "king" highlights the problem. Another king? The non-Jew Herod had been made king by the Romans and now the genuine king of the Jews may have arrived.

he was troubled King Herod's later years were plagued by fear of rivals and the idea of a new king being born would have upset him greatly. Furthermore, at that time, there was a widespread expectation that a universal king would appear and bring about an age characterized by peace and prosperity.

and all of Jerusalem with him. The city here is personified as it often is in the Old Testament. It is unknown why the whole city was also troubled. It is possibly because of Herod's reaction or they may have expected trouble immediately before the reign of the Messiah. Whatever the public excitement around the arrival of the Magi and their question about the newborn king, it leads to nothing for we read of it no further in the narrative.

This may refer to the Jewish leaders who would later reject Jesus, persecute Him and eventually hand Him over to the Romans for crucifixion. If this is what is in mind, then this phrase could anticipate the eventual rejection of Jesus by the nation (cf. 23:37-39). Later, Matthew will tell us that the whole city was again "shaken" by Jesus—because of His so-called triumphal entry (21:10).

Matt. 2:4 And after gathering together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he began to inquire from them where the Christ was to be born.

Note on a variant reading: A few manuscripts do not have the phrase *from them*.

And after gathering together It is unlikely the term for gathering together is a reference to the Jewish synagogue. There is nothing sinister here, as some people have tried to argue.

all the chief priests The term is used for more than just the one high priest. It can have reference to the captain of temple, the leader of weekly priests, the past high priests, or the family of ruling high priest. We learn from Josephus there were 28 High Priests from the time of Herod until the fall of Jerusalem. They were appointed by either the Romans or the Herodian princes. Herod himself appointed seven. These High Priests were chosen, for the most part, from a few aristocratic families—the Sadducees. According to the usual chronology of the life of Jesus, the High Priest at His birth was either Matthias son of Theophilus or Joasar son of Boethos (Josephus, *Antiquities*, XVII, iv. 2, vi. 4).

and scribes of the people The scribes could be learned scholars of the law they were experts in the law of Moses. Herod assembled these experts with whom he was on bad terms. The fact that Matthew speaks of Herod assembling the Sanhedrin has caused some to doubt the truthfulness of this passage as McNeile notes:

The summoning of the whole Sanhedrin for this purpose is open to grave doubt. Not only is Herod said to have begun his reign with a massacre of its members (Jos. Ant. XIV. ix. 4), —he certainly reduced its importance and influence to a minimum—but he could have easily asked the question privately of a single Scribe. The narrative emphasizes the zeal of the foreigners who sought the Messiah, in contrast with the indifference of the official rulers (McNeile, p. 15).

he began to inquire from them. Herod was inquiring, or continued to inquire (the imperfect tense in Greek refers to continuous action in past time).

where the Christ is to be born. Not the king but where the Messiah is to be born. The verb is in the present tense in Greek with the emphasis on the certainty of the event.

Matt. 2:5 And they said to him, "In Bethlehem of Judea; for thus it is written by the prophet:

Note on a variant reading. Some manuscripts have the word *Micah* after the word prophet. One Latin manuscript reads *through Isaiah the prophet saying*.

And they said to him, “In Bethlehem Notice they do not consult the stars, but rather the Scriptures when they want to find where He will be born. They knew the predicted place for the Messiah’s birth, so their failure to believe was not due to ignorance. John 7:41,42 shows that even the common people knew where the Messiah was to be born. However, though Israel knew where the Messiah would be born, the Gentiles are first to worship Him. Apparently they did nothing about the report for even with the visit of these foreign dignitaries they did not bother to travel the six miles to check it out!

of Judea This is contrasted to the Bethlehem in the Galilee area.

for thus it is written by the prophet: This Scripture is found in Micah 5:2.

Matt. 2:6 ‘And you Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, you are by no means least among the leaders of Judah; for out of you will come a ruler who will shepherd my people Israel.’”

Note on a variant reading. Some manuscripts read *of Judea* instead of *land of Judah*. A few manuscripts read *land of the Jews*.

And you Bethlehem, They quote Scripture for the answer—Micah 5:2 with last line from 2 Samuel 5:2. Matthew’s quote is not particularly close to Hebrew or the Septuagint but has the basic sense of the passage. Thus the differences between them are minor.

in the land of Judah, Again to make the distinction between the other Bethlehem located in the Galilee.

you are by no means least among the leaders of Judah; This word is inserted by Matthew to show Bethlehem’s greatness. It is not part of the prophecy from Micah or 2 Samuel.

for out of you No other city had this promise. This one city was singled out from all the cities on earth.

will come a ruler The Messiah would come out of Bethlehem.

who will shepherd” The leader is not specified as the Messiah but as the one who will shepherd Israel.

my people Israel.’ Jesus, the Son of David, was born in the city of David, and like David, He will ruler over God’s people.

Though the religious rulers knew where the Messiah was to be born they acted neither positively (as did the Magi 2:11) or negatively (as did Herod 2:16). They did absolutely nothing at all! Their later successors, who could not ignore Him, were the ones who plotted Jesus’ execution (26:3-4,57).

Matt. 2:7 Then Herod, after he had secretly summoned the Magi, found out from them the time the star appeared.

Then Herod, after he had secretly summoned the Magi Herod summons them privately, he wants no undue publicity, and finds out the exact date when the star made its appearance.

found out from them the time the star appeared. He gives no reason why he asked, but obviously it is to determine the age of the young child.

Matt. 2:8 And he sent them to Bethlehem and said, “Go and search carefully for the child; and as soon as you find him, report to me, so that I too may come and worship him.”

And he sent them to Bethlehem Herod dispatches them to Bethlehem—the place where the Scripture says the Messiah will be born.

and said, “Go and search carefully for the child; The question arises as to why Herod did not send troops. Most likely, he had no doubt the Magi would return and tell him the exact location of the child. Furthermore, the sight of soldiers coming with them would have jeopardized their chances of finding the child.

and as soon as you find him, report to me, He wants to know the exact location and identity of this new king if indeed He does exist.

so that I too may come and worship him.” The Magi have no way of knowing that Herod is lying about his intent.

Matt. 2:9 And after they heard the king, they went away; and behold, the star which they saw at its rising was going before them, until it came and stopped over the place where the child was.

Note on a Variant Reading: Instead of *the place where the child was* two manuscripts read *of the child*.

And after they heard the king, they went away; The Magi, not knowing the real intentions of Herod, go their way to find the Christ child in accordance with the kings’ wishes. We note the irony of the situation—the Jewish religious leaders made no attempt to follow through on the possibility that this child might be the long-awaited Messiah. The first to understand were Gentiles who came from a far away land. Even at this early stage of Matthew’s gospel we see the universal implications of Jesus’ coming to the earth. He will be the Savior of the entire world.

and behold the star which they saw at its rising The astronomical phenomena they saw in their own country again appeared to them.

was going before them The fact that it was going before them” (imperfect tense in Greek which indicates continuous action in past time) denotes something supernatural. No natural phenomena could explain this.

The text may be implying that the star only appeared to move due to the movement of the Magi. Since Bethlehem was only a few miles from Jerusalem any distance the star moved would have been unnoticeable unless it was only about a mile high. The point is that the movement was supernatural.

until it came and stopped over the place where the child was. Again, there is no way to explain this on a natural level. The idea that the star would lead them to the very house where Jesus was living was no problem for the ancients—a star was said to lead Aeneas to the spot where Rome was founded (Virgil, Aeneid 2.694ff.).

The idea of a supernatural sign leading the Magi would have the Matthew's readers recalling how the Israelites were led in the Exodus by the cloud and the fire (Exodus 13:21-22).

Justin Martyr said Jesus was born in a cave that served as a stall for cattle and donkeys. It would have been beneath the inn on the side of a hill (Mounce, p. 20).

Matt. 2:10 And when they saw the star, they rejoiced with exceeding great joy.

And when they saw the star, The star now reappears.

they rejoiced with exceeding great joy. They were exceedingly happy that their long journey was over.

Matt. 2:11 And when they came into the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother, and falling down they worshipped him. And then they opened their gifts of gold, and of incense, and of myrrh.

Note on a Variant Reading: Instead of *they saw* a few manuscripts read *they found*.

And when they came unto the house, They are now in a house, not in the manger. Matthew tells us nothing about the manger story or that the previous residence of Joseph and Mary was in Nazareth (Luke 1:26).

they saw the child The child is mentioned first, before His mother. The Greek word translated "child" can refer to an infant. Jesus was not necessarily an older child at this time. The same term used in Luke 2:27 of Jesus forty days after His birth.

with Mary his mother, There is silence concerning Joseph. Matthew emphasizes Mary's special importance (see 1:16)

and falling down they worshipped him. Though not specifically alluded to by Matthew, Psalm 72:10-11 refers to kings falling down before "the king." His readers, familiar with the Old Testament, would probably have thought of this passage in the Psalms.

And then they opened their gifts These are gifts fit for a king. All nations will serve the king and offer Him gifts.

of gold, Gold is mentioned in Psalm 72:15.

and of incense, Isaiah 60:1-6 speaks of the nations and kings offering gold and incense.

and of myrrh. Myrrh is also a gift fit for a king (Psalm 45:8; Song of Songs 3:6), and they remind the reader of the homage paid to David's son Solomon by the Queen of Sheba with her gifts of spices and gold. The use of myrrh in Jesus' crucifixion (Mark 15:23) and burial (John 19:39) led to the tradition that it symbolizes His suffering. However, in the Old Testament, it is rather a symbol of joy and festivity (see references above and Proverbs 7:17; Song of Songs 5:5).

The decoding of the gifts, i.e. gold and incense means Deity, and myrrh is equal to suffering, is not relevant to Matthew's intention though it remains a popular way of viewing the gifts brought by the Magi.

Matt. 2:12 Then, being divinely instructed in a dream not to return to Herod, they departed through another way into their own country.

Then, being divinely instructed This is a common term used of divine revelations, injunctions, and warnings.

in a dream not to return to Herod, Matthew stresses the continuing control of God's providence. Revelation by dreams was a regular feature in the culture to which these Magi belonged. God's use of their astrological and cultural background does *not* imply His endorsement of their practices. The star initially did not lead them, the star only got their attention as to the fact that the Messiah had been born.

they departed through another way into their own country. They went back to their unknown country through an unknown way. The key thought is that they bypassed Jerusalem. Mounce makes the following interesting observation:

By secular observation these gentile astrologers had discerned the coming of the Jewish Messiah, sought him out in order to worship him, and now in obedience to a divine visitation return home without making contact with the religious authorities. All this time the religious leaders of Jerusalem know from their own Scriptures where the Messiah is to be born. But not even the visit of foreign dignitaries piques their curiosity enough to find out if there is any truth in the report. As Jesus later said, "I have come into the world, so that the blind will see and those who see will become blind" (John 9:39) (Mounce, p. 16).

The story of the Magi shows that Gentiles, unlike the Jews, were receptive to the Jewish king. This speaks of the future blessing for all nations, not just Israel which is in keeping with God's promises to Abraham (Genesis 12:1-3).

The church in the West did not miss the importance of the Magi's visit. Before they began to celebrate Christmas, they already celebrated Epiphany (January 6) which celebrates the manifestation of Christ to the Gentiles.

This introduces a theme that will occur throughout the Gospel—the presence of the Messianic king demands decision and therefore causes division between the ones who reject and accept Him. We note, for example, the opposite reactions of Herod and the Magi. Furthermore this passage stresses the link with David by showing His birth to be in David's city Bethlehem in fulfillment of prophecy though His home will be in Nazareth (explained in the next passage).

McNeile writes:

The narrative of the Magians is rich in spiritual significance. It affords a type of early history of Christianity: the Son of God was revealed 'to the Jew first, and also to the Gentile'—to the mother and Joseph first, and also to the foreign astrologers. This, as Zahn says, is heard throughout the gospel, 7:10-12; 12:18-21; 15:24-28, 24:14, 28:19. He was revealed to the humble and ignorant first, and then to the honorable and learned; cf. 1 Corinthians 1:26. To the poor first, and then to the

rich; to the West first, and then to the East. It also has other lessons: He was revealed to astrologers by a method suited to their habits and understanding. And their object in coming to Jesus was not personal advantage, but solely to give Him homage (McNeile, p. 22).

THE FLIGHT TO EGYPT (2:13-15)

After the Magi depart Joseph is warned in a dream to take his family and leave Bethlehem for Egypt. They will remain there until the death of Herod.

Matt. 2:13 Now when they had departed, behold, the angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream, saying, “Get up and take the child and his mother, and flee into Egypt, and stay there until I tell you; for Herod is about to search for the child to destroy him.”

Note on a variant reading: One manuscript (Vaticanus) has *into their country* after *departed*.

Now when they had departed, With the Magi now gone, God will providentially intervene with Joseph.

behold, the angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream, Joseph is again warned in a dream. This is a recurring theme in the first two chapters. In the ancient world dreams were viewed as a form of communication with the unseen realm. Ancient cultures had professionals who would interpret dreams (see Daniel 2:2). However from the biblical perspective this ability came from God alone (Genesis 40:8).

saying, “Get up and take the child and his mother, The child and his mother is a stock phrase.

and flee into Egypt, This was out of the jurisdiction of Herod. Egypt, particularly since the days of the Maccabees was a place of asylum for Jews.

and stay there until I tell you; They would be divinely instructed when to return.

for Herod is about to search for the child There is immediate danger.

to destroy him.” The threat is consistent with what we know of Herod’s character. This same verb, translated “destroy,” also occurs in the passion narrative 27:20 where the chief priests and elders are the ones who want to destroy Jesus. This also reminds us of Pharaoh’s attempt on the life of Moses (Exodus 2:15).

Matt. 2:14 And he arose, took the child and his mother by night, and left for Egypt.

And he arose, took the child and his mother As always, Joseph’s obedience is immediate. Note the order in which they are listed; even in His infancy Jesus is given priority over everyone else.

by night, This stresses the immediacy of the need. The fact that they left by night would have made their escape impossible to trace. Leaving at night would also evoke memories of the night Exodus (Exodus 12:31).

and left The Greek word *anachoreo* has the idea to “withdraw from danger” (see 2:22; 12:15). *Anchorite* later became a technical term for the monks who withdrew from society.

for Egypt. At this time every large city in Egypt had a group of Jews living there.

Matt. 2:15 And he remained there until the death of Herod, that it might be fulfilled that which was spoken by the Lord through the prophet, saying, “Out of Egypt I called my son.”

Note on a variant reading: One Syriac manuscript reads *through the mouth of Isaiah the prophet* instead of *the prophet*.

And he remained there He refers to Jesus.

until the death of Herod, This would have occurred some years later. “Herod died shortly before Passover, in March-April 4 B.C. According to apocryphal tradition, the sojourn in Egypt lasted seven years” (Hill, p. 85). It is possible that Jesus could have been born as early as 7 B.C. The fact that Herod ordered the slaughter of all the children two years and under lends possibility to that date.

that it might be fulfilled This is the third of Matthew’s fulfillment quotations.

that which was spoken by the Lord The ultimate source.

through the prophet, The prophet is the intermediate source.

saying, “Out of Egypt I called my son.” The reference is Hosea 11:1. This fulfillment quotation belongs properly after verse 21, after the account of Herod’s death and Joseph’s return to Egypt. Putting it here places the Exodus to Egypt example prior to the Exile (vs. 16-18). By doing this, it unites the holy family’s experience in Egypt with the Exodus.

Hosea is referring to the actual Exodus and not making a prophecy about the future. Therefore the fulfillment would be typical of two great moments of redemptive history: (1) the Exodus of the nation from Egypt and (2) the Exodus of the Holy family from Egypt. Matthew connects them to form a larger unity.

The earlier is a foreshadow of the latter. Israel, and God’s Son Jesus are both in Egypt of necessity and are both delivered by divine provision. Matthew sees Jesus living out and summing up the history of Israel.

In Egypt, in the Exodus, and in the wilderness, Jesus is the embodiment of Israel. He not only anticipates her victories but He also shares in her sufferings (cf. Isaiah 63:8,9). Israel’s history has now reached its goal, the earlier Exodus finds its counterpart and its climax in the deliverance of God’s people from their sins (1:21).

It should also be noted that the place where the Lord was crucified (Jerusalem) was spiritually called Egypt (Revelation 11:8).

THE SLAUGHTER OF THE INNOCENTS (2:16-18)

The murderous king Herod, seeing that the Magi tricked him, now orders the slaughter of the innocent male children in the area of Bethlehem.

Matt. 2:16 Then Herod, after seeing that he had been tricked by the Magi, became exceedingly angry, and then he sent out and killed all the male children in Bethlehem and in all their regions, from age two and beneath, according to the time he had ascertained from the Magi.

Then Herod, after seeing that he had been tricked by the Magi, After some time had elapsed, Herod realized that the Magi were not returning.

became exceedingly angry, Herod's anger is not solely based on the Magi's failure to return. His evil intent began the first time he heard of the rival king being born. Obviously this anger intensified when they did not return.

and then he sent out Notice Matthew places the responsibility for these murders directly on Herod.

and killed all the male children in Bethlehem Since he was unable to determine whether the child actually exists and, if so, where he might be found, Herod takes no chances. He sends his troops to kill every male infant.

This act parallels Pharaoh's attempt to destroy Israel's savior—Moses (Exodus 1:15-2:10).

and in all their regions, Herod gives himself an extra measure of assurance.

from age two and beneath, The total dead would be about 20 male children, given a population of about 1,000 at that time along with the infant mortality rate.

The early church tended to exaggerate the number (Byzantine tradition set it at 14,000, Syrian at 64,000 and some even equated it with the 144,000 of Revelation 14!).

Herod's ruthlessness knew no bounds when it came to protecting his throne. He had already executed his own wife Mariamne and his own sons Alexander and Aristobulus in 6 or 7 B.C.

Thereafter he executed his son Antipater (Josephus, *Antiquities* 16.11.7; 17.7) as well as a large group of conspirators.

So there would be widespread mourning at his death, Herod ordered that a member of every family was to be killed when he died (Josephus, *Antiquities* 17.6.6.). Fortunately, this order was never carried out.

according to the time he had ascertained from the Magi. Two years was probably more than sufficient time, allowing for the time the Magi originally had seen the star. The Magi may have observed it long before they arrived in Jerusalem.

Mounce comments upon the lack of historical corroboration to the slaughter of the innocents.

That Herod would certainly carry out such a savage plan is not surprising. We already know that he murdered members of his own family, and, after all, Bethlehem was a tiny little village with not more than twenty or thirty children of that age. That Josephus the historian (or any other early writer) neglects to mention the slaughter tells us more about the cruelty of that day than it does

about any lack of historicity of the event. Such purges were simply not noteworthy (Mounce, p. 18).

Matt. 2:17 Then that which was spoken through Jeremiah the prophet was fulfilled, saying,

Note on a variant reading: Two manuscripts have *by the Lord* after *spoken*.

Then that which was spoken through Jeremiah the prophet was fulfilled, saying, Herod's wrong action is seen as fulfilling prophecy. The quotation is introduced with a fulfillment statement with one part obviously missing, "in order that.

All other formula quotations of Matthew have this word ("in order that") which expresses the purpose. The only other exception is 27:9-10 where it also refers to something evil. Matthew therefore is reluctant to ascribe evil to the purposes of God.

Matt. 2:18 "A voice was heard in Ramah, weeping and great mourning, Rachel weeping for her children and not willing to be comforted, because they are no more."

Note on a variant reading. Many manuscripts have *lamentation* before *weeping and great mourning*.

A voice was heard in Ramah, Ramah has no importance as a place name. The tomb of Rachel is in Ramah (cf. 1 Samuel 10:2) which is about six miles north of Jerusalem. It is on the road the exiles would have taken.

weeping and great mourning. The quotation is from Jeremiah 31:15. Its connection is to the Exile of the people to either Assyria (the ten northern tribes—Israel) or to Babylon (the two southern tribes—Judah).

There is also another tradition, possibly current in Matthew's day, that Rachel's tomb was on the outskirts of Bethlehem (see Genesis 35:10;48:7 which says she was buried on the way to Bethlehem). However, the exact site of Ramah (1 Samuel 10:2) is in the area of Benjamin. This Bethlehem tradition is current to this day.

If Matthew had this also in mind, then Rachel was weeping for the slain infants in Bethlehem in the larger context of joy because the Messiah has been born in the same small town.

Rachel weeping for her children Rachel weeps bitterly because of the fate of the exiles. Yet the larger context in Jeremiah is one of hope, deliverance, and fulfillment (Jeremiah 30-31). References to Messianic joy surround this weeping and mourning. Similarly Matthew's story of Messianic joy is marred by the death of the innocent children in Bethlehem. Hence the parallel.

and not willing to be comforted, No one could console her at the loss of these infants.

because they are no more." As there was deliverance from the Exile patterned after deliverance from Egypt in the Exodus, so God now brings Messianic deliverance. The weeping mothers of Bethlehem and Rachel's weeping for the exiles corresponds to the larger context in each story that the Messiah will deliver His people. Again we have Jesus summing up the whole experience of Israel. Note further the

geographical significance of the first three quotations of Matthew. They involve the city of David (Bethlehem), the land of the Exodus (Egypt), and the mourning of the exiles to Babylon.

Note also that Matthew also highlights the differences between two kings, the pretender and the rightful one. Herod was selfish while Jesus was self-denying and self-sacrificing (16:24; 20:28); Herod yielded to Satan while Jesus resisted Satan's temptations (4:1-11). Herod was the destroyer while Christ was the Savior (1:21). Herod was cruel to the little ones while Christ was kind to the little ones (15:32; 19:14). Finally, Herod lost everything while Christ was given control over everything (11:27; 28:18).

THE RETURN OF THE HOLY FAMILY, THE SETTLING IN NAZARETH (2:19-23)

After Herod's death the family returns to Israel. However because Herod's son is ruling Judea in his father's place Joseph takes the family and settles in Nazareth.

Matt. 2:19 But after the death of Herod, behold, the angel of the Lord appeared in a dream to Joseph in Egypt,

But after the death of Herod, Approximately 4 B.C. but of the exact time we are not certain. It could have been closer to 1 B.C.

behold, the angel of the Lord Again the angel of the Lord appears.

appeared in a dream to Joseph in Egypt, His death signified not only the return of the Holy Family but also of others who had fled from his tyranny. We find similar language is used to refer to the death of Pharaoh (Exodus 2:23).

Matt. 2:20 saying, "Arise and take the child and his mother, and go to the land of Israel; for those who sought the child's life are dead."

saying, "Arise and take the child and his mother, Joseph is commanded to take Mary and Jesus back to Israel.

and go to the land of Israel; From Egypt back to Israel just like the Exodus.

for those who sought the child's life are dead." This statement is almost verbatim with Exodus 4:19 and may account for the plural "those." It is also possible that the plural refers to Herod's servants, who after Herod's death, were no longer in power. A third possibility is that sometimes the Greek language uses a categorical plural—a plural subject is employed to draw focus away from the subject (Herod) and onto the action. Thus the point emphasized is that the child's life is no longer in danger.

Matt. 2:21 And he rose up and took the child and His mother, and entered into the land of Israel.

Note on a variant reading: Many manuscripts read *came* instead of *entered into*.

And he rose up and took the child and his mother, Joseph again immediately obeys.

and entered into the land of Israel. They go back to the land they started from.

Matt. 2:22 But when he heard that Archelaus was ruling in Judea in place of his father Herod, he became afraid to return there. And having been warned in a dream he withdrew into the region of the Galilee.

But when he heard that Archelaus When Herod died Archelaus, his eldest son, was placed over Judea, Samaria, and Idumea.

was ruling in Judea His rule, however, did not extend to the Galilee.

in place of his father Herod, These kings were succeeded by their own relatives.

he became afraid to return there. The fear of Archelaus was justified. However confirmation of his kingship was withheld by Augustus until Archelaus proved himself. The confirmation never occurred because Archelaus began his reign by slaughtering 3000 prominent citizens. He was removed by the emperor two years later. Though another son of Herod ruled over the Galilee (Herod Antipas) he was a more tolerant ruler. Galilee became known in his day as a place for revolutionary sentiments. This is something his father never would have tolerated.

And having been warned in a dream The recurring theme of the dreams continue.

he withdrew into the region of the Galilee. Matthew again stresses God's providential protection. The geographical sequence is Israel-Galilee-Nazareth. It is in Galilee where Jesus will begin His ministry (4:12-16) in fulfillment of Isaiah 9:1 which Matthew cites. Galilee's large population of Gentiles symbolizes the universal significance of the ministry of Jesus—a theme which will recur throughout the gospel.

Matt. 2:23 and he came and lived in the city called Nazareth, that it might be fulfilled which was spoken through the prophets, "He will be called a Nazarene."

Note on a variant reading: *Nazareth* is spelled differently in some manuscripts.

and he came and lived in the city called Nazareth, The family now settles in Nazareth. Matthew has already accounted for Galilee as the place where Jesus' ministry began. He is now going to account for Nazareth as the place where He lived.

Nazareth is never mentioned in Scripture apart from the gospels. It was located in the hills in Galilee and looked down upon two of the most important caravan routes in the ancient world—one from the seacoast to the territories to the east and the other from Egypt to Damascus. However Nazareth was looked down upon by those from Judea as is seen by the response of Nathaniel to his brother Philip, "Nazareth! Can any good thing come out from there? (John 1:46).

Jesus was called a "Nazarene" and Acts 24:5 says the followers of Jesus were of the "sect of the Nazarenes." This title associated Jesus with His hometown in Nazareth. Nazareth was an insignificant village with a large Gentile population. It's existence is not mentioned in the Old Testament and the idea that the Messiah would come from Nazareth would be unexpected (cf. John 1:46; 7:41,42,52). The Old Testament had already anticipated this humility of the Messiah (Psalm 22; Isaiah 53; Zechariah 11:4-14).

that it might be fulfilled Another fulfillment quotation.

which was spoken through the prophets, We note that there is not one specific prophet mentioned. Furthermore, the word prophets is plural.

“He will be called a Nazarene.” This statement is not found in the Old Testament and has led to much speculation as to what Matthew meant (see question at end of chapter).

The fact that Luke mentions that Mary and Joseph originally came from Nazareth is seen as a contradiction by many commentators. Matthew seems to know nothing of this fact. Matthew, however, narrates that which is relevant to his purpose in the fulfillment quotations. There is nothing in his narrative that precludes their previous residence in Nazareth. It is possible that Mary and Joseph had decided to settle in Bethlehem—it was their ancestral home town. The events surrounding the Magi, Herod the great, the slaughter of the innocents, and Herod Antipas caused them to change their plans and move north again. The angel that appeared to Joseph confirmed the need to leave this region.

The same problem is often raised by those commenting on Luke. Luke records nothing of the flight to Egypt and return. Yet Luke 2:39 is sufficiently vague that a trip to Egypt can be placed there before the return to Galilee. The verse reads:

And when they had performed everything according to the Law of the Lord, they returned to Galilee, to their own city of Nazareth.

This certainly does not preclude the events that led them to Egypt.

SUMMARY TO CHAPTER 2

The first section of chapter two (verses 1-12) chronicles the story of the Magi who arrive from the East. We do not know how many of them there were, exactly where they came from, how they were dressed, what their names were, and what happened to them after they went home.

They ask the question about the location of the newborn king of the Jews. Some extraordinary celestial phenomenon, which they had seen in their own country, had convinced them that the Messiah, the king of the Jews, had been born. The exact nature of this “star” is unknown. It is also not known how the Magi connected it with the birth of Christ. What is known, however, is that they came from a great distance to worship the newborn king. But first they must locate Him.

The murderous King Herod was troubled by their arrival as well as the rest of Jerusalem.

The king wants to know where this new king will be born. Consequently a meeting of the religious leaders determined that the Messiah was to be born in Bethlehem—as it is written in the Scriptures (Micah 5:2).

Once the king has this information he has a secret meeting with the Magi. He does not tell them his real intention but rather pretends he also wishes to worship this new king. He seeks further information from

them about the time of the star's appearance. Armed with the information, he tells them to go to Bethlehem, find the child, then return and tell him so he can join in the worship.

The Magi leave Herod and experience divine guidance that leads them to the very house where the child is staying.

They enter the house and see the child and His mother. They prostrate themselves before the newborn king in worship and then open the gifts which they brought. To what degree they understood who they were worshipping is not known. It is also unknown how much they understood the significance of the gifts they brought.

As was the situation with Joseph, God speaks to the Magi in a dream. They are instructed to return home without informing Herod concerning the whereabouts of the Messiah. They heed the warning and return home through a different route.

The lesson that Matthew is emphasizing from the visit of the Magi, is that Gentiles, as well as Jews, are part of God's plan of salvation (cf. 8:11; 28:19; Romans 10:12).

The next section is the flight into Egypt (13-15). The angel again speaks to Joseph in a dream and tells him to immediately leave the area with his family. Herod wants to take the life of the child. They immediately go by night to Egypt, which was outside of Herod's domain.

Matthew sees the flight to Egypt as a fulfillment of Hosea 11:1. The Messiah was repeating the history of the nation Israel in going down to Egypt and then returning to the Promised Land. As God supernaturally protected the nation from destruction, so too did He with the Christ child.

Once Herod realized the Magi were not returning he became furious and ordered the slaughter of the innocents (verses 16-18). All boy babies, two years and beneath were put to death upon his order. Unknown to Herod is that the one whom he was attempting to destroy had already escaped. Matthew sees this murderous act as a fulfillment of prophecy.

The last section deals with the return of the holy family and the settlement in Nazareth (verses 19-23). Joseph, again instructed in a dream, is told to return from Egypt because Herod has died. When they return they probably head for Bethlehem. However upon hearing that the cruel Archelaus is ruling Judea in the place of his father Joseph is afraid to reside there. Again he is instructed in a dream to settle in his former residence—Nazareth. This city in Galilee was out of the jurisdiction of Archelaus. Jesus would become known as a citizen of this despised city (a Nazarene) fulfilling the prophecy that the Messiah would become despised and rejected among mankind (Isaiah 11:1; 53:3; Psalm 22:6,7, 13, etc.)

The response of Herod to the baby Jesus is sharply contrasted with that of the Magi. In Herod's attempt to kill the infant King we encounter evil for the first time in Matthew's narrative. Matthew will show throughout his gospel that evil continually stands in opposition to God's kingdom which comes through Christ. This reaches a climax in the crucifixion narrative. Thus the slaughter of the innocents anticipates the eventual slaughter of the innocent Jesus on the cross.

There is, however, God's providential protection of the Holy Child. God's purposes cannot be stopped. It was not thwarted by Egyptian bondage nor by the exile of the chosen people to Babylon. In Israel's history God repeatedly brought salvation to His people. He has now brought to them the one who relives their history, sums it up, and brings it to a fulfillment. The events surrounding the Christ child are related to all that preceded. They are fulfillments of earlier events. The Messiah, the promised descendant of David

toward whom all things are pointed, is now in the world. As did His people, He comes out of Egypt to the Promised Land and settles in Galilee. He brings forth light to those who sit in darkness as the prophet had foretold. He will dwell in the unlikely town of Nazareth and be called a Nazarene. As Matthew clearly shows, this is God's eternal plan, nothing has happened by accident.

QUESTIONS FOR CHAPTER 2

WHAT PARALLELS DO WE FIND BETWEEN JESUS AND MOSES?

We find some striking parallels between the two stories. The information given in parentheses is derived from Jewish sources at the time of Jesus that are testified by the writers Josephus and Philo.

1. Pharaoh killed all male Hebrew infants Exodus 1:22 (having been forewarned, either by scribes or through a dream, of a newborn Hebrew who was a threat to his kingdom and this possibility filled him and Egypt with terror).
2. At a later time Moses fled to Egypt because his life was threatened by Pharaoh Exodus 2:15 (the infant Moses deliverance is due to his parents actions).
3. At the death of Pharaoh Moses was directed to return and he obeyed, Exodus 4:1-9-20.
4. In addition to these general similarities there are some striking agreements in language. In Exodus 2:15 "he was seeking to kill Moses" is close to Matthew 2:13 "he was seeking to destroy the child." Exodus 2:15 "he fled" is identical to Matthew 2:14 In Exodus 2:23 the king of Egypt died" is close to Matthew 2:19. Most impressive of all is the nearly verbatim agreement between Exodus 4:19 and Matthew 2:20.
5. Jesus came to save His people from their sins (1:21) as Moses saved Israel from the bondage of Egypt.

Clearly Matthew had in mind the story of Moses as he tells the story of Jesus. Herod is the antitype of Pharaoh and Jesus is the antitype of Moses.

Though there is not a neat one to one correspondence between the two accounts there is rather a series of allusions that would make it clear to the Jewish reader that Jesus is the new Moses.

QUESTION

DID THE OLD TESTAMENT PREDICT THE MESSIAH WOULD COME FROM NAZARETH?

Did Matthew make a mistake by saying the Old Testament predicted the Messiah would come out of Nazareth? The answer is no. Matthew does not quote a particular prophet but says the prophets (plural) predicted this. He probably did this because his reference is to several Old Testament prophets though none would have his exact wording. His use of the plural is not quoting a specific utterance of one of the prophets. He is not saying this fulfills a direct statement from the Old Testament but rather it sums up the Old Testament teaching on the identity of the Messiah.

Yet Matthew probably meant more than this with his emphasis of fulfillment in Jesus growing up in Nazareth. The two main views are:

(1) Jesus Was A Nazarite

A Nazarite was one who took a special vow of separation to the Lord (Number 6:1-21; cf. Judges 13:5,7). A person abstained from cutting his hair, strong drink, and avoided contact with the dead. Although this description may fit John the Baptist (cf. Luke 1:15) it is inappropriate for Jesus who was accused of being a glutton and drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners (11:19) and who raised the dead by touching them (9:23-26).

(2) Jesus Was The Promised Messianic Branch (Hebrew *Netzer*).

Most likely we have a play on words here in Hebrew between the word for “branch” and Nazareth. The quotation in Isaiah 11:1 speaks of a branch (*netzer*) coming out of Jesse. This passage is Messianic in content and is related to Isaiah 7:14 (quoted in Matthew 1:23). The Messianic figure in Isaiah 11:1 is Emmanuel (God with us) of Isaiah 7:14.

Matthew’s readers would not realize the wordplay until they understood the meaning of *netzer* in Hebrew but the primary meaning would have been evident to the Greek reader—that Jesus was called a Nazarene since He was from Nazareth.