

Matthew 2

Matthew moves forward from the birth (1:25) of Jesus to an age when Jesus is in a house (2:11). King Herod and the city of Jerusalem tremble when they hear of the birth of the “King of the Jews” while wise men from the east, likely Gentiles, decide to worship Him. Additionally, the move into Egypt and then out of Egypt imitates the family of Israel under Jacob in the book of Genesis.

TRANSLATION - 2:1-6:

1 Then Jesus, after being born in Bethlehem of Judea in the days of Herod, the King, behold, wise men from the east came into Jerusalem, **2** saying, “Where is the one born king of the Jews? For we saw his star in the east and we came to worship Him.” **3** And after hearing, King Herod was alarmed and all Jerusalem with him, **4** and gathering together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he was inquiring from them where the Christ is to be born. **5** And they said to him, “In Bethlehem of Judea; for thus it has been written through the prophet: **6** And you, Bethlehem, land of Judah, by no means the least you will be among the leaders of Judah. For out of you will go out one leading; Who will shepherd My people, Israel.”

WORDS:

“Wise men” (vs 1), commonly transliterated as “magi,” are found six times in the NT; here in this text (2:1, 7, 16) and Acts 8:9; 13:6, 8, where it refers to magicians, as opposed to astrologers. These men were likely religious advisors and politicians with an interest in reading the paths of the stars. These specific wise men came from the east, perhaps Babylon, Persia, or some other eastern location.

“Jews” (vs 2) is the designation for Israel, used 195 times in the NT, which became popular after the return from Babylonian exile. The term is used 81 times in the OT, in books written after the exile (primarily Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther, Jeremiah). “Worship” (60 times) is the general word for expressing acts of glory, honor, thanksgiving to God. It can, in narrow contexts, be interpreted as “give reverence,” to human beings. Matthew uses the verb 13 times.

“Alarmed” (vs 3) means to “stir up, disturb, unsettle, trouble, frighten,” and is used 17 times. Matthew uses it also in 14:26.

“To lead” (vs 6) is a general term which means to “guide, rule, think, consider.” It is used 28 times, 10 times in Matthew, concentrated in chapter 27 (27:2, 11, 14-15, 21, 27; it is the word behind the translation “governor”).

“To shepherd” (ver. 6) is used 11 times in Scripture; this is its only use by Matthew. The term can be used metaphorically for guidance, protection, and nurture.

GRAMMAR:

“It has been written” (vs 5) translates the Greek verbal perfect tense. The perfect tense denotes an action which occurred *in the past* (“It was written”) but its effects are still relevant or felt in the present (“It stands written”).

OLD TESTAMENT REFERENCES:

The reference cited by the scribes is Micah 5:2 (which differs from both the LXX and the MT), combined with 2 Samuel 5:2.

ARCHAEOLOGY:

Bethlehem (ver. 1) was the city of King David (1 Sam. 16:1; 20:6-29; Luke 2:11), located 5 miles south of Jerusalem. Archaeologists guess that Bethlehem’s population in the first century was around 300 people. There was wide recognition that the Messiah would be born in Bethlehem (John 7:41-42). It is identified as “of Judea” to separate it from the Bethlehem

located in the territory of Zebulun (Josh. 19:15-16). The designation "of Judah" also further identifies Jesus as a descendant of King David, of the tribe of Judah.

King Herod is mentioned 43 times in the Gospels (Matt., Mark, Luke) and Acts. About 9 members of his family are also mentioned in Scripture. He was a good administrator and enjoyed building projects (including the temple, began in 20 BC), but he was ruthless, cruel, and extremely paranoid. He killed close associates, his wife (Mariamne), and at least two sons. Herod the Great ruled from 37 BC to his death in 4 BC. "East" is a term used 11 times in Matthew. Here, it likely denotes a far distant land, to the east, inhabited by Gentiles. Jerusalem had been the capital city of Israel since King David conquered it (2 Sam. 5:1-12).

Chief priests (a compound word) are found 122 times in Scripture (limited to the Gospels and Hebrews). Priests were supposed to have come from the tribe of Levi, specifically from the family of Aaron. However, by NT times, Roman rulers would appoint and depose priests at a whim. For this reason, more than one man could be designated as "chief priest" even if only one man served in the office at a time. Josephus, the Jewish historian, lists 28 high priests in the New Testament era.

Scribes are found 63 times in the NT. Outside of the Gospels and Acts, the word is found only in 1 Cor. 1:20. Since the scribes dealt extensively with the Law, they were also designated "experts of the law" (see Matt. 22:35). Most, if not all, scribes were members of the Pharisaic sect while priests were members of the Sadducean sect.

COMMENTS:

The inspired text does not give us much information on the identity of these wise men. It is likely they were Gentiles, coming from the east (although Jews still lived in Babylon - Elam and Media - in the days of Jesus: Acts 2:9). The tradition that they were kings is as old as the early Christian Tertullian and their names (Gaspar, Melchior, and Balthasar) come from the 6th century AD, but there is no reason to believe any of these positions.

While "worship" might be translated with a more generic "bow down," it appears from this context that the wise men worship Jesus as a divine being, a point Matthew brings out throughout his gospel (2:2, 8, 11; 8:2; 9:18; 14:33; 15:25; 20:20; 28:9, 17). Since the star itself appeared to be supernatural, we would think the wise men accepted some unique nature in Jesus and chose to worship Him.

Matthew, again, shows a high view of Scripture by suggesting that the prophecy was given *through* a prophet. This shows that God was considered the source of the prophecy and the prophet was only the conduit through which God made His will known.

We do not know how the wise men would have associated a star with the birth of the King of the Jews. Most scholars suggest the connection comes from Numbers 24:17, which was associated with the Messiah. That is a possibility and Jews in Babylon could have made that association for the benefit of the wise men. Matthew does not make the connection with Numbers 24:17. Yet, if the Jews told the wise men of Numbers 24:17, we wonder why they did not also share Micah 5:2 with them.

If the wise men worshipping Jesus foreshadows Gentiles worshipping Jesus, then perhaps the fear of Jerusalem at the birth of Jesus foreshadows the fear of Jerusalem at the death of Jesus (cf. 21:10). Jerusalem was likely alarmed because there would be another death, if not a civil war, between King Herod and this new king.

APPLICATION:

Observe that Jesus already has several designations applied to Him in these first six verses: King of the Jews, Messiah, Ruler, and Shepherd. Jesus will fill many roles in His nature and work.

TRANSLATION - 2:7-12:

7 At that time, Herod after secretly calling the wise men determined precisely from them the time of the star's appearing, **8** and after sending them into Bethlehem, he said, "After

going, inquire carefully concerning the child. And as soon as you might find [him], announce to me, thus even I after coming I may worship Him.” **9** Then after those hearing the king, they went out and behold, the star, which they saw in the east, was leading them, until after coming, it stood above where was the child. **10** And after seeing the star, they rejoiced with very great joy. **11** And after coming into the house, they saw the child with Mary, His mother, and after falling, they worshipped Him and after opening their treasures, they offered to Him gifts: gold and frankincense and myrrh. **12** And after being warned in a dream not to return to Herod, through another way, they returned to their home.

WORDS:

“To determine precisely” (vs 7) is used only in this context (2:7, 16) in Scripture. However, “exactness, precision” is used once as well as “exact, strict.” The adverb, “accurately, carefully, well” (cf. 2:8) is used 9 times in the NT.

“Child” (vs 8) is used 52 times in Scripture for “child, infant.” Matthew uses the term 18 times.

“Treasures” (vs 11) is used 17 times in Scripture with Matthew using 9 of those occasions. The word can mean the treasure box or the treasure inside the box. “Gifts” is used 19 times, 9 by Matthew. “Gold” is found 10 times, half used by Matthew. “Frankincense” is found twice; here and Revelation 18:13. “Myrrh” is also found twice; here and John 19:39.

“To be warned” (vs 12) is used 9 times, only in this context by Matthew (2:12, 22). It means to share a revelation, an injunction, or a warning.

“To return” and “home” are related words; the latter is the root word of the former.

ARCHAEOLOGY:

Frankincense (vs 11) was a gum made from the resin of a tree found in Arabia. It could be used for medicinal purposes, but it was also used in worship (Exo. 30:8, 34-38). It had a sweet fragrance. Myrrh was also a gum made from tree resin. It was also used in worship (Exo. 23-25), as well as anointing the dead (John 19:39-40). Jews would combine it with wine to make an anesthetic (Mark 15:230). All three gifts were often associated with wise men, myrrh being a component of the ink used by wise men. Mary and Joseph likely used these gifts to finance their trip into Egypt.

COMMENTS:

This star was clearly no ordinary star! The wise men estimated that the star had appeared some time around two years previously (cf. ver. 16). Herod sent them to find the child and send back word to him where the infant king was. He deceives them into believing he desires to worship Him as well. The star moved again, this time settling above the house where Jesus was laying. This star was clearly no ordinary star! It is not helpful to try to explain this phenomenon in some natural way. It is clearly supernatural. The wise men rejoiced greatly that they had found the King of the Jews so they entered the house, which may have been attached to the manger where Jesus was born (Luke 2:6-7).

The wise men entered the home and worshipped the baby. Some have seen a fulfillment, in the wise men’s worship, of passages such as Psalm 72:10-11, 15 and Isaiah 60:6. Perhaps that is true, but the inspired writer does not make that connection. Observe that no adoration or veneration were extended to Jesus’ mother. They present gifts which would have been natural for wise men to have in their possession. We have no idea how many wise men there were; there were just three types of gifts. Later, God warned the wise men to return home a different way, which they did.

APPLICATION:

The scribes and chief priests, and King Herod, could have followed the wise men and worshipped Jesus. But they chose not to do so.

TRANSLATION - 2:13-15:

13 And after their returning, behold the angel of the Lord appears in a dream to Joseph saying, "After arising, take the child and His mother and flee into Egypt and stay there until I will speak to you. For Herod is about to search for the child to destroy Him. **14** So, arising, he took the child and His mother at night and returned into Egypt, **15** and he was there until the end of Herod; in order that the saying might be fulfilled by the Lord through the prophet saying, "Out of Egypt I called My Son."

WORDS:

"To return" (vs 14) is the same verb so translated in verse 12.

"End" (vs 15) denotes the end of his life, i. e. his death. This is the only place this specific word is used. However, the verb "to come to an end, die" is found 11 times (cf. 2:19).

OLD TESTAMENT REFERENCES:

While this passage (Hosea 11:1) is specifically quoted and applied to Jesus, a few other points create parallels between Jesus and Moses which the astute Bible student would recognize (Exo. 1:16-2:5; 4:19-20). Hosea lived during the days prior to the Assyrian exile. He warned his people (Israel) that they would be taken into captivity because of their idolatry, yet, when they repent, God would bring them back home. It is in that context that 11:1 is found. God called His son Israel out of Egypt and He would again call His children out of exile. Matthew uses that same imagery as a picture of God calling His Son out of Egypt.

ARCHAEOLOGY:

Egypt (vs 13) served as a place of refuge for the patriarchs as well as Jews hiding from the Babylonian exile during the days of Jeremiah. It is estimated that as many as 1 million Jews lived in Egypt during this period. At this point in time, Egypt was a Roman province outside of King Herod's jurisdiction. The distance from Bethlehem to Egypt was about 200 miles.

Since there is no secular reference to the slaughter of these babies (nor in any other gospel), some skeptics suggest it was not historical. However, it is very consistent with what we know of King Herod from secular sources. Additionally, Bethlehem was a small village and it is possible that he did not kill very many babies so that it did not warrant being mentioned in history books.

COMMENTS:

This was the only time Jesus left the area known as Palestine. Herod is a paranoid, wicked man. Baby Jesus, the King of the Jews, is a threat to Herod's reign. God sends His angel to tell Joseph to take Jesus and Mary (observe that Jesus is always mentioned first), and flee to Egypt. Joseph, as he has done since he was introduced to us, did what he was commanded to do. We do not know how long he remained in Egypt, but it was until the death of Herod. In that way, Jesus fulfilled the imagery of Hosea 11:1, God calling His Son out of Egypt. In several ways, Jesus is going to reflect the life of Israel: spending time in Egypt, baptism (3:13-17), then in the wilderness tempted (4:1-11), and on the Mount (17:1-8). Matthew does not present Jesus as a "New Moses," but Jesus parallels Moses and Israel in several ways.

APPLICATION:

Joseph is a great example of obeying what God commands, and doing so immediately.

TRANSLATION - 2:16-18:

16 At that time, Herod after seeing that he was deceived by the wise men, he was very angry, and after sending, he destroyed all the children in Bethlehem and in all its regions from two years and under, according to the time which he had determined precisely from the wise men. **17** At that time, there was fulfilled the saying through Jeremiah the prophet, saying, **18** A

voice in Ramah was heard, weeping and much lamenting. Rachel is weeping over her children and she was not wanting to be comforted, because they are not.

WORDS:

“To deceive” (vs 16) means to “ridicule, make fun of, mock, trick.” It is used 13 times in the Scriptures. Matthew uses the verb five times (here; 20:19; 27:29, 31, 41). This specific verb, “to be angry,” is used only here in Scripture. “To destroy” is used 24 times, meaning to “take away, do away, or kill.”

“Children” (vs 18) is a different word for “child” than the one used earlier. This one, used 99 times, can mean “child, son” but also, more generally, “descendants, posterity.” “To be comforted” is used 109 times, 9 times by Matthew. The word means “to call, invite, urge, implore, request, cheer up.” Its noun form is used of the Holy Spirit (John 14:26) and of Jesus (1 John 2:1 - “Advocate” or “Comforter” or “Helper”).

OLD TESTAMENT REFERENCES:

Jeremiah is mentioned three times by Matthew, here, 16:14; 27:9. Some Jews believed Jesus was Jeremiah risen from the dead (16:14). The passage from Jeremiah comes from 31:15. It is interesting that the same chapter speaks of a “new covenant” (31:31-34) which Jesus came to establish (Matt. 26:28; Luke 22:20; Heb. 8:8, 13; 9:15). In fact, it appears that almost all of Jeremiah 31 is Messianic.

ARCHAEOLOGY:

Ramah was the place where Rachel died and was buried (Gen. 35:19; 48:7; 1 Sam. 10:2). It was about 6 miles north of Jerusalem. It was also on the road which the Babylonian conquerors would have taken, leading exiles out of Jerusalem, toward Babylon (Jer. 40:1).

COMMENTS:

Herod is enraged that the wise men did not return to tell him where Jesus was located. Consistent with his evil nature, he decides to kill all the baby boys who would be the age of Jesus. He simply wants to murder any rival to his throne. In his behavior and the subsequent weeping of the moms in Bethlehem, Matthew finds another fulfillment. The moms weeping for their murdered babies fulfill the imagery of moms in Jeremiah’s day weeping that their children (including adults) were carried into exile. Again, the life of Jesus imitates the nation of Israel.

APPLICATION:

There is no reason, and the Bible does not teach it, to regard these babies as saints or martyrs. Babies do not know good from evil (Deut. 1:39); therefore, they have not sinned and have no need of salvation. They are pure from birth because they have not sinned and so tainted their pure souls. As unjust as the death of these baby boys were, God did not step in and stop it. He does not always stop evil people from choosing to do wrong. Yet, they will not escape His punishment.

Herod’s rage against these babies seems to be reflected in Revelation 12.

TRANSLATION - 2:19-23:

19 Then after Herod’s ending, behold the angel of the Lord appeared in a dream to Joseph in Egypt, **20** saying, “After arising, take the child and His mother and go into the land of Israel. For those seeking the soul of the child have died.” **21** So after arising, he took the child and His mother and entered into the land of Israel. **22** And after hearing that Archelaus reigns over Judah in the place of his father, Herod, he was afraid to go there. And being warned in a dream, he returned into the district of Galilee. **23** Thus was fulfilled the saying through the prophets that, “A Nazarene he will be called.”

WORDS:

“Ending” (vs 19) is the verbal form of the noun “end” or “death” used in verse 15.

“Soul” (vs 20) is used frequently in the NT (103 times) and can mean “self, life, person, living being, or life (in general).” Matthew uses the word 16 times.

“To be afraid” (vs 22) is used 95 times in Scripture. Matthew uses the word 18 times. It means “to be afraid, fear, reverence, or respect.”

OLD TESTAMENT REFERENCES:

There is no prophecy of Jesus being called a “Nazarene.” Bible students, therefore, have to contemplate what Matthew meant. It is important that Matthew uses the plural, “prophets,” and he does not use the word “saying...” Perhaps he was referring to Jesus as the “Branch” (*neser*) of Jesse from Isaiah 11:1 (see also Isa. 4:2; Jer. 23:5; 33:15; Zech. 3:8; 6:12). Or, perhaps (but not likely), Matthew is making a play on the word for “Nazirite,” one specially dedicated to God (Numbers 6; see Judges 13:5, 7). Yet, there is no other indication that Jesus took the Nazirite vow (see Matt. 11:19). Or, some suggest Matthew has in mind a host of passages which indicate Jesus was to be despised and rejected (see Isa. 53:2-3; Psa. 22:6-7) and associates that concept with the view in the first century that Nazareth was a despised and rejected city (cf. John 1:45-46). In some places, “sect of the Nazarene” was used pejoratively of Christianity (cf. Acts 24:5). Jesus was, indeed, despised (Matt. 12:24; 27:21-23, 63; Luke 23:11; John 1:11; 5:18; 6:66; 9:22).

ARCHAEOLOGY:

Archelaus (vs 22) was given Judea, Samaria, and Idumea at the death of King Herod, but he was banished by Augustus Caesar to Gaul in AD 6 when the Jews protested his cruelty. This is the only place where he is mentioned. Galilee, a district 55 miles by 25 miles, was under the leadership of another Herod, Antipas (Matt. 14:1-12; cf. Luke 3:1). Galilee fits into OT prophecy (Isa. 9:1-2) and fulfillment (Matt. 4:12-16). After Archelaus, Rome made the territory a Roman province under the government of a procurator. There are three procurators who are significant for Bible students: Felix (Acts chapters 23 & 24; 25:14), Festus (Acts 24:27; chapters 25 & 26), and Pontius Pilate (Matt. 27:2, 11-26).

Nazareth, as already indicated (see above under “Old Testament References”), was not a well-respected city. It was, however, larger than Bethlehem with archaeologists estimating between 500-2000 citizens at this time.

COMMENTS:

King Herod died in 4 BC. Again, an angel appeared to Joseph to command him to return to Palestine. “Those who sought the Child’s life are dead.” We do not know who the people were who were dead, except Herod. Perhaps some of his servants or perhaps Matthew uses “those” in a generic way. Or, perhaps he is reflecting, again, the life of Moses and God’s command to him in Exo. 4:19.

Joseph, consistent with his nature, returns to Palestine, but when he hears that King Herod’s son, Archelaus, is ruling, he is afraid. Again, God communicates with Joseph (an angel is not mentioned in verse 22) and Joseph settles in Galilee, in the village of Nazareth. At that point, Matthew suggests that Jesus will be known as a “Nazarene,” tying Jesus to the “Branch” of Isaiah 11:1, or perhaps suggesting He will not be respected because of His hometown (see above under “Old Testament References”).

APPLICATION:

Joseph obeys every time God commands him to do something. When he is afraid, he waits for further communication from God. We certainly need to obey Jesus Christ as Joseph obeyed God: Matt. 7:21-23, 24-27; Heb. 5:8-9.

Our modern calendars were developed by Dionysius Exiguus in the sixth century. His calculations were off slightly as he changed from a dating method based on the founding of the city of Rome to the birth of Jesus. Thus we say Jesus was born in 4 BC.

The date of Jesus' birth was assigned to December 25th, likely when pagan converts changed the Roman holiday Saturnalia into a holy day. Saturnalia was a vacation day, a day in which Christians could worship. It is more likely that Jesus was born in the spring when shepherds spent the night with their flocks (Luke 2:8) in anticipation of lambs being born. The celebration of the birth of Jesus ("Christmas") has no support in Scripture.