

Matthew moves from the conception of Jesus in 1:18–25 to events surrounding His infancy in 2:1–23. Luke 2 writes about His birth.

**2:1 Now after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea in the days of Herod the king, behold, wise men from the east came to Jerusalem,
2:2 saying, “Where is he who has been born king of the Jews? For we saw his star when it rose and have come to worship him.”**

“After Jesus was born” shows that the events mentioned here took place after Jesus’ birth but the text does not specify how long after. However, we should notice that (1) the appearance of the star coincided with Jesus’ birth before the Magi departed on their trip (Matt. 2:2), (2) Jesus’ family was now living in a home (Matt. 2:11) not a stable (Lk. 2:16), and (3) Herod killed all the children two years of age and under, according to the time which he had determined from the Magi (Matt. 2:16). If the Magi were from Babylon (see below), it may have taken up to four months to travel to Jerusalem (Ezra 7:9). Add to that some time for them to prepare for the journey and we might guess that Jesus was between 6 months and two years old (also Carson, 94). None of this is certain, but we can be confident that the Magi did not arrive at the scene of Jesus’ birth as depicted on modern Christmas cards.

Bethlehem of Judea distinguishes the city from the Bethlehem of Zebulun (i.e. Galilee; Josh. 19:15), which is further north. More importantly it identifies it as King David’s home (called “the city of David” in Luke 2:4), the long-awaited birthplace of the Davidic Messiah (Mic. 5:2, Matt. 2:6). Bethlehem was about a 2-hour walk (about 6 miles) south of Jerusalem.

“Bethlehem” means “house of bread.” It was no doubt called this because of the fruitfulness of the fields that surrounded it (Broadus, Matthew, 15). It was in the general locality where Jacob buried Rachel, where Ruth gleaned the rich wheat fields, and where David showed his youthful valor in protecting the flocks (Broadus, Matthew, 15).

“Herod” was a title (not a name) that could be accorded to a tetrarch (a ruler of a Roman province; 14:1) or a king. The Herod of Matthew 2 was Herod the Great who was named king of Judea by the Roman senate in 40 BC. Herod was born in 73 BC to an Idumean and died in 4 BC. Since he was not Jewish, he was not viewed as an illegitimate ruler by the Jews.

If Herod died in 4 BC, Jesus must have been born sometime before that—perhaps as early as 6 BC since He had been in Bethlehem for some time and also stayed in Egypt for a while before Herod died (see MacArthur, Matthew, 25–26 for more on Herod).

Herod was “politically gifted, intensely loyal, an excellent administrator, and clever enough to remain in the good graces of successive Roman emperors” (Carson, 84). King Herod was the only ruler in Palestine who succeeded in bringing peace to that region. However, he was also power hungry and placed heavy taxes upon the people to support a luxurious lifestyle and many building projects. He constructed a mountain fortress southeast of Bethlehem on the highest peak in the Judean desert called the Herodian where he watched for disturbances in the city of Jerusalem. He also rebuilt the temple; however, Herod built many temples to pagan gods as well. He was hated by the Jews for this.

But Herod was most known for his paranoia and cruelty. In order to find favor with the Jews he had his first wife (Doris) executed and married a Jewess named Mariamne, a princess of Hasmonaean descent. He later had Mariamne's brother drowned while bathing and her grandfather and mother killed. He also had Mariamne executed and two of his sons strangled in prison. His acts of cruelty increased as his life drew to a close. The murder of the infants in Bethlehem was his attempt to rid himself of another rival to the throne. Five days before he died he had another son executed. Knowing that none would mourn his death, he had the most distinguished citizens arrested, put in prison, and then executed when he died to assure that there would be mourning in Jerusalem.

After his death, Palestine was divided among three of his sons according to his wishes: Philip was made tetrarch of Iturea, Herod Antipas became tetrarch of Galilee and Peraea, and Archelaus ruled Judea, Samaria, and Idumea. Herod Antipas was the Herod that had John the Baptist beheaded, and treated Jesus with contempt at Jesus' trial before sending him back to Pontius Pilate.

Two other Herods are mentioned in the New Testament: Agrippa I (called "Herod the king") had James, the brother of John, killed and had Peter arrested; and the last Herod, Agrippa II, king of Trachonitis who replaced Felix for the trial of Paul. (see endnote for a summary)

Probably more myth has surrounded the story of the coming of **the wise men** (or "Magi," from the Greek μάγος) than any other story in the Bible. The only real facts we have about them are found in these few verses in Matthew. We don't know their names, their number, their mode of transportation, or where they came from.

Magi (pronounced may-ji) were a cast of wise men specializing in astrology, astronomy, medicine, and natural science. However, in NT times the term was used loosely (Carson, 85). In Acts 13:6 and 8, for example, it was used of false prophets and sorcerers.

There are four possible countries from which the Magi might have come—Arabia, Babylon, Persia, or Egypt.

A question naturally arises as to why the Magi had an interest in the birth of a Jewish king and how they knew He had been born. There is no definitive answer, but the following rationale provides fairly convincing support that they were from Babylon.

Around 605 BC Israel was conquered by Babylon and many Jews were taken into captivity. Daniel the prophet was among the first of them to go. While he was in captivity, he wrote the book of Daniel that mentions a group of men called Magi (μάγους; Dan. 1:20; 2:2; 5:7; etc; Carson, 85). Daniel's wisdom was unsurpassed and he eventually became the head of the Magi (Dan. 1:17–21; 2:46–49). Because of his compassion (Dan. 2:24) and great wisdom, Daniel was respected by the Babylonians and was able to teach them much about the living and true God, and the coming Messiah (Dan. 7:13, 14, 27; 9:24–27). In addition, the Book of Daniel is unique in that it is written both in Hebrew (the language of the Jews) and in Aramaic (the language the Babylonians spoke). The Aramaic section is from Daniel 2:4–7:28; the subject matter of this section concerns the gentile world. At the end of that section Daniel predicted the coming of a ruler from Israel who would rule the nations. If the Magi in Babylon believed that this would come to pass, the birth of "the king of the Jews" would be of great importance to them.

¹³ “I saw in the night visions,
and behold, with the clouds of heaven
there came one like a son of man,
and he came to the Ancient of Days
and was presented before him.

¹⁴ And to Him was given dominion
and glory and a kingdom,
that all peoples, nations, and languages
should serve Him;
His dominion is an everlasting dominion,
which shall not pass away,
and His kingdom one
that shall not be destroyed.

²⁷ And the kingdom and the dominion
and the greatness of the kingdoms under the whole heaven
shall be given to the people of the saints of the Most High;
his kingdom shall be an everlasting kingdom,
and all dominions shall serve and obey him.’

Although the Jews were allowed to return to Israel in 538 BC, many remained in Babylon, intermarried with the people of the east, and wielded quite a bit of influence (Carson, 85). It is, therefore, possible that the prophecies about the future ruler of Israel as told by Daniel were also known outside of Israel even in New Testament times.

Since Magi were experts in astronomy, it was not difficult for them to spot the sudden appearance of an unusual star in the heavens (Matt. 2:2) and link messianic prophecy to the supernatural phenomena. Therefore, they headed to Jerusalem, Israel’s capital, where specifics of His birth could most likely be found.

The NASB translates verse 2 as “we saw His star in the east” but the ESV is more likely correct in translating it as “we saw his star when it rose” since if the star was in the east, it would have been the opposite direction of Jerusalem. The **star** that they followed is variously interpreted as a conjunction of planets, a comet, the glory of God, or a star of supernatural origin. Although any of these explanations are possible, **the star** was probably supernatural. It is hard to imagine a natural event where a star rises, leads the Magi, reappears, and then comes to rest above the specific location Jesus is to be found.

The fact that gentiles came to Jesus emphasizes that Jesus is king of all people. The Magi coming to see Jesus also reveals the condition of Israel’s relationship to God at that time. In the Book of Matthew, it is the Jews and their leaders that rage against the Messiah and the gentiles who come to worship (contrast Psa. 2). John says of Christ, “He came to His own, and His own people did not receive Him” (Jn. 1:11). In Matthew 8:11–12 Jesus said, “many will come from east and west and recline at table with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven, while the sons of the kingdom will be thrown into the outer darkness.” The Magi (who were gentiles) recognized that the king of Israel had been born (notice that they ask, “Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews?” not, “Where is the one who will

become king of the Jews?) while the Jews were clueless. The Messiah was a nonentity in their lives. Even after the news arrived in Jerusalem, and the teachers told the travelers where to find the Savior, no one bothered to make the two-hour walk to see if the Magi's claim was true. Instead they simply returned to business as usual. The sheer silence and inactivity of the leaders is overwhelming in view of the magnitude of what was happening. Such was the spiritual condition of the nation over whom their King was to rule (Jn. 1:11).

The word, προσκυνέω, can be translated as "pay homage" or "**worship**." The root meaning is "to kiss." Metaphorically it means "to kiss the ground" or prostrate oneself before a superior. "This was the usual way of showing respect among the Jews" (Est. 8:3; Job 1:20; Dan. 3:7; Psa. 72:11; Isa. 46:6; Barnes). Considering that the Magi saw Jesus as a king, not God incarnate, "homage" fits best, although Matthew may expect Christians, looking upon the event in hindsight, to see more in the word than what appears at face value.

**2:3 When Herod the king heard this, he was troubled, and all Jerusalem with him;
2:4 and assembling all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them
where the Christ was to be born.**

Verse 4 makes clear that the king being spoken about was the Christ.

Herod was not conversant with the Jewish Scriptures, so he called together all the religious leaders from Jerusalem and its environs. The chief priests consisted of both the present high priest and former priests who held that position. They were most likely Sadducees. The teachers of the law were the legal experts of Jesus' day; they were the lawyers and teachers of biblical law and Jewish oral tradition (cf. Matt. 22:35). They were most likely Pharisees, though it is known that some priests were also scribes.

Herod had been called "king of the Jews" by the Senate in Rome for almost 40 years, but no one called him Messiah. Messiah is the long-awaited God-anointed Ruler, who would overcome all other rule, and bring in the end of history, and establish the kingdom of God and never die or lose His reign. For this reason, Herod was disturbed. All of Jerusalem was disturbed as well, not because they loved Herod so much or because they didn't want Messiah to come, but because they feared what Herod might do with such news (Carson, 86).

**2:5 They told him, "In Bethlehem of Judea, for so it is written by the prophet:
2:6 "And you, O Bethlehem, in the land of Judah,
are by no means least among the rulers of Judah;
for from you shall come a ruler
who will shepherd my people Israel.""**

Micah 5:2 had predicted that the Messiah would be born in Bethlehem. This was the understanding of the populace as well; in John 7:42 the people asked, "Has not the Scripture said that the Christ comes from the offspring of David, and comes from Bethlehem, the village where David was?"

In Micah 5 the king is clearly more than a mere human for it also says of Him that "His goings forth are from long ago, from the days of eternity . . . And He will arise and shepherd His flock in the strength of the LORD, in the majesty of the name of the LORD His God. And . . . He will be great to the ends of the earth."

When comparing Micah 5:2 to Matthew 2:6 the student of Scripture may wonder why OT quotes often appear so differently in the NT. The differences in these references are brought to light when comparing the two prophecies side by side.

Micah 5:2

“But you, Bethlehem Ephrathah, “
(ancient name of the city)

**“Though you are little among
the thousands of Judah,”**
(though considered as a small,
insignificant town in Judah)

**“Yet out of you shall come forth to
Me the One to be Ruler in Israel,”**

**“Whose goings forth are from of old,
from everlasting.”**

Matthew 2:6

“Bethlehem, land of Judah,”
(name of city in Jesus’ day)

**“are by no means least among
the rulers of Judah”**
(though small, Judah was an
important city)

**“for out of you will come a ruler
who will be the shepherd
of my people Israel.”**

How can these differences be accounted for?

At the time that Matthew was written, Hebrew was a dead language for most people. The common person spoke Aramaic or Greek. When the Old Testament was read publicly it was translated into the language of the people. The translation was not literal, nor was it a paraphrase, but something in-between—a sort of interpreting translation—with commentary sometimes added as well. Matthew quotes the Old Testament in exactly that way. He brings the actual meaning of Micah 5:2 out more clearly. Matthew, perhaps inspired by Micah 5:4, added the shepherd language of 2 Samuel 5:2 (cf. 1 Chron. 11:2) making it clear that Jesus is the one who fulfills the promises to David.

2:7 Then Herod summoned the wise men secretly and ascertained from them what time the star had appeared.

2:8 And 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.”

2:9 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.

The real reason why Herod wanted to know when the star appeared doesn’t come to light until later when we read in verse 16 that he desired to kill Jesus. At this point of time, Herod was confident that he had deceived the Magi, so he saw no need to send an escort with them.

As the Magi left Jerusalem the star reappeared and they headed for Bethlehem. The verses do not need to imply that the star was directly over the house where Jesus was, only that it led them to Bethlehem (Carson, 88). However, the wording does not exclude that possibility either.

2:10 When they saw the star, they rejoiced exceedingly with great joy.

2:11 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.

2:12 And being warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they departed to their own country by another way.

When they saw the star, they rejoiced exceedingly with great joy. This is a quadruple way of describing the magnitude of their joy. They did not just rejoice, they rejoiced *exceedingly*. But more than that, they rejoiced exceedingly *with joy*. And the joy that they rejoiced exceedingly with is called *great* joy. What was all this joy about?—they were on their way to see the Messiah.

In the ancient east it was extremely important to bring gifts when approaching a superior. Gold, frankincense, and myrrh were all expensive. The latter two were fragrant spices used in perfumes. Frankincense is a glittering odorous gum obtained by making incisions in the bark of several trees (Carson, 89). Myrrh comes from trees in Arabia and a few other places and is a highly valued spice, medicine, and perfume (Carson, 89). “These were natural enough as the traditional gifts of homage to a ruler. Compare the gifts sent by Jacob to Joseph (Gen. 43:11), and Psa. 45:8, for the myrrh and spices; Psa. 72:15, for the gold; Isa. 60:6, for gold and incense” (Ellicott). The gifts no doubt helped to finance the upcoming trip of Joseph, Mary, and Jesus to Egypt (Matt. 2:13–14).

Verse 11 reminds us of Psalm 72:10–11 and Isaiah 60:6 where the nations offer gifts to the King of Israel. Psalm 72 is a royal Psalm where petition is made for the prosperity of God’s Anointed as He rules the Davidic kingdom. It is messianic since Jesus shares in the promises made to David. Isaiah chapters 60–63 describe the glorious future of Jerusalem in which God’s glory shines through His anointed Servant (Isa. 61:1–3). The Magi’s actions are a foretaste, anticipating the complete fulfilment of these prophecies.

Psalm 72 Give the king your justice, O God,
and your righteousness to the royal son!
2 May he judge your people with righteousness,
and your poor with justice!
3 Let the mountains bear prosperity for the people,
and the hills, in righteousness!
4 May he defend the cause of the poor of the people,
give deliverance to the children of the needy,
and crush the oppressor!
5 May they fear you^[a] while the sun endures,
and as long as the moon, throughout all generations!
6 May he be like rain that falls on the mown grass,
like showers that water the earth!
7 In his days may the righteous flourish,
and peace abound, till the moon be no more!
8 May he have dominion from sea to sea,
and from the River^[b] to the ends of the earth!
9 May desert tribes bow down before him,
and his enemies lick the dust!
10 **May the kings of Tarshish and of the coastlands
render him tribute;
may the kings of Sheba and Seba
bring gifts!**

Isaiah 60 Arise, shine, for your light has come,
and the glory of the Lord has risen upon you.
2 For behold, darkness shall cover the earth,
and thick darkness the peoples;
but the Lord will arise upon you,
and his glory will be seen upon you.
3 And nations shall come to your light,
and kings to the brightness of your rising.
4 Lift up your eyes all around, and see;
they all gather together, they come to you;
your sons shall come from afar,
and your daughters shall be carried on the hip.
5 Then you shall see and be radiant;
your heart shall thrill and exult,
because the abundance of the sea shall be turned to
you,
the wealth of the nations shall come to you.
6 A multitude of camels shall cover you,
the young camels of Midian and Ephah;
all those from Sheba shall come.
**They shall bring gold and frankincense,
and shall bring good news, the praises of the Lord.**

Being warned in a dream not to return to Herod, the Magi departed to their own country by another way (2:12).

CONCLUDING OBSERVATIONS: Chapter 2 “contrasts Jesus’ legitimate kingship and sovereignty with the illegitimate roles of Herod and the Jewish leaders in Jerusalem, many of whom he had appointed” (Blomberg, *Commentary on the NT use of the OT*, 7). As the Asbury Bible Commentary says:

The contrast between Herod and Jesus centers upon the question of kingship. Matthew introduces the theme of kingship at the outset of the chapter: The wise men ask Herod where the **king of the Jews** has been born (2:2), Jesus is indirectly identified as **a ruler** (2:6), and Matthew repeatedly refers to Herod as **the king** (2:1, 3, 9). Matthew thus directs our attention to two types of king and two types of kingdom: the kingship of Herod versus the kingship of Jesus.

The kingship of Herod is presented in harsh terms. His tyrannical rule is characterized by an all-consuming desire to preserve his own status and power. Herod will stop at nothing, including the murder of innocent children, to realize his self-serving goals.

The nature of Jesus' kingship, on the other hand, is defined by the word from Micah quoted in 2:6: He will be **“the shepherd of my people Israel.”** He is the gentle and loving Ruler of His people, who, like a shepherd, saves His people from destruction. Specifically, Jesus reigns as King over His people by dying for them (27:11, 29, 37), thereby saving them from their sins (1:21; cf. 20:28). The contrast with Herod could not be more pronounced: Jesus gives His life for the sake of others; Herod takes the lives of others for his own sake.

This tension between the kingdom of Herod and the kingdom of Jesus points to the conflict between the kingdom of this world (i.e., the desire for power and self-rule on the part of evil persons everywhere) and the kingdom of God. The passage challenges readers to reflect upon the character of their own lives in order to determine whether the spirit and attitude of Herod (an attitude of militant self-rule) is present to any degree in their hearts. Those readers who see a bit of Herod in themselves will soon encounter a word of challenge and hope: “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near” (3:2; 4:17).

The second contrast in chapter 2 centers upon response to the person of Jesus. Matthew distinguishes between Herod and the wise men in terms of their responses to Jesus. The response of the wise men to Jesus is entirely appropriate, and their actions serve as a model of true discipleship. They seek Christ (v.2), and when they have found Him they rejoice (v.10), worship (2:2, 11a), and offer Him gifts that befit a king (2:11b; cf. Psa. 45:7–9; 72:15). The response of Herod is completely different. He is disturbed at the news of the wise men (2:3), then engages in deception (2:7), lying (2:8), and murder (2:16) in order to destroy Jesus. The wise men worship Jesus while Herod seeks to kill Him. Here as elsewhere in Matthew there is no middle ground: those who will not worship Jesus as the royal Messiah necessarily reject Him and seek His destruction.

ENDNOTE: “Herods” in the New Testament

1. **Herod the Great (ruled 40–4 B.C.)** Matthew 2 (see above).
2. **Herod Archelaus (ruled 4 B.C.–A.D. 6)** was one of Herod the Great’s three sons. He received one-half of his father’s territory (Judea and Samaria). He was replaced by a Roman procurator less than ten years into his reign which is why Pontius Pilate was in charge at Jesus’ crucifixion rather than him.
3. **Herod Antipas (ruled 4 B.C.–A.D. 39)** was called “the Fox” by Jesus (Luke 13:32). He also received a quarter of his father’s territory (Galilee and Perea). He divorced his first wife and married Herodias, the wife of his brother (who was yet a different “Herod”). He killed John the Baptist. Pontius Pilate sent Jesus to see this Herod as part of Jesus’ trial since he was visiting Jerusalem at the time.
4. **Herod Philip the Tetrarch (ruled 4 B.C.–A.D. 34)** received the remaining quarter of his father’s territory (north and east of Galilee—mostly ruled over Syrians and Greeks). He married his niece, Salome, the daughter of Herodias (Herod Antipas’s wife-of-sin).
5. **Herod Agrippa I (ruled A.D. 37–44 [41–44 in Judea])** was the grandson of Herod the Great and nephew of Herodias, Herod Antipas’s wife. He eventually ended up ruling over even more territory than his grandfather, Herod the Great, did. He is the one who put Peter in prison (Acts 12:1–5). He is also the one who “did not give God the glory” and was struck by an angel and “eaten by worms” (Acts 12:20–23).
6. **Herod Agrippa II (ruled A.D. 50s until long after the end of the Jewish war; died around A.D. 93)** Like his father, Herod Agrippa I, and his great-grandfather Herod the Great, he ruled over a large territory. This is the person who interviewed Paul along with the Roman procurator Porcius Festus when Paul was imprisoned in Caesarea (in Palestine) after Paul’s third missionary journey (Acts 25–26). Agrippa exclaimed to Paul, “In a short time you will persuade me to become a Christian” (Acts 26:28).