

# *“Easter’s Troubling Truth”*

Matthew 2:1-12

**EASTER**

March 31, 2024

**INTRO:** What are you thinking about right now?  
How are you feeling today?  
Are you considering Christmas/Easter?

**PRAYER**

**CONTEXT:**

- Today is Resurrection Sunday!
- We’re walking thru Matthew’s Gospel
- Today we start chapter 2...
- Today we’re going to connect some serious dots

**BIG IDEA:** The trouble is...  
Christ was born King!

**TEXT:**

*The Visit of the Wise Men*

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 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." 3 When **Herod the king** heard this, he was troubled, and all Jerusalem with him; 4 and assembling all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Christ was to be born. 5 They told him, "In Bethlehem of Judea, for **so it is written by the prophet**: 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."

7 Then **Herod summoned the wise men secretly** and ascertained from them what time the star had appeared. 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." 9 After listening to **the king**, they went on their way. And behold, **the star that they had seen when it rose went before them until it came to rest over the place** where the child was. 10 When they saw the star, they rejoiced exceedingly with great joy. 11 And going into the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother, and they fell down and **worshiped** him. Then, opening their treasures, they offered him gifts, gold and frankincense and myrrh. 12 And **being warned in a dream** not to return to Herod, they departed to their own country by another way.

## PREVIEW:

1. Today is...
2. Troubling
3. Truth

# I. Today is...

1. Truth about today
2. Traditions about today...

**VIDEO:** *Resurrection Contextualization*

# II. Troubling

**Scripture** = *“troubled,” “deeply disturbed,” “worried,” “very upset,” “stirred,” “alarmed,” “greatly agitated”*

1. Mankind

- We’re in modern day Sodom & Gomorrah!
- White House: Easter is “Transgender Day.”
- The world is drunk-on & blinded-by SIN!

**VIDEO:** *Doomed Society*

2. Miracles



3. Message



- Jesus Christ is CREATOR Christ; over all creation!
- Jesus Christ is...*Truth~Love~Grace~Mercy~HOPE!*
- Jesus Christ was BORN King...
- Jesus Christ IS King...
- Jesus Christ is MY King!

**OR**

- I REJECT Jesus Christ's coming & Kingship...
- I REJECT Jesus Christ's crucifixion & resurrection
- I REJECT Jesus Christ's LORDSHIP over my life!
- I REJECT Jesus Christ's resurrecting redemption!
- I REJECT Jesus Christ's life-giving, gifted-Gospel!

#### 4. Methods

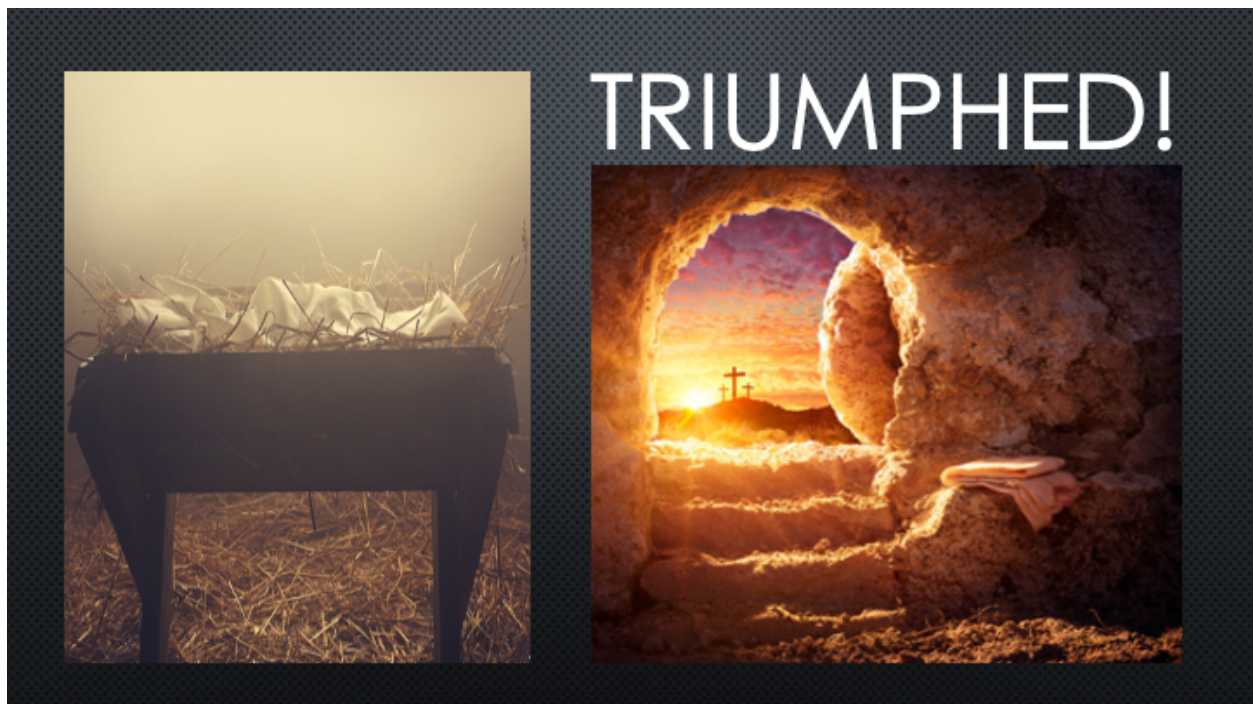
- Acts 1:8... *Truth in Love...* No matter what!



**VIDEO:** *Luuka Sharing Troubling Truth*

## 5. Messiah

- *Christ is The crucified & resurrected CREATOR...*
- *He is RISEN... ALIVE... The living & loving God!*
- *He is The ALMIGHTY!*
- *Jesus is LORD... Sovereign over ALL!*
- *All resistance to His reign will receive His wrath!*



## III. Truth

1. m M m = The Gospel TRUTH (miracle Messiah mission)
2. John 3:3; 3:16; 3:36
3. John 6:44 & John 14:6 & 15 & John 20:21

**VIDEO:** *Easter*

- Is that what you came to celebrate?
  - What are you thinking right now?
  - How are you feeling right now?
  - *Have you connected Christmas & Easter?*
- We need more Friday in our Sunday!
- We need more Sunday in our Monday!
- We need to BE...
  - Matthew 28:18-20
  - Acts 1:8
  - Titus 2:15

## **CLOSE:**

- Today's truth is timeless truth!
- **Genesis 3:15**
- **John 3:16**

**VIDEO:** *That's My King!*

*Jesus was not born to "become a king."* **NO!**  
**Jesus was BORN The King of kings & LORD of lords!**

# **PRAYER**

**WORSHIP:** *Faces of Amazing Grace & Forever*

# STUDY NOTES:

## KEY WORDS:

### ◀ 4352. proskuneó ▶

#### Strong's Concordance

proskuneó: to do reverence to

**Original Word:** προσκυνέω

**Part of Speech:** Verb

**Transliteration:** proskuneó

**Phonetic Spelling:** (pros-koo-neh'-o)

**Definition:** to do reverence to

**Usage:** I go down on my knees to, do obeisance to, worship.

#### HELPS Word-studies

4352 *proskynéō* (from [4314](#) /*prós*, "towards" and *kynéo*, "to kiss") – properly, to kiss the ground when prostrating before a superior; to *worship*, ready "to fall down/prostrate oneself to adore on one's knees" (*DNTT*); to "do obeisance" (*BAGD*).

["The basic meaning of [4352](#) (*proskynéō*), in the opinion of most scholars, is to *kiss*. . . . On Egyptian reliefs worshipers are represented with outstretched hand throwing a kiss to (*pros-*) the deity" (*DNTT*, 2, 875,876).

4352 (*proskynéō*) has been (metaphorically) described as "the kissing-ground" between believers (the Bride) and Christ (the heavenly Bridegroom). While this is true, [4352](#) (*proskynéō*) suggests the willingness to make all necessary physical *gestures of obeisance*.]

#### NAS Exhaustive Concordance

##### Word Origin

from [pros](#) and *kuneó* (to kiss)

##### Definition

to do reverence to

##### NASB Translation

bow down (1), bow down before (1), bowed down (1), bowed down before (2), bowing before (1), bowing down (1), prostrated himself before (1), worship (32), worshiped (17), worshipers (1), worshiping (1), worships (1).

#### Thayer's Greek Lexicon

STRONGS NT 4352: προσκυνέω



**προσκυνέω, προσκύνω**; imperfect **προσεκύνουν**; future **προσκυνήσω**; 1 aorist **προσεκύνησα**; from Aeschylus and Herodotus down; the Sept. very often for **𐤀𐤓𐤏𐤓𐤕𐤓** (to prostrate oneself); properly, **to kiss the hand to (toward) one**, in token of reverence: Herodotus 1, 134; (cf. K. F. Hermann, Gottesdienstl. Alterthümer d. Griech. § 21; especially Hoelemann, Die Biblical Gestalt. d. Anbetung in his 'Bibelstudien' i., 106ff); hence, among the Orientals, especially the Persians, **to fall upon the knees and touch the ground with the forehead** as an expression of profound reverence ("to make a 'salam'"); Latin *veneror* (Nepos, Conon. 3, 3), *adoro* (Pliny, h. n. 28, 5, 25; Suetonius, Vitell. 2); hence, in the N. T. **by kneeling or prostration to do homage (to one) or make obeisance**, whether in order to express respect or to make supplication. It is used a. of homage shown to men of superior rank: absolutely, [Matthew 20:20](#) (the Jewish high-priests are spoken of in Josephus, b. j. 4, 5, 2 as **προσκυνούμενοι**); **πεσών ἐπί τούς πόδας προσεκύνησεν**, [Acts 10:25](#); **τίνι** (according to the usage of later writings; cf. Winer's Grammar, 36, 210 (197); (Buttmann, § 131, 4); Lob. ad Phryn., p. 463), [Matthew 2:2, 8](#); [Matthew 8:2](#); [Matthew 9:18](#); [Matthew 14:33](#); [Matthew 15:25](#); (); (R G); [Mark 5:6](#) (here WH Tr marginal reading have the accusative); ; [John 9:38](#); with **πεσών** preceding, [Matthew 2:11](#); [Matthew 4:9](#); **ἐνώπιον τῶν ποδῶν τίνος**, [Revelation 3:9](#); (it may perhaps be mentioned that some would bring in here [Hebrews 11:21](#) **προσεκύνησεν ἐπί τό ἄκρον τῆς ῥάβδου αὐτοῦ**, explaining it by the (Egyptian) custom of bowing upon the magistrate's staff of office in taking an oath; cf. Chabas, Melanges Egypt. III. i., p. 80, cf. p. 91f; but see below).

**b.** of homage rendered to God and the ascended Christ, to heavenly beings, and to demons: absolutely (our **to worship**) (cf. Winer's Grammar, 593 (552)), [John 4:20](#); [John 12:20](#); [Acts 8:27](#); [Acts 24:11](#); [Hebrews 11:21](#) (cf. above); [Revelation 11:1](#); **πίπτειν καί προσκυνεῖν**, [Revelation 5:14](#); **τίνι**, [John 4:21, 23](#); [Acts 7:43](#); [Hebrews 1:6](#); [Revelation 4:10](#); [Revelation 7:11](#); [Revelation 11:16](#); [Revelation 14:7](#); [Revelation 16:2](#); [Revelation 19:4, 20](#); [Revelation 22:8](#); [Revelation 13:4](#) G L T Tr WH (twice (the 2nd time WH text only)); G T Tr WH text; [Revelation 20:4](#) Rec.; **πεσών ἐπί πρόσωπον προσκυνήσει τῷ Θεῷ**, [1 Corinthians 14:25](#); **πίπτειν ἐπί τά πρόσωπα καί προσκυνεῖν τῷ Θεῷ**, [Revelation 11:16](#); preceded by **πίπτειν ἔμπροσθεν τῶν ποδῶν τίνος**, [Revelation 19:10](#). in accordance with the usage of the older and better writings with **τινα** or **τί** (cf. Matthiae, § 412): [Matthew 4:10](#); [Luke 4:8](#); [Revelation 9:20](#); [Revelation 13:12](#); [Revelation 14:9, 11](#); also [Revelation 13:4](#) (Rec. twice; (WH marginal reading once)), 8 (where Rec. dative), 15 R L WH marginal reading; 20:4a (where Rec. dative), 4b (where Relz dative); [Luke 24:52](#) R G L Tr brackets WH reject; (the Sept. also connects the word far more frequent with the dative than with the accusative (cf. Hoelemann as above, p. 116ff)); **ἐνώπιον τίνος**, [Luke 4:7](#); [Revelation 15:4](#).

## Strong's Exhaustive Concordance

worship.

From [pros](#) and a probable derivative of [kuon](#) (meaning to kiss, like a dog licking his master's hand); to fawn or crouch to, i.e. (literally or figuratively) prostrate oneself in homage (do reverence to, adore) -- worship.

see GREEK [pros](#)

see GREEK [kuon](#)

## ◀ 5015. tarassó ▶

### Strong's Concordance

**tarassó:** to stir up, to trouble

**Original Word:** ταράσσω

**Part of Speech:** Verb

**Transliteration:** tarassó

**Phonetic Spelling:** (tar-as'-so)

**Definition:** to stir up, to trouble

**Usage:** I disturb, agitate, stir up, trouble.

### HELPS Word-studies

**5015** *tarássō* – properly, put in *motion* (to agitate back-and-forth, shake to-and-fro); (figuratively) to set in motion what *needs to remain still* (at ease); to "trouble" ("agitate"), causing inner perplexity (emotional agitation) from getting *too stirred up inside* ("upset").

[[5015](#) (*tarássō*) translates 46 Hebrew words in the *LXX* (*Abbott-Smith*), showing the enormous connotation power of OT Hebrew vocabulary.]

### NAS Exhaustive Concordance

**Word Origin**

from a prim. root tarach-

**Definition**

to stir up, to trouble

**NASB Translation**

disturbed (1), disturbing (2), stirred (3), stirring (1), terrified (2), troubled (9).

### Thayer's Greek Lexicon

STRONGS NT 5015: ταράσσω

**ταράσσω**; imperfect *ἐτάρασσον*; 1 aorist *ἐταράξα*; passive, present imperative 3 person singular *ταρασσέσθω*; imperfect *ἐταρασσομην*; perfect *τεταραγμαί*; 1 aorist *ἐταράχθην*; from Homer down; **to agitate, trouble** (a thing, by the movement of its parts to and fro);

*a.* properly: *τό ὕδωρ*, [John 5:4](#) (R L),<sup>7</sup> ([Ezekiel 32:2](#); *τόν Πόντον*, Homer, *Odyssey* 5, 291; *τό πέλαγος*, Euripides, *Tro.* 88; *τόν ποταμόν*, Aesop *fab.* 87 (25)).

*b.* tropically, "to cause one inward commotion, take away his calmness of mind, disturb his equanimity; to disquiet, make restless" (the Sept. for *לָרַג*, etc.; passive, *ταράσσομαι* for *רָגַג*, to be stirred up, irritated); *α.* **to stir up**: *τόν ὄχλον*, [Acts 17:8](#); (*τούς ὄχλους*, [Acts](#)

[17:13](#) L T Tr WH). *β.* **to trouble**: *τινα*, to strike one's spirit with fear or dread,

passive, [Matthew 2:3](#); [Matthew 14:26](#); [Mark 6:50](#); [Luke 1:12](#); ([Luke 24:38](#)); [1 Peter](#)

[3:14](#); *παράσσεται ἡ καρδιά*, [John 14:1, 27](#); to affect with great pain or

sorrow: *ἑαυτόν* (cf. our **to trouble oneself**), [John 11:33](#) (A. V. **was troubled** (some understand the word here of bodily agitation)) (*σεαυτόν μή ταράσσε*, Antoninus 4,

26); *τετάρακται ἡ ψυχή*, [John 12:27](#) ([Psalm 6:4](#)); *ἐταράχθη τῷ πνεύματι*, [John](#)

[13:21](#). *γ.* **to render anxious or distressed, to perplex** the mind of one **by suggesting scruples or doubts** (Xenophon, *mem.* 2, 6, 17): [Galatians 1:7](#); [Galatians 5:10](#); *τιναλόγοις*, [Acts 15:24](#).

(Compare: *διαπαράσσω*, *ἐκπαράσσω*.)

## Strong's Exhaustive Concordance

trouble.

Of uncertain affinity; to stir or agitate (roil water) -- trouble.

## ◀ 4165. poimainó ▶

### Strong's Concordance

poimainó: to act as a shepherd

**Original Word:** ποιμαίνω

**Part of Speech:** Verb

**Transliteration:** poimainó

**Phonetic Spelling:** (poy-mah'-ee-no)

**Definition:** to act as a shepherd

**Usage:** I shepherd, tend, herd; hence: I rule, govern.

## HELPS Word-studies

**Cognate:** 4165 *poimainō* – properly, to *shepherd*, caring for (protecting) the flock.

[4165](#) /*poimainō* ("shepherding, pastoring") is distinct from "feeding" ([1006](#) /*bóskō*). [4165](#) (*poimainō*) focuses on "tending" ("shepherding") (*WS*, 274), which includes guarding, guiding, and folding the flock and is only provided (ultimately) by Jesus Christ – the Shepherd, who calls under-shepherds (such as elder-overseers) to guard and guide His people by His direction (1 Pet 5:1-5). [See 4166](#) (*poimēn*).

[[4165](#) /*poimainō* ("to shepherd, tend") occurs 11 times in the NT, usually with a figurative sense of "shepherding (tending) God's flock." This provides Spirit-directed *guidance (care)* conjunction with *feeding* His people (teaching them Scripture).]

## NAS Exhaustive Concordance

**Word Origin**

from [poimén](#)

**Definition**

to act as a shepherd

**NASB Translation**

caring (1), rule (3), shepherd (5), tending sheep (1), tends (1).

## Thayer's Greek Lexicon

STRONGS NT 4165: ποιμαίνω

ποιμαίνω; future ποιμανῶ; 1 aorist imperative 2 person plural ποιμάνατε ([1 Peter 5:2](#)); (ποιμήν, which see); from Homer down; the Sept. for פָּדַד; **to feed, to tend a flock, keep sheep;**

*a.* properly: [Luke 17:7](#); [ποιμήνην](#), [1 Corinthians 9:7](#).

*b.* tropically, **α. to rule, govern:** of rulers, [τινα](#), [Matthew 2:6](#); [Revelation 2:27](#); [Revelation 12:5](#); [Revelation 19:15](#) ([2 Samuel 5:2](#); [Micah 5:6](#) (); , etc.; (cf. Winers Grammar, 17)) (see [ποιμήν](#), *b.* at the end); of the overseers (pastors) of the church, [John 21:16](#); [Acts 20:28](#); [1 Peter 5:2](#). **β. to furnish pasturage or food; to nourish:** [ἐαυτόν](#), to cherish one's body, to serve the body, [Jude 1:12](#); to supply the requisites for the soul's needs (R. V. **shall be their shepherd**), [Revelation 7:17](#). (Synonym: see [βόσκω](#), at the end.)

## Strong's Exhaustive Concordance

to shepherd, rule

From [poimen](#); to tend as a shepherd of (figuratively, supervisor) -- feed (cattle), rule.

see GREEK [poimen](#)

## Forms and Transliterations

εποίμαινε εποίμαινόν εποίμανεν Ποίμαινε Ποίμαινε ποιμαίνει ποιμαίνει ποιμαίνει ποιμαίνει ποιμαίνεις ποιμαίνεις ποιμαίνοντα ποιμαίνοντα ποιμαίνοντας ποιμαίνοντες ποιμαίνοντες ποιμαίνοντων ποιμαίνουσαι ποιμαίνουσιν ποιμαίνων ποιμανατε ποιμάνατε ποιμανει ποιμανεί ποιμανεῖ ποιμανεῖς ποιμανθήση ποίμανον ποιμανούσι ποιμανούσιν ποιμανώ ποιμενικά ποιμένικω Poimaine Poímaine roimainei roimaínei roimainein roimaínein roimainonta roimaínonta roimainontes roimaínontes roimanate roimánate roimanei roimaneî

## Links

[Interlinear Greek](#) • [Interlinear Hebrew](#) • [Strong's Numbers](#) • [Englishman's Greek Concordance](#) • [Englishman's Hebrew Concordance](#) • [Parallel Texts](#)

## Englishman's Concordance

### [Matthew 2:6 V-FIA-3S](#)

**GRK:** ἡγούμενος ὅστις ποιμανεῖ τὸν λαόν

**NAS:** WHO *WILL SHEPHERD* MY PEOPLE

**KJV:** a Governor, that *shall rule* my people

**INT:** a leader who *will shepherd* the people

### [Luke 17:7 V-PPA-AMS](#)

**GRK:** ἀροτριῶντα ἢ ποιμαίνοντα ὅς εἰσελθόντι

**NAS:** or *tending sheep*, will say

**KJV:** or *feeding cattle*, will say

**INT:** plowing or *shepherding* the [one] having come in

### [John 21:16 V-PMA-2S](#)

**GRK:** λέγει αὐτῷ Ποίμαινε τὰ πρόβατά

**NAS:** You. He said *to him, Shepherd* My sheep.

**KJV:** He saith unto him, *Feed* my sheep.

**INT:** He says to him *Shepherd* the sheep

### [Acts 20:28 V-PNA](#)

**GRK:** ἔθετο ἐπισκόπους ποιμαίνειν τὴν ἐκκλησίαν

**NAS:** you overseers, *to shepherd* the church

**KJV:** overseers, *to feed* the church

**INT:** did set overseers *to shepherd* the church

### [1 Corinthians 9:7 V-PIA-3S](#)

**GRK:** ἢ τίς ποιμαίνει ποίμνην καὶ

**NAS:** who *tends* a flock

KJV: or who *feedeth* a flock, and  
INT: or who *shepherds* a flock and

### 1 Peter 5:2 V-AMA-2P

GRK: ποιμάνατε τὸ ἐν  
NAS: *shepherd* the flock of God  
KJV: *Feed* the flock of God  
INT: *shepherd* the among

### Jude 1:12 V-PPA-NMP

GRK: ἀφόβως ἑαυτοὺς ποιμαίνοντες νεφέλαι ἄνυδροι  
NAS: with you without fear, *caring* for themselves;  
KJV: with you, *feeding* themselves  
INT: fearlessly themselves *shepherding* clouds without water

### Revelation 2:27 V-FIA-3S

GRK: καὶ ποιμανεῖ αὐτοὺς ἐν  
NAS: *AND HE SHALL RULE* THEM WITH A ROD  
KJV: And *he shall rule* them with  
INT: and *he will shepherd* them with

### Revelation 7:17 V-FIA-3S

GRK: τοῦ θρόνου ποιμανεῖ αὐτοὺς καὶ  
NAS: of the throne *will be their shepherd*, and will guide  
KJV: of the throne *shall feed* them,  
INT: of the throne *will shepherd* them and

### Revelation 12:5 V-PNA

GRK: ὃς μέλλει ποιμαίνειν πάντα τὰ  
NAS: [child], who *is to rule* all  
KJV: who was *to rule* all nations  
INT: who is about *to shepherd* all the

### Revelation 19:15 V-FIA-3S

GRK: καὶ αὐτὸς ποιμανεῖ αὐτοὺς ἐν  
NAS: the nations, *and He will rule* them with a rod  
KJV: and he *shall rule* them with  
INT: and he *will shepherd* them with

### Strong's Greek 4165 11 Occurrences

Ποίμαινε — 1 Occ.  
ποιμαίνει — 1 Occ.  
ποιμαίνειν — 2 Occ.

[ποιμαίνοντα — 1 Occ.](#)

[ποιμαίνοντες — 1 Occ.](#)

[ποιμάνατε — 1 Occ.](#)

[ποιμανεῖ — 4 Occ](#)

## Matthew 27: (the accounts of Great Friday)

### *Jesus Delivered to Pilate*

[1](#)When morning came, all the chief priests and the elders of the people took counsel against Jesus to put him to death. [2](#)And they bound him and led him away and delivered him over to Pilate the governor.

### *Judas Hangs Himself*

[3](#)Then when Judas, his betrayer, saw that Jesus was condemned, he changed his mind and brought back the thirty pieces of silver to the chief priests and the elders, [4](#)saying, "I have sinned by betraying innocent blood." They said, "What is that to us? See to it yourself." [5](#)And throwing down the pieces of silver into the temple, he departed, and he went and hanged himself. [6](#)But the chief priests, taking the pieces of silver, said, "It is not lawful to put them into the treasury, since it is blood money." [7](#)So they took counsel and bought with them the potter's field as a burial place for strangers. [8](#)Therefore that field has been called the Field of Blood to this day. [9](#)Then was fulfilled what had been spoken by the prophet Jeremiah, saying, "And they took the thirty pieces of silver, the price of him on whom a price had been set by some of the sons of Israel, [10](#)and they gave them for the potter's field, as the Lord directed me."

### *Jesus Before Pilate*

[11](#)Now Jesus stood before the governor, and the governor asked him, **"Are you the King of the Jews?"** **Jesus said, "You have said SO."** [12](#)But when he was accused by the chief priests and elders, he gave no answer. [13](#)Then Pilate said to him, "Do you not hear how many things they testify against you?" [14](#)But he gave him no answer, not even to a single charge, so that the governor was greatly amazed.

### ***The Crowd Chooses Barabbas***

<sup>15</sup>Now at the feast the governor was accustomed to release for the crowd any one prisoner whom they wanted. <sup>16</sup>And they had then a notorious prisoner called Barabbas. <sup>17</sup>So when they had gathered, Pilate said to them, "Whom do you want me to release for you: Barabbas, or Jesus who is called Christ?" <sup>18</sup>For he knew that it was out of envy that they had delivered him up. <sup>19</sup>Besides, while he was sitting on the judgment seat, his wife sent word to him, "Have nothing to do with that righteous man, for I have suffered much because of him today in a dream." <sup>20</sup>**Now the chief priests and the elders persuaded the crowd to ask for Barabbas and destroy Jesus.** <sup>21</sup>The governor again said to them, "Which of the two do you want me to release for you?" And they said, "Barabbas." <sup>22</sup>**Pilate said to them, "Then what shall I do with Jesus who is called Christ?" They all said, "Let him be crucified!"** <sup>23</sup>And he said, "Why? What evil has he done?" **But they shouted all the more, "Let him be crucified!"**

### ***Pilate Delivers Jesus to Be Crucified***

<sup>24</sup>So when Pilate saw that he was gaining nothing, but rather that a riot was beginning, he took water and washed his hands before the crowd, saying, **"I am innocent of this man's blood; see to it yourselves."** <sup>25</sup>And **all the people answered, "His blood be on us and on our children!"** <sup>26</sup>Then he released for them Barabbas, and having scourged<sup>c</sup> Jesus, delivered him to be crucified.

### ***Jesus Is Mocked***

<sup>27</sup>Then the soldiers of the governor took Jesus into the governor's headquarters, and they gathered the whole battalion before him. <sup>28</sup>And they stripped him and put a scarlet robe on him, <sup>29</sup>and **twisting together a crown of thorns, they put it on his head and put a reed in his right hand. And kneeling before him, they mocked him, saying, "Hail, King of the Jews!"** <sup>30</sup>And they spit on him and took the reed and



struck him on the head. [31](#)And when they had mocked him, they stripped him of the robe and put his own clothes on him and led him away to crucify him.

### ***The Crucifixion***

[32](#)As they went out, they found a man of Cyrene, Simon by name. They compelled this man to carry his cross. [33](#)And when they came to a place called Golgotha (which means Place of a Skull), [34](#)they offered him wine to drink, mixed with gall, but when he tasted it, he would not drink it. [35](#)And when they had crucified him, they divided his garments among them by casting lots. [36](#)Then they sat down and kept watch over him there. [37](#)And **over his head they put the charge against him, which read, “This is Jesus, the King of the Jews.”** [38](#)Then two robbers were crucified with him, one on the right and one on the left. [39](#)And those who passed by derided him, wagging their heads [40](#)and saying, “You who would destroy the temple and rebuild it in three days, save yourself! If you are the Son of God, come down from the cross.” [41](#)So **also the chief priests, with the scribes and elders, mocked him, saying, [42](#)“He saved others; he cannot save himself. He is the King of Israel; let him come down now from the cross, and we will believe in him.** [43](#)He trusts in God; let God deliver him now, if he desires him. For he said, ‘I am the Son of God.’” [44](#)And the robbers who were crucified with him also reviled him in the same way.

### ***The Death of Jesus***

[45](#)Now from the sixth hour there was darkness over all the land until the ninth hour. [46](#)And about the ninth hour Jesus cried out with a loud voice, saying, “Eli, Eli, lema sabachthani?” that is, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” [47](#)And some of the bystanders, hearing it, said, “This man is calling Elijah.” [48](#)And one of them at once ran and took a sponge, filled it with sour wine, and put it on a reed and gave it to him to drink. [49](#)But the others said, “Wait, let us see whether Elijah will come to save him.” [50](#)And Jesus cried out again with a loud voice and yielded up his spirit.

[51](#)And **behold, the curtain of the temple was torn in two, from top to bottom. And the earth shook, and the rocks were split.** [52](#)The tombs also were opened. And many bodies of the saints who had fallen asleep were raised, [53](#)and coming out of the tombs after his resurrection they went into the holy city and appeared to many. [54](#)When the centurion and those who were with him, keeping watch over Jesus, saw the earthquake and what took place, they were filled with awe and said, “Truly this was the Son of God!”

[55](#) There were also many women there, looking on from a distance, who had followed Jesus from Galilee, ministering to him, [56](#) among whom were Mary Magdalene and Mary the mother of James and Joseph and the mother of the sons of Zebedee.

### ***Jesus Is Buried***

[57](#) When it was evening, there came a rich man from Arimathea, named Joseph, who also was a disciple of Jesus. [58](#) He went to Pilate and asked for the body of Jesus. Then Pilate ordered it to be given to him. [59](#) And Joseph took the body and wrapped it in a clean linen shroud [60](#) and laid it in his own new tomb, which he had cut in the rock. And he rolled a great stone to the entrance of the tomb and went away. [61](#) Mary Magdalene and the other Mary were there, sitting opposite the tomb.

### ***The Guard at the Tomb***

[62](#) The next day, that is, after the day of Preparation, the chief priests and the Pharisees gathered before Pilate [63](#) and said, "Sir, we remember how that impostor said, while he was still alive, 'After three days I will rise.' [64](#) Therefore order the tomb to be made secure until the third day, lest his disciples go and steal him away and tell the people, 'He has risen from the dead,' and the last fraud will be worse than the first." [65](#) Pilate said to them, "You have a guard of soldiers. Go, make it as secure as you can." [66](#) So they went and made the tomb secure by sealing the stone and setting a guard.

## **NIV Application Commentary:**

### **Matthew 2:1–12**

**A**FTER JESUS WAS born in Bethlehem in Judea, during the time of King Herod, Magi from the east came to Jerusalem <sup>2</sup>and asked, "Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews? We saw his star in the east and have come to worship him."

<sup>3</sup>When King Herod heard this he was disturbed, and all Jerusalem with him. <sup>4</sup>When he had called together all the people's chief priests and teachers of the law, he asked them where the Christ was to be born. <sup>5</sup>"In Bethlehem in Judea," they replied, "for this is what the prophet has written:

<sup>6</sup>" 'But you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah,  
are by no means least among the rulers of Judah;  
for out of you will come a ruler  
who will be the shepherd of my people Israel.' "

<sup>7</sup>Then Herod called the Magi secretly and found out from them the exact time the star had appeared. <sup>8</sup>He sent them to Bethlehem and said, “Go and make a careful search for the child. As soon as you find him, report to me, so that I too may go and worship him.”

<sup>9</sup>After they had heard the king, they went on their way, and the star they had seen in the east went ahead of them until it stopped over the place where the child was. <sup>10</sup>When they saw the star, they were overjoyed. <sup>11</sup>On coming to the house, they saw the child with his mother Mary, and they bowed down and worshiped him. Then they opened their treasures and presented him with gifts of gold and of incense and of myrrh. <sup>12</sup>And having been warned in a dream not to go back to Herod, they returned to their country by another route.

AS CHAPTER 2 opens, the narrative time frame has jumped ahead upwards of two years (see comments on 2:16). Matthew ended chapter 1 with Jesus being born and named (1:25). Now this baby is a “child” (2:8, 11), and the family is living “in Bethlehem in Judea” (2:1). Bethlehem is located six miles south/southwest of Jerusalem.<sup>2</sup>

Luke informs us that before the birth of Jesus, Joseph and Mary traveled from Nazareth in Galilee to Bethlehem in Judea for the mandated census ordered by Caesar Augustus (Luke 2:1–7). They most likely performed a wedding ceremony in Nazareth, after which they traveled to Bethlehem for the census, where the child was born. Luke does not mention any of the events found in Matthew 2 except to say that after the presentation of the child in the temple, “when Joseph and Mary had done everything required by the Law of the Lord, they returned to Galilee to their own town of Nazareth” (Luke 2:39).

Most who try to harmonize the infancy accounts suggest that the events of Matthew 2 occur after the temple visit but before the permanent return to Nazareth to raise the child. Others suggest the trip to Nazareth in Luke 2:39 took place prior to the events of Matthew 2, proposing that after the family left the temple, they went to Nazareth for their personal belongings (Luke 2:29) since they had decided to raise the child in Bethlehem. Then, after taking up residence in Bethlehem, the events of Matthew 2:1–22 unfold. When they return from Egypt and discover the danger of continuing to live in Bethlehem, they return permanently to Nazareth. It is somewhat difficult to posit an intermediary visit to Nazareth based on the surface reading of Luke 2:39–40. In any case, after Jesus’ birth and his presentation in the temple, Joseph and Mary decide to raise the child in Bethlehem, Joseph’s ancestral city.

### **The Magi’s Journey to Jerusalem (2:1–2)**

THE EVENTS MATTHEW is about to narrate take place “during the time of King Herod.” Palestine, the region of land comprising the biblical Israel and Judah, was one of the many regions that fell to the ever-expanding Roman Empire. A series of problems within the Hasmonean dynasty had left it fair game for the voracious appetite of Roman military expansion. In 63 B.C., the renowned general Pompey advanced on Jerusalem and captured the city as well as the rest of Palestine. **The Romans installed local figures to rule for them, and eventually Herod, an Idumean/Nabatean by bloodline, gained prominence and ruled under Rome from 37 to 4 B.C. Herod, called “king of the Jews,” ruled firmly and at times ruthlessly.** He most likely died in March, 4 B.C. (see discussion below). Since Herod is still alive when the Magi arrive in Jerusalem as much as two years after Jesus was born, the dating of Jesus’ birth is placed by most scholars at between 6 and 4 B.C. (see comments on 2:16).

The universal significance of the birth of the child Jesus is heralded immediately because **Magi from the east arrive in Jerusalem seeking to worship the one born “king of the Jews” (1:1–2).** The term “Magi” (*magos*, “magician”) originally referred to a priestly caste in ancient Persia, perhaps followers of Zoroaster (c. 630?–550? B.C.), a **Persian teacher and prophet.** Babylonian elements were subsequently introduced, including astrology, demonology, wisdom, and magic. **Magi were usually leading figures in the religious court life of their country of origin, employing a variety of scientific (astrology), diplomatic (wisdom), and religious (magical incantations) elements in their work.** These practices were distinct from a more common type of “magician” found elsewhere (e.g., *magos* in Acts 13:6, 8).

These Magi came from “the east” and were looking for the one born “king of the Jews.”

**They apparently had been exposed to Old Testament prophecies from Jewish colonies situated in the east. Although**

many Jews returned to Palestine after the Exile, many remained in the east, especially in Babylon, in Parthia to the north, and in Arabia to the southwest.

Pagan leaders, both political and religious, were well aware of Jewish religious distinctives, such as Sabbath observance and marital restrictions, and there were significant Jewish centers of learning in Babylon at the time of the Magi.

***Gentile religious leaders in the east were regularly exposed to Hebrew Scriptures, prophecy, and teachers.***

If the Magi came from the environs of Babylon, they would have traveled approximately nine hundred miles. The trade route from Babylon followed the Euphrates River north, then south through the Orontes River valley of Syria into Palestine. Since they would have had to make arrangements for the journey and gather a traveling party,

it would have taken several months from the time they first saw the star until they arrived in Jerusalem.

In spite of the well-known Christmas carol “We Three Kings of Orient Are,” there is little historical certainty behind the wording of the stanza. As early as the third century A.D., the Magi were considered kings, fulfilling Psalm 72:11, “All kings will bow down to him.” But the Magi were probably more along the lines of religious advisers to their court. Their actual number is uncertain. Eastern tradition sets their number at twelve, but Western tradition sets it at three, based on the three gifts of gold, incense, and myrrh.

***Likely the Magi, whatever their number, traveled with a much larger number of attendants and guards for the long journey.***

The Magi's goal is to find "the one who has been born king of the Jews." Matthew has traced the lineage through King David (1:6), preparing for Jesus Messiah to be called "king of the Jews." The people of Israel had long waited for the rightful heir to the throne, but God announces his arrival first through these Gentile Magi. An expectation had circulated in the world of the first century that a ruler would arise from Judea. Suetonius writes, "Throughout the whole of the East there had spread an old and persistent belief: destiny had decreed that at that time men coming forth from Judea would seize power [and rule the world]." Israel's prophets had long spoken of a period of world peace and prosperity that would be instituted by a future Davidic deliverer (e.g., Ezek. 34:23–31). This belief had penetrated beyond the borders of Israel, so that others were looking for a ruler(s) to arise from the land of Judea.

The Magi announce of the king whom they seek, "We saw his star in the east and have come to worship him." The word "east" (*anatole*) can mean either the "rising" of the sun and stars (cf. Luke 1:78) or the locale called "the east" (Rev. 21:13). The phrase "from the east" in 2:1 appears to be the latter, but the expression "in the east" in 2:2 implies the former, indicating that they saw the star rise. That is, they didn't see the star rise in the eastern part of the sky, otherwise it would have caused them to travel east. Rather, while they were to the east of Jerusalem, the star rose, perhaps to the west of them, causing them to travel west to Jerusalem.

Through the Jewish community in their homeland, the Magi would have become familiar with Balaam's prophecy, "A star will come out of Jacob; a scepter will rise out of Israel" (Num. 24:17). In many quarters within Judaism this prophecy was understood to point to a messianic deliverer (e.g., CD 7:18–26; 4QTest. 9–13). In Revelation, Jesus refers to himself in similar language: "I am the Root and the Offspring of David, and the bright Morning Star" (Rev. 22:16; cf. 2:28; 2 Peter 1:19).

There are several proposals as to the nature of this star. (1) Many suggest that it was a natural phenomenon that can be traced back to some known astronomical event, whether a comet,<sup>15</sup> a supernova, or a conjunction of planets. One widely discussed possibility is that the attention of the Magi was attracted by an unusual conjunction of planets that occurred on May 27, 7 B.C. In ancient Babylonian astrology, Jupiter represented the primary deity. When Jupiter came close to Saturn (which represented the Jews), in the constellation Pisces (which represented Palestine), the Magi referred to Jupiter as the star of the king they were seeking, and the association with Saturn and Pisces showed them in which nation (the Jews) and where

(Palestine) to look for him. A related suggestion draws on this conjunction but links the specific star to a supernova that Chinese and Korean astronomers recorded in March to April 5 B.C.

(2) Others suggest that the “star” was a supernatural astral phenomenon that God used to herald Jesus’ birth. This is suggested in the text by the description of the star, which appears and reappears and moves and directs the Magi to the precise house that Jesus and his family occupied. Some suggest that perhaps only the Magi saw this starlike phenomenon.

(3) **Another plausible suggestion is that the supernatural phenomenon was actually an angel sent to the Magi to announce the birth of Messiah and to guide them to Jesus so that they would be a witness to his birth through their worship. Good angels are commonly referred to as stars (e.g., Job 38:7; Dan. 8:10; Rev. 1:16, 20; 2:1; 3:1), as are fallen angels (Rev. 8:10, 11; 9:1; perhaps Isa. 14:12–13). Angels guided and protected Israel to the Promised Land (Ex. 14:19; 23:20), and they often appear in Jewish and Christian literature as guides. New Testament scholar Dale Allison cites the apocryphal Arabic *Gospel of the Infancy 7*, which expands Matthew’s account of the Magi to say, “In the same hour there appeared to them an angel in the form of that star which had before guided them on their journey.”**

This last view is consistent with the prominent place of the angel of the Lord in the overall infancy narrative: announcing to Joseph the virginal conception of Jesus (1:20), warning the Magi not to return to Herod (2:12), warning Joseph to flee with the family to Egypt (2:13),

telling them to go back to Israel (2:19), and guiding them in a dream to Nazareth (2:22).

In any case, *with their mixture of influence from paganism, astrology, and Jewish Scriptures, it is doubtful that the Magi knowingly come to worship Jesus in recognition of his incarnate nature as the God-man.*

**They most likely desire to worship the “king of the Jews” in a way similar to how leading figures from a subservient country paid homage to the king of a ruling country.** The Magi are giving rightful homage to Jesus as the promised ruler to arise in Israel, but their worship is far more than even they intended.

#### **Herod's Cunning Duplicity (2:3-8)**

APPARENTLY HEROD IS familiar with the star symbolism that was to announce the arrival of the Messiah, so he does not challenge the Magi. His first reaction at first seems surprising: “He was disturbed, and all Jerusalem with him.” Herod knows he is not the rightful heir to the Davidic kingdom; he has usurped the throne by aligning himself with Rome. So **with the Magi’s announcement that they are seeking the one born king of the Jews, he probably perceives that invading forces from the east may perhaps join forces within Israel to oust him and place a king on the throne who is from the true line of the expected Messiah.**

Herod has no fear of attack from the west, because that is where the Roman Empire lies, and he is the Rome-sanctioned ruler of Judea. However, he develops a profound fear of attacks from the east. During the Hasmonean struggle for supremacy between Antigonus and Hyrcanus



II, Antigonus joined forces with the Parthians, an empire to the northeast of Israel, who invaded Judea and besieged Jerusalem. Herod fled to Rome, where he appealed for help to oust the Parthians and claim the throne. After recapturing Jerusalem in 37 B.C., Herod built a series of fortress-palaces all along the eastern border to ensure safety from invading forces. Herod also dedicated his reign and resources to a number of magnificent architectural projects. These projects often benefited his Jewish subjects, such as the rebuilding of the temple in Jerusalem, begun in 20/19 B.C. and completed in A.D. 63.

The final years of Herod's reign were characterized by constant domestic problems. His ten wives had produced offspring who contended against each other for his throne. As he became older, he grew increasingly paranoid, and he had a number of his own family members imprisoned and executed—for example, his wife Miramne I and later her two sons, Alexander and Aristobulus. After several incidents of this sort, Caesar Augustus supposedly made the famous pun that he would rather be Herod's pig (*hys*) than his son (*huios*).

Not only is Herod disturbed at the arrival of the Magi, but so also is “all Jerusalem with him.” The word “Jerusalem” is the designation for the holy city (4:5; 27:53), but it also represents the religious and political leadership of Israel. **The leadership may be disturbed along with Herod because they know the consequences they might suffer if he were to fly into a rage at the perceived threat of the arriving forces with the Magi.**

But more likely, their reaction gives a clue to the spiritual health of Israel's leadership. They have aligned themselves politically with Herod, and if his power base is threatened, so is theirs.

***One would expect the religious leadership to celebrate at the report of the birth of the king***

## *of Israel, but the arrival of the true king of the Jews presents a threat to Israel's corrupt religious and political power.*

From the outset of Matthew's story, Jerusalem is potentially negative toward Jesus and joins forces with those who will soon attempt to kill him (2:16, 20).

The central leadership of the Jews was lodged in the "chief priests" and the "teachers of the law" (*grammateus*). The chief priests were members of the Sanhedrin (cf. 26:57; Mark 14:53), joining the high priest in giving oversight to the temple activities, treasury, and priestly orders. The term *grammateus* (also trans. "scribe") was once most closely associated with reading, writing, and making copies of the Scriptures. But by New Testament times it came to signify an expert in relation to the interpretation of law and is used interchangeably with the term "lawyer" or "expert in the law" (*nomikos*; cf. Matt. 23:4; Luke 11:45–46). These were the official interpreters of the Old Testament (see comments on 8:19).

Herod's inquiry as to "where the Christ was to be born" demonstrates that the concept of "king of the Jews" (2:2) had become linked with "the Christ," the Messiah.

The religious leaders cite the prophet Micah, who centuries earlier referred to Bethlehem as not least among "the clans of Judah," because it would be the birthplace of the future ruler, the Messiah (Micah 5:2).

Their quotation also has an allusion to a famous shepherding theme cited at David's installation as king over Israel, "You will shepherd my people Israel, and you will become their ruler" (2 Sam. 5:2).

The prophetic expectation of the Davidic Messiah being born in Bethlehem had become widespread in Israel (cf. John 7:42). This village is twice

honored, because the birthplace of David the king is now also the birthplace of Jesus the Christ, the king and shepherd of Israel.

**Herod's duplicity takes over as he secretly brings in the Magi and attempts to find out when the star had appeared to them (2:7). The need for secrecy may have been to keep the Jews who were hoping for the arrival of Messiah from warning the Magi of Herod's treachery.** Or perhaps if the child the Magi are seeking really is the coming Messiah, and if Herod were to eliminate the child, it would not sit well with the Jewish people. So **he goes about his plans secretly so that he can be rid of the threat to his throne without the people knowing of it.** It seems inconceivable that he would try to get rid of the Messiah for the sake of his own throne, but Herod was an Idumean, and any thought of a Jewish deliverer taking over his power would be ruthlessly resisted. Note

too that **Herod considered himself**  
***"King of the Jews."***

The distance of the Magi's homeland from Palestine likely prevented them from knowing about Herod's ruthless reputation, so they think that Herod sincerely wants to acknowledge the arrival of the Messiah. **Herod is confident he has deceived the Magi, because he does not send an escort with them to Bethlehem, and he has no reason to doubt that they will follow through and return to tell him the child's whereabouts.** It is **divine intervention that will spoil his plans.**

### The Magi Worship the Child (2:9-12)

THE STAR THAT led them to Palestine now apparently reappears and leads the Magi the six miles to the child in Bethlehem. The description of the activity of the star implies a supernatural phenomenon, since it is difficult to reconstruct how any form of star could go ahead of them and stop or remain over the place where the child was. Since the Magi have already been informed that the Messiah was to be born in Bethlehem, the star doesn't so much guide them to the town but to the place in the town where the child and family are now located. This is consistent with some kind of supernatural angelic guidance (see comments on 2:2).

Jesus, with Mary and Joseph, is now in a "house" in Bethlehem. Recently excavated houses for common people from the first century era display regular features. Houses built on level ground often formed a series of rooms built around a courtyard. Included in these rooms were living spaces, which doubled as sleeping quarters, cooking area, stables, and storage rooms. Houses built in hilly areas might be two stories high. The lower floor had a courtyard surrounded by stables while the upper floor had the living/sleeping rooms. In rocky cavernous areas, the lower floor might incorporate caves or grottos into the structure as underground stables.

**The term for Jesus in 2:8, 9, 11 (also 2:13, 14, 20, 21) is "child" (*paidion*), which normally designates an infant or toddler. Since Herod will later attempt to have all boys under two years old killed, the child is now perhaps nearly two.** Whether the house in which they live is the same one connected to the stable in which Jesus was born is unknown, but since the young family has stayed in Bethlehem instead of returning to Nazareth to raise their son, it implies that Joseph has arranged for permanent living quarters in a family house.

The purpose of the Magi's pilgrimage to see the child is accomplished as they "bowed down and worshiped him" (2:11). Although they see both the child and Mary, his mother,

**they worship the child only.** Joseph is not mentioned, even though he has, and will continue to have, a substantial role in the narrative. The true center of their attention is the infant Jesus.

The word used to describe the Magi's "worship" is one normally reserved for the veneration of deity. It is a clear principle in Scripture that God alone is to receive worship, never an intermediary, not even an angel (e.g., Acts 14:11–15; Rev. 19:10). But it is doubtful that at this time these quasi-pagan religious figures understand Jesus' divine nature. Since it took even Jesus' closest followers some time to comprehend the nature of the Incarnation, it is doubtful that the Magi are knowingly worshipping Jesus as the God-man. Yet in spite of their blend of pagan religious background with Jewish influence, their worship is probably far more than even they understand.

At the least they understand that this is God's Messiah, and they worship the God of Israel through him. At the same time, their worship is a clear indictment of the Herodian leadership in Jerusalem, who will soon attempt to kill, not worship, the infant king of the Jews.

When approaching royalty or persons of high religious, political, or social status, gifts were often brought to demonstrate obeisance (Gen. 43:11–15; 1 Sam. 9:7–8; 1 Kings 10:1–2). The word "treasures" is used of the treasury of a nation (1 Macc. 3:29) or, as here, some kind of receptacle or "treasure-box," used by the Magi for carrying valuables—gold, incense, and myrrh—that they present to the newborn king. **This act of worship recalls Old Testament passages where leaders of Gentile nations presented gifts to the king of Israel, and it looks forward prophetically to the nations honoring the coming Messiah.**<sup>31</sup>

**"Gold" is the most-often mentioned valued metal in Scripture; as in modern times, it was prized throughout the ancient world as a medium of exchange as well as for making jewelry, ornaments, and dining instruments for royalty.**

“Incense” (or “frankincense”; cf. Lev. 2:1; 14:7; Neh. 13:9) is derived from the gummy resin of the tree *Boswellia*. The gum produced a sweet odor when burned.

Frankincense was used for secular purposes as a perfume (Song 3:6; 4:6, 14), but in Israel it was used ceremonially as part of a recipe for the only incense permitted on the altar (Ex. 30:9, 34–38).

“Myrrh” is the sap that exudes from a small tree found in Arabia, Abyssinia, and India. It consists of a mixture of resin, gum, and the oil myrrhol, which produces its characteristic odor. Sold in either liquid or solid form, myrrh was used in incense (Ex. 30:23), as a perfume for garments (Ps. 45:8; Song 3:6) or for a lover’s couch (Est. 2:13; Prov. 7:17), and as a stimulant tonic (cf. Mark 15:23). The Jews did not practice full embalming of corpses, but a dead body was prepared for burial by washing, dressing it in special garments, and packing it with fragrant myrrh and other spices to stifle the smell of a body as it decayed (John 19:39).

**There is a long history of interpretation that finds symbolic significance in these gifts in accord with Jesus’ life and ministry: e.g., gold represents his kingship, incense his deity, myrrh his sacrificial death and burial. But this reads too much into the Magi’s understanding of who Jesus is. Rather, these three gifts indicate the esteem with which the Magi revere the child and represent giving him the honor due him as king of the Jews.**

More than the Magi know or intend, these gifts are likely used to providentially support the family in their flight to and stay in Egypt.

But **the danger from Herod’s paranoid jealousy of the infant king comes to the forefront as the Magi are warned in a dream not to return to him with their report (2:12).** Dreams were commonly understood in the ancient world to be means of divine communication to humans (see comments on 1:20).

***Joseph is the primary recipient of dreams: announcing the virginal conception of Jesus (1:20), warning the family to go to Egypt (2:13), telling them to go back to Israel (2:19), and guiding them to Nazareth (2:22). In most of these an angel is specifically mentioned as the one who engages Joseph.***

Therefore, it seems plausible that the angel appears also in this dream to the Magi, warning them of Herod's duplicity. If so, the warning in a dream is consistent with the view that the star guiding them was an angel, who now directs them back to their homeland.

Instead of retracing their steps through Jerusalem, where Herod awaits them, "they returned to their country by another route" (2:12). **Behind the expression "they returned" is a word (*anachoreo*) that highlights a thematic pattern of hostility, withdrawal, and prophetic fulfillment that recurs in the narrative.** Matthew emphasizes that in spite of recurring hostile circumstances, God's sovereign care surrounds Jesus Messiah's earthly life. Under the threatening cloud of hostility, the Magi avoid Herod in Jerusalem, necessitating a long detour back to their homeland.

They may have traveled south around the lower extremity of the Dead Sea to link up with the trade route north through Nabatea and Decapolis east of the Jordan River. Or they may have traveled south to Hebron and then west to the Mediterranean coast to link up with the trade route traveling north on the coastal plain. Herod's long arm of military security covered most of even these circuitous routes, so the Magi and entourage must have traveled swiftly and as secretly as possible. **Their sacrifice and endurance is profound testimony**

to the impact of having seen and worshiped the infant Jesus, the true king of the Jews, and the hope even of Gentile seekers.

**GOD'S SOVEREIGN CARE.** Ambition, strength, and strategy are characteristics that we expect to find in those successful in politics, the military, entertainment, sports, or business. God can, and has, used those characteristics in his people throughout history as he has brought about his will on earth. Joshua's ambition to bring the people of Israel to the Promised Land was exemplary to all the people as he followed God's lead without wavering (Josh. 1:6–9; 23:6–11). The strength that Moses demonstrated in the face of resistant Pharaoh and over the forces of nature has stood for centuries as one of the most spectacular displays of God's own strength (e.g., Ps. 105:23–45). The strategy that King David displayed when conquering the giant Goliath and vanquishing God's enemies is legendary among military leaders (e.g., 1 Sam. 17:50–54; 2 Sam. 8:11–15). God can, and does, use ambition, strength, and strategy to carry out his will.

However, the unexpectedness of the infancy account signals to us that God will turn those characteristics upside down as he initiates this crucial stage of salvation history.

The picture that Matthew paints of the arrival of Jesus is breathtaking in its potential but alarming in its vulnerability.

*Jesus is King of the Jews (2:1), Messiah (2:4), and Ruler (2:6), who will “shepherd” his people Israel (2:6). In him are localized the prophetic hopes of the people of Israel as they strain under the yoke of Rome.*

This is no ordinary child, but he is the ruler who will once again bring safety to the beleaguered people of God.



**Yet Jesus is just a little child. He has no royal courtiers to care for him, no military guard to defend him. He has no palace or army. In fact, an ominous note is sounded. This vulnerable, humble little claimant to Israel's throne will be threatened by the conniving tyrant, Herod.**

*Who will care for the little future king?  
Who will protect him? How can he possibly  
survive to bring about those roles  
prophesied for him?*

This is what makes the unexpectedness of Matthew's story so striking.

The ambition, strength, and strategy of Herod and the religious leadership of Jerusalem are contrasted with the vulnerability of the child.

Herod's entire career was marked by ruthless ambition as he deposed all the Hasmonean aspirants to the throne. He orchestrated alliances with whomever was in power in Rome so that he had the strength of the Roman military and political machines behind him. He had a callous brilliance behind his strategy, keeping at bay the competing forces in Israel through grudging gratitude for his building accomplishments, yet fear of his cruelty and hatred of his religious and political treachery. No aspirant to the throne could hope to compete with Herod—especially one so vulnerable as the infant Jesus lying helplessly in the arms of a young, peasant mother and protected only by a lowly, unproven father from the insignificant town of Nazareth.

Yet throughout the narrative, the theme that underlies all of these events is that God is in control.

As he begins his redemption of humanity, his hand is on every event that transpires. The miraculous appearance of the star to Gentile Magi signaled that God was initiating messianic deliverance for Israel—and for all humanity.

The child and parents are sovereignly routed to Bethlehem, his prophesied birthplace, despite living in faraway Nazareth. With a significance that they could not possibly fully comprehend, pagan Magi

prostrate themselves in worship of the only One who is divinely worthy of their veneration. The humble child and parents are providentially supplied with gifts that will enable them to escape the increasingly murderous ravages of a paranoid slaughterer. And the devious plan of one of the most powerful figures in the ancient world is stymied by innocent Magi as they heed a miraculous warning in a dream. In spite of recurring hostile circumstances, God's sovereign care is exercised in Jesus Messiah's earthly life.

*Human ambition, power, and strategy often cannot see the hand of God and unwittingly attempt to thwart his purposes. Herod and the religious leadership in Jerusalem were blinded to God's plan of redemption because of the lust for their own plans and purposes.*

Their blindness then caused them to attempt to hinder God's design.

**Only eyes of faith are open to see God's activities, because he often performs behind the scenes of human history in unexpected ways to bring about his purposes.**

Matthew accentuates this elegant theme at the beginning of his story so that his readers will open their eyes of faith to see the working of God in the life of Jesus Messiah. **The theme of God's sovereignty displayed in the infancy narrative sets a trajectory for Matthew's recounting of Jesus' entire ministry.**

Jesus does not operate according to typical human expectations and ambitions, he does not come with typical human power, fanfare, or fame, and he will often run counter to typical human strategies. He comes, remarkably, as a humble servant, bringing justice to both Jew and Gentile alike, offering healing and hope and a message of good news to the hurting and marginalized (cf. 12:15–21).

The unexpectedness of this kind of Messiah will potentially cause offense to even his own renowned herald, John the Baptist, who must learn to look for God's activity in redeeming Israel and not force his own understanding on God's Messiah (11:2–6). **The**

**unexpectedness of this kind of Messiah will infuriate the religious establishment of Israel, leading to their own hardhearted sin (12:22–32) and their condemnation and execution of the only One for whom they should have been looking (26:1–2).**

**And the unexpectedness of Jesus' redemptive, sacrificial, messianic ministry will baffle even his own disciples, for they have in mind the ways of humans, not the ways of God (16:21–23; 20:20–28).**

Ambition, strength, and strategy—these characteristics are exhibited in God's plan of salvation that is worked out in the entrance of Jesus Messiah to history. But those characteristics are displayed with divine expression, not human.

Matthew focuses our attention on the fact that God is in control, even as the events surrounding his work unfold in unexpected ways.

### **GOD'S LOVE—AND OURS.**

“She had a habit of saying little silent prayers about the simplest everyday things, and now she whispered: ‘Please God, make him think I am still pretty.’ ” What heart-wrenching words! Della's knee-length, cascading, beautiful brown hair was her most prized possession, but she has just cut it off to sell to a wigmaker. She does it so she will have money to buy her beloved husband, Jim, a Christmas present. With the money from the sale of her hair she will be able to buy a gold watch chain on which Jim can hang his most prized possession, the gold watch that had been his father's and grandfather's.

Della and Jim are a newly wed young couple who subsist in near poverty. They have little money for finery in their hovel of an apartment, let alone for extravagant Christmas gifts. Without knowing what she has done, Jim will be coming home on Christmas Eve to find Della shorn of her beautiful hair, all to buy the gold chain for him that he cannot possibly afford to buy for himself. Will he still think her to be pretty?

But in a tear-jerking twist in this classic story told by O. Henry, we learn that Jim has sold his cherished watch to buy a set of tortoise shell combs with jeweled rims for his beloved young wife's beautiful hair—the very set she has yearned over for so long but can never hope to buy for herself.

Della now has cropped hair, but with the finest gift her young husband could sacrifice to buy. And Jim, now has no watch, but with the most precious gift his young bride could sacrifice to bring to him for Christmas. O. Henry muses at the end of the story:

Here I have lamely related to you the uneventful chronicle of two foolish children in a flat who most unwisely sacrificed for each other the greatest treasures of their house. But in a

last word to the wise of these days let it be said that of all who give gifts these are the wisest. Of all who give and receive gifts, such as they are wisest. Everywhere they are wisest. They are the magi.

I just reminded my wife of this story, which she had last read in college nearly thirty years ago, and immediately tears filled her eyes. That tells you as much about my wife's tender spirit as it does about the poignancy of the story! Henry may have added a bit of an allegorical twist

to his story, but he certainly touches a basic element in all of us. **The very act of sacrificial giving defines what it means to love each**

**other.** The Magi in Matthew's story may have been impelled by that kind of love in their worship and gift-giving at the arrival of the King of the Jews. It's hard to get inside their head and heart historically to know for sure. But I think that Henry is right to extrapolate from their actions what the Magi themselves may not even have guessed fully—our sacrificial worship and love of Jesus will produce true, sacrificial love for each other.

## Personal response to Jesus.

Matthew is not putting down on record just another religious story. He is telling what has been famously entitled for the film screen *The Greatest Story Ever Told*. **God has entered history in the person of Jesus Messiah, and the world has never been the same.** Henry rightly recognized that all of our sacrifice is but a faint reflection of what lies behind the Christmas story. We rightfully focus on the Magi, but we certainly must focus on the sacrificial love of God, of which the apostle Paul tells us, "God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us" (Rom. 5:8).

**Sometimes we get caught up in sentimental images of the Christmas story:**

**Christmas story:** a haloed baby Jesus resting peacefully in a hay-filled trough in a quaint stall in a field near Bethlehem on a midwinter starry night with the beatific mother Mary and antiquated father Joseph, camels arriving with three Magi, all surrounded by donkeys and sheep with shepherds from the fields and an angelic host.

**Our purpose here is not to**

disrupt sentimentally held traditions but to understand clearly Matthew's emphasis so that we can more carefully align our lives with the immense significance of the arrival of Jesus Messiah.

**The purpose of the Magi's visit was to worship the one born "king of the Jews." True, their worship was probably homage given to Jesus as a human king, but their actions point to a deeper tribute than even they knew.**

Matthew has informed his readers that Jesus was divinely conceived (1:18–25), so to honor him truly is to worship the only One who is worthy of worship, God himself.

Jesus is not only the “king of the Jews,” but he is also One who provides the hope of salvation for the entire world. **If these Gentile Magi have recognized Jesus as Israel’s king, then the Jews should certainly acknowledge him as the Messiah.**

But will they? **As Matthew turns to the response of the Jewish leadership to the Magi’s astounding announcement, he tragically records only duplicity and treachery.**

**It is sobering to recognize that those who had the greatest opportunity to worship the true king of the Jews became pawns of the usurper, Herod.**

**As we reflect on our own religious and political agendas, we should also take a sober look at our own response to Jesus. It isn’t always in the accomplishments of our lives that our relationship with Jesus is measured most accurately.** Every pastor or youth worker or Sunday school teacher knows how busy we can become with marking out our own activities and priorities. In the busyness of our service it is possible to lose sight of the work of God in us and around us. **Are we ready to acknowledge Jesus’ presence in all the details of our lives, or do our own desires and ambitions cause us to overlook his influence?**

At this most fundamental level, **Matthew teaches us that Jesus’ arrival in history to initiate the salvation of his people from their sins surely requires that we give ourselves to him. When we do so, his life becomes the pattern for our own lives.** The mutual self-sacrificial giving of Della and Jim is indeed a profound example for our own lives, but it is most importantly derived from the implication of the sacrifice of the Incarnation. **I am awestruck when I consider that God’s giving in Jesus’ incarnation and crucifixion is**



**the foundation and example for my own giving.** The apostle Paul strikes that note when he declares, “Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her” (Eph. 5:25).

Many marriages experience what I call the “tug-of-war” syndrome, where each partner tugs to have his or her needs met by their spouse. A state of equilibrium can be attained when each has tugged hard enough so that they are relatively satisfied. But if you have ever been in a tug-of-war at a picnic, you’ll remember that the equilibrium is tenuous, because it is maintained only through the tension of an unending expenditure of energy. Many couples grow so tired of this kind of continual struggle in a relational tug-of-war that they give up.

However, instead of tugging, couples can be taught how to give. In premarital counseling I ask couples to perform an experiment. They must commit themselves for two months never to ask to have their own personal needs met but only to ask how each can meet the other’s needs. What they will discover is that the equilibrium that they attain is not one of tension but of grace. They both give to the other without being asked, and their own needs are met by receiving, not demanding. The experiment ends up in most cases as the basis of a new kind of marital relationship, in which giving is the operating guideline, not taking.

The couples usually react incredulously when I first propose the experiment. One young woman said, quite honestly, “I’m so used to nagging him I’ll never get him to help me with the wedding plans or take me out to dinner. He just doesn’t think about my needs many times.” But when they both began to understand that they were going to attempt to follow God’s pattern of grace toward us, they were both amazed at their responses to each other. He developed a whole new set of daily priorities, where he consistently asked, “What does she need today that I can supply?” And in turn, she was free to make sure that he got what he felt he needed, like the regular Saturday afternoon to play basketball with his buddies. Remarkably, he often volunteered even to give that time up if he saw that she needed him! They both found their responsibility in giving what the other needed, not demanding what they themselves needed. Instead of tugging, they learned an entirely new pattern of giving. But that kind of graceful equilibrium is made possible only by a fundamental transformation in our lives when we experience God’s giving, displayed so graphically in the little infant in Bethlehem.

Such is the story that Matthew tells, quite in line with the verse that we know too well from the apostle John, who said, “For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son” (John 3:16).<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Michael J. Wilkins, [Matthew](#), The NIV Application Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 2004), 91–108.

# Expositors Commentary: D.A. Carson

## *The Visit of the Magi (2:1–12)*

Few passages have received more diverse interpretations than this one (cf. W.A. Schulze, "Zur Geschichte der Auslegung von Matth. 2,1–12," *Theologische Zeitschrift* 31 [1975]: 150–60; M. Hengel and H. Merkel, "Die Magier aus dem Osten und die Flucht nach Ägypten (Mt 2) im Rahmen der antiken Religionsgeschichte und der Theologie des Matthäus," in Hoffmann et al., pp. 139–69). **During the last hundred years or so, such diversity has sometimes sprung from a reluctance to accept either the supernatural details or the entire story as historically true. Thus it becomes necessary to find theological motive for creating the pericope.** E. Nellesen (*Das Kind und seine Mutter* [Stuttgart: KBW, 1969]), though acute in his theological observations, maintains the evangelist has fused and improved two Palestinian (and probably Galilean) legends (similarly Soares Prabhu, pp. 261–93).

Many (e.g., Gundry, Hill, Schweizer) suppose that the OT quotations constituted a collection of testimonia to Jesus in their own right, before Matthew (or the church from which he sprang) embellished them with midrashic stories to produce our Matthew 2. **The stories have doubtful ties with history. Their real point is theological, to show that the Messiah was born in Bethlehem as predicted, that his appearance provoked Jewish hostility but won Gentile acceptance (the Magi), and above all to set up a contrast between Moses and Jesus.**

**Jewish tradition is steeped in stories about Pharaoh's astrologers knowing that the mother of Israel's future deliverer was pregnant, that there was a slaughter (by drowning) of all Jewish and Egyptian infants for the next nine months, that the entire house in which Moses was born was filled with great light, etc. Matthew, therefore, may have been trying to show Jesus' significance by ascribing to his birth similar and perhaps greater effects.** Full-blown, these stories about Moses are preserved in Midrash Rabbah on Exodus 1, an eighth century A.D. compilation. Their roots, however, stretch at least as far back as the first century (Jos. Antiq. II, 205–7, 15–16 [ix. 2–3]; cf. also Targ. j on Exod 1:15; and Davies, *Setting*, pp. 78–82, for other veiled hints to Moses in Matt 1–2).

**This reconstruction has numerous weaknesses. The independent existence of collected testimonia is not certain.** There is no evidence of Midrashim written on such a diverse collection of texts (if the collection itself ever existed). The

presupposed antithesis between theology and history is false; on the face of it, Matthew records history so as to bring out its theological significance and its relation to Scripture. Matthew writes at so early a time that if Jesus had not been born in Bethlehem this claim would have been challenged. We are dealing with decades, not the millennium and a half separating Moses from Josephus.

First-century stories about astrological deductions connected with Augustus Caesar's birth (Suetonius *De Vita Caesarum* 94), about Parthian visits to Nero (Cicero *De Divinatione* 1. 47), or about Moses' birth (above) may suggest that Matthew 2:1–12 was fabricated; but they may equally attest the prevalence of astrology and the fact that some such visits undoubtedly occurred in the ancient world. Thus they would establish the verisimilitude of the passage. More important, the stories about Moses' birth (e.g., in Jos.) were almost certainly regarded by most readers as factually true; and there can be little doubt (contra Gundry) that Matthew intends his stories about Jesus to be read the same way. If so, we may conceivably argue that Matthew was himself deceived or else wished to deceive. What we cannot do is to argue that he wrote in a fashion recognized by its form to be divorced from historical reality. In any case, the suggested backdrop—stories about Moses' birth—is not very apt; **close study shows the theological matrix of the prologue centering on Jesus as the Davidic King and Son of God (cf. esp. Nolan; Kingsbury, *Matthew*), not on him as the new Moses, to whom the allusions are few and inexplicit.**

Of course **Matthew did not just chronicle meaningless events. He wrote to develop his theme of fulfillment of Scripture** (Had not God promised that nations would be drawn to Messiah's light [Isa 60:3]?); to establish God's providential and supernatural care of this virgin-born Son; to anticipate the hostilities, resentment, and suffering he would face; and to hint at the fact that Gentiles would be drawn into his reign (cf. Isa 60:3; Nellessen, *Das Kind*, p. 120, acutely compares Mt 8:11–12; cf. 28:16–20). **The Magi will be like the men of Nineveh who will rise up in judgment and condemn those who, despite their privilege of much greater light, did not receive the promised Messiah and bow to his reign (12:41–42).**

**1** Bethlehem, the place near which Jacob buried his Rachel (Gen 35:19) and Ruth met Boaz (Ruth 1:22–2:6), was preeminently the town where David was born and reared. For Christians it has become the place

## where angel hosts broke the silence and announced Messiah's birth (Luke 2).

It is distinguished from the Bethlehem in Zebulun (Josh 19:15) by the words "in Judea." Scholars have seen in these two words a preparation for v. 6: "Bethlehem, in the land of Judah" (though there the Hebrew form "Judah" is used rather than the Greek "Judea"), or for v. 2: "king of the Jews." But "Bethlehem in Judea" may be not much more than a stereotyped phrase (cf. Judg 17:7, 9; 19:1–20; Ruth 1:1–2; 1 Sam 17:12; Matt 2:5). Luke 2:39 makes no mention of an extended stay in Bethlehem and a trip to Egypt before the return to Nazareth; if he knew of these events, Luke found them irrelevant to his purpose.

Unlike Luke, Matthew offers no description of Jesus' birth or the shepherd's visit; he specifies the time of Jesus' birth as having occurred during King Herod's reign (so also Luke 1:5). Herod the Great, as he is now called, was born in 73 B.C. and was named king of Judea by the Roman Senate in 40 B.C. By 37 B.C. he had crushed, with the help of Roman forces, all opposition to his rule. Son of the Idumean Antipater, he was wealthy, politically gifted, intensely loyal, an excellent administrator, and clever enough to remain in the good graces of successive Roman emperors. His famine relief was superb and his building projects (including the temple, begun 20 B.C.) admired even by his foes. But he loved power, inflicted incredibly heavy taxes on the people, and resented the fact that many Jews considered him a usurper. In his last years, suffering an illness that compounded his paranoia, he turned to cruelty and in fits of rage and jealousy killed close associates, his wife Mariamne (of Jewish descent from the Maccabees), and at least two of his sons (cf. Jos. Antiq. XIV–XVIII; S. Perowne, *The Life and Times of Herod the Great* [London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1956]; and esp. Abraham Schalit, *König Herodes: Der Mann und sein Werk* [Berlin: de Gruyter, 1969]).

Traditionally some have argued that Herod died in 4 B.C. ; so Jesus must have been born before that. Josephus (Antiq. XVII, 167 [vi. 4]) mentions an eclipse of the moon shortly before Herod's death, and this has normally been identified as having occurred on 12–13 March 4 B.C. After Herod's death there was a Passover celebration (Jos. Wars II, 10 [i. 3]; Antiq. XVII, 213 [ix. 3]), presumably 11 April 4 B.C. ; so the date of his death at first glance seems secure. Recently, however, Ernest L. Martin *The Birth of Christ Recalculated!* [Pasadena: FBR, 1978], pp. 22–49) has advanced solid reasons for thinking the eclipse occurred 10 January 1 B.C. ; and, integrating this information with his interpretation of other relevant data, Martin proposes a birth date for Jesus in September, 2 B.C. (His detailed pinpointing of 1 Sept., based on his understanding of Rev 12:1–5, is too speculative to be considered.) Several lines of evidence stand against this thesis: Josephus dates the length of Herod's reign as thirty-seven years from his accession or thirty-four from the time of his effective reign (Antiq. XVII, 191 [viii.1]; Wars I, 665 [xxxiii. 8]), and these favor a death date in 4 B.C. Coins dated at the time of 4 B.C., minted under the reign of Herod's sons, support the traditional date.

Martin answers these objections by supposing that Herod's successors antedated their reigns to 4 B.C. in honor of Herod's sons Alexander and Aristobulus whom he had killed in that year and by arguing that between 4 B.C. and 1 B.C. there was some form of joint rule shared by Herod and his son Antipater. In that case Josephus's figures relating to the length of Herod's rule refer to his unshared reign. This is psychologically unconvincing; the man who murdered two of his sons out of paranoia and jealousy and arranged to have hundreds of Jewish leaders executed on the day of his death was not likely to share his authority, even in a merely formal

way. The question remains unresolved. For a more traditional dating of Jesus' birth in late 5 B.C. or early 4 B.C., see Hoehner, *Chronological Aspects*, pp. 11–27 (written before Martin's work).

The "Magi" (*magoi*) are not easily identified with precision. Several centuries earlier the term was used for a priestly caste of Medes who enjoyed special power to interpret dreams.

**Daniel (Dan 1:20; 2:2; 4:7; 5:7) refers to magoi in the Babylonian Empire. In later centuries down to NT times, the term loosely covered a wide variety of men interested in dreams, astrology magic, books thought to contain mysterious references to the future, and the like.**

Some Magi honestly inquired after truth; many were rogues and charlatans (e.g., Acts 8:9; 13:6, 8; cf. R.E. Brown, *Birth of Messiah*, pp. 167–68, 197–200; TDNT, 4:356–59). Apparently, these men came to Bethlehem spurred on by astrological calculations. But they had probably built up their expectation of a kingly figure by working through assorted Jewish books (cf. W.M. Ramsey, *The Bearing of Recent Discovery on the Trustworthiness of the New Testament*, 4th ed. [London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1920], pp. 140–49).

The tradition that the Magi were kings can be traced as far back as Tertullian (died c. 225). It probably developed under the influence of OT passages that say kings will come and worship Messiah (cf. Pss 68:29, 31; 72:10–11; Isa 49:7; 60:1–6). The theory that there were *three* "wise men" is probably a deduction from the *three* gifts (2:11). By the end of the sixth century, the wise men were named: Melkon (later Melchior), Balthasar, and Gasper. Matthew gives no names. His *magoi* come to Jerusalem (which, like Bethlehem, has strong Davidic connections [2 Sam 5:5–9]), arriving, apparently (cf. Note 5), from the east—possibly from Babylon, where a sizable Jewish settlement wielded considerable influence, but possibly from Persia or from the Arabian desert. The more distant Babylon

may be supported by the travel time apparently required (see on 2:16).

2 The Magi saw a star “when it rose” (NIV mg.; cf. note at 2:1). What they saw remains uncertain.

1. Kepler (died 1630) pointed out that in the Roman year A.U.C. 747 (7 B.C.), there occurred a conjunction of the planets Jupiter and Saturn in the zodiacal constellation of Pisces, a sign sometimes connected in ancient astrology with the Hebrews. Many details can be fitted to this suggestion (Alf; R.E. Brown, *Birth of Messiah*, pp. 172–73; DNTT, 3:735; Maier), not least that medieval Jews saw messianic significance in the same planetary conjunction. Moreover the conjunction occurred in May, October, and November of 7 B.C. ; and one of the latter two appearances could account for 2:9. But there is no solid evidence that the ancients referred to such conjunctions as “stars”; and even at their closest proximity, Jupiter and Saturn would have been about one degree apart—a perceived distance about twice the diameter of the moon—and therefore never fused into one image.

2. Kepler himself preferred the suggestion that this was a supernova—a faint star that violently explodes and gives off enormous amounts of light for a few weeks or months. The suggestion is no more than guess: there is no confirming evidence, and it is difficult on this theory to account for 2:9.

3. Others have suggested comets, what some older writers refer to as “variable stars.” The most likely is Halley’s Comet (cf. Lagrange), which passed overhead in 12 B.C. ; but this seems impossibly early.

4. Martin opts for a number of planetary conjunctions and massings in 3/2 B.C. This suggestion depends on his entire reconstruction and late date for Herod’s death (see on 2:1), which is no more than a possibility. The theory also shares some of the difficulties of 1.

5. In the light of 2:9, many commentators insist that astronomical considerations are a waste of time: Matthew presents the “star” as strictly supernatural. This too is possible and obviously impossible to falsify, but 2:9 is not as determinative as is often suggested (cf. on 2:9). The evidence is inconclusive.

Matthew uses language almost certainly alluding to Numbers 24:17: “*A star will come out of Jacob; a scepter will rise out of Israel.*”

This oracle, spoken by Balaam, who came “from the eastern mountains” (Num 23:7), was widely regarded as messianic (Targ. Jonathan and Onkelos; CD 7:19–20; 1QM 11:6; 1QSb 5:27; 4QTest 12–13; T Judah 24:1). Both Matthew and Numbers deal with the king of Israel (cf. Num 24:7), though Matthew does not resort to the uncontrolled allegorizing on “star” frequently found in early postapostolic Christian writings (cf. Jean Danielou, *The Theology of Jewish Christianity* [London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1964], pp. 214–24).

**Granting Matthew’s informed devotion to the OT, he surely knew that the OT mocks astrologers (Isa 47:13–15; Dan 1:20; 2:27; 4:7; 5:7) and forbids astrology (Jer 10:1–2).**

Nevertheless, it was widely practiced in the first century, even among Jews (cf. Albright and Mann).

Matthew neither condemns nor sanctions it; instead, he contrasts the eagerness of the Magi to worship Jesus, despite their limited knowledge, with the apathy of the Jewish leaders and the hostility of Herod’s court—all of whom had the Scriptures to inform them.

## Formal knowledge of the Scriptures, Matthew implies, does not in itself lead to knowing who

Jesus is; just as God sovereignly worked through Caesar's decree that a census be taken (Luke 2:1) to ensure Jesus' birth in Bethlehem to fulfill prophecy, so God sovereignly used the Magi's calculations to bring about the situation this pericope describes.

The question the Magi asked does not tell how their astrology led them to seek a "king of the Jews" and what made them think this particular star was "his." The widely held idea that the ancient world was looking for a Jewish leader of renown (based largely on Jos. War VI, 312–13 [v.4]; Suetonius *Vespasian* 4; Tacitus *Histories* v.13; Virgil *Eclogue* 4) cannot stand close scrutiny. The Josephus passage refers to Jewish expectations of Messiah, and the others

probably borrowed from Josephus. The Magi may have linked the star to "the king of the Jews" through studying the OT and other Jewish writings—a possibility made plausible by the presence of the large Jewish community in Babylon.

We must not think that the Magi's question meant, Where is the one born to become king of the Jews? but, Where is the one born king of the Jews? (cf. Notes). His kingly status was not conferred on him later on; it was his from birth.

Jesus' participation in the Davidic dynasty has already been established by the genealogy. The same title the Magi gave him found its place over the cross (27:37).

***"Worship" (cf. Notes) need not imply that the Magi recognized Jesus' divinity; it may simply mean "do***



*homage” (Broadus). Their own statement suggests homage paid royalty rather than the worship of Deity. But Matthew, having already told of the virginal conception, doubtless expected his readers to discern something more—viz., that the Magi “worshipped” better than they knew.*

<sup>3</sup> In contrast with (*de*, a mild adversative; NIV, “when”) the Magi’s desire to worship the King of the Jews, Herod is deeply troubled. In this “all Jerusalem” joins him, not because most of the people would have been sorry to see Herod replaced or because they were reluctant to see the coming of King Messiah, but because they well knew that any question like the Magi’s would result in more cruelty from the ailing Herod, whose paranoia had led him to murder his favorite wife and two sons.

<sup>4</sup> Here “all” modifies “chief priests and teachers of the law,” not “the people,” and refers to those who were living in Jerusalem and could be quickly consulted. “Chief priests” refers to the hierarchy, made up of the current high priest and any who had formerly occupied this post (since Herod, contrary to the law, made fairly frequent changes in the high priesthood) and a substantial number of other leading priests (cf. Jos. Antiq. XX, 180 [viii. 8]; War IV, 159–60 [iii. 9]; the same Greek word is used for

“high priests” and “chief priests”). **The “teachers of the law,” or “scribes” as other EV call them, were experts in the OT and in its copious oral tradition. Their work was not so much copying out OT MSS (as the word “scribes” suggests) as teaching the OT. Because much civil law was based on the OT and the interpretations of the OT fostered by the leaders, the “scribes” were also “lawyers”** (cf. 22:35: “an expert in the law”).

The vast majority of the scribes were Pharisees; the priests were Sadducees. The two groups barely got along, and therefore Schweizer (*Matthew*) judges this verse “historically almost inconceivable.” But Matthew does not say the two groups came together at the same time; Herod, unloved by either group, may well have called both to guard against being tricked. If the Pharisees and Sadducees barely spoke to one another, there was less likelihood of collusion. “He asked them” (*epynthaneto*, the imperfect tense sometimes connotes tentative requests: Herod may have expected the rebuff of silence; cf. Turner, *Insights*, p. 27) where **the Christ (here a title: see on 1:1) would be born, understanding that “the Christ” and “the king of the Jews” (2:2) were titles of the same expected person.** (See 26:63; 27:37 for the same equivalence.)

**5** The Jewish leaders answered the question by referring to what stands written, which is the force of the perfect passive verb *gegraptai* (NIV, “has written”), suggesting the authoritative and regulative force of the document referred to (Deiss BS, pp. 112–14, 249–50). NIV misses the preposition *dia* (lit., “what stands written *through* the prophet”), which implies that the prophet is not the ultimate source of what stands written (cf. on 1:22). Both in 1:22 and here, some textual witnesses insert the name of the prophet (e.g., Micah or even Isaiah). “Bethlehem in Judea” was introduced into the narrative in 2:1.

**6** While expectation that the Messiah must come from Bethlehem occurs elsewhere (e.g., John 7:42; cf. Targ. on Mic 5:1: “Out of you shall come forth before me the Messiah”), here it rests on Micah 5:2 (1 MT), to which are appended some words from 2 Samuel 5:2 (1 Chronicles 11:2). Matthew follows neither the MT nor the LXX and his changes have provoked considerable speculation.

1. “Bethlehem Ephrathah” (LXX, “house of Ephrathah”) becomes “Bethlehem, in the land of Judah.” Hill (*Matthew*) says this change was made to exclude “any other Judean city like Jerusalem.” But this reads too much into what is a normal LXX way of referring to Bethlehem (cf. Gundry, *Use of OT*, p. 91). “Ephrathah” is archaic and even in the MT primarily restricted to poetical sections like Micah 5:2.

2. The strong negative “by no means” (*oudamōs*) is added in Matthew and formally contradicts Micah 5:2. It is often argued that this change has been made to highlight Bethlehem as the birthplace of the Messiah. Indeed, Gundry’s commentary uses this change as an example of Matthew’s midrashic use of the OT, a use so free that he does not fear outright

contradiction. There are better explanations. Even the MT of Micah implies Bethlehem's greatness: "though you are small among the clans [or rulers, who personify the cities; KJV's 'thousands' is pedantically correct, but 'thousands' was a way of referring to the great clans into which the tribes were subdivided; of Judg 6:15; 1 Sam 10:19; 23:23; Isa 60:22] of Judah"

sets the stage for the greatness that follows. Equally, **Matthew's formulation assumes that, apart from being Messiah's birthplace, Bethlehem is indeed of little importance** (cf. Hengstenberg, 1:475–76, noted by Gundry, *Use of OT*, pp. 91–92).

To put it another way, though the second line of Micah 5:2 formally contradicts the second line of Matthew 2:6, a wholistic reading of the verses shows the contradiction to be merely formal. Matthew 2:6 has perhaps slightly greater emphasis on the one factor that makes Bethlehem great.

3. Matthew adds the shepherd language of 2 Samuel 5:2, making it plain that the ruler in Micah 5:2 is none other than the one who fulfills the promises to David.

*It is tempting to think that Matthew sees a pair of contrasts (1) between the false shepherds of Israel who have provided sound answers but no leadership (cf. 23:2–7) and Jesus who is the true Shepherd of his people Israel and (2) between a ruler like Herod and the one born to rule. The words "my people Israel" are included, not simply because they are found in 2 Samuel 5:2, but because Matthew, like Paul, faithfully records both the essential Jewish focus of the OT promises and the OT expectation of broader application to the Gentiles (cf. on Mt 1:1, 5, 21). Jesus is not only the promised Davidic king but also the promised hope*

*of blessing to all the nations*, the one who will claim their obeisance (cf. Ps 68:28–35; Isa 18:1–3, 7; 45:14; 60:6; Zeph 3:10).

*That same duality makes the desires of the Gentile Magi to worship the Messiah stand out against the apathy of the leaders who did not, apparently, take the trouble to go to Bethlehem.*

Of course, the Jewish leaders may have seen the arrival of the Magi in Jerusalem as one more false alarm.

As far as we can tell, the Sadducees (and therefore the chief priests) had no interest in the question of when the Messiah would come; the Pharisees (and therefore most teachers of the law) expected him to come only somewhat later. The Essenes alone, who were not consulted by Herod, expected the Messiah imminently (cf. R.T. Beckwith, “The Significance of the Calendar for Interpreting Essene Chronology and Eschatology,” *Revue de Qumran* 38 [1980]:

167–202). But **Matthew plainly says that, though Jesus was the Messiah, born in David’s line and certain to be Shepherd and Ruler of Israel, it was the Gentiles who came to worship him.**

**7–10 The reason Herod wanted to learn, at his secret meeting with the Magi (v. 7), the exact time the star appeared was that he had already schemed to kill the small boys of Bethlehem (cf: v. 16). The entire story hangs together (see on v. 16). Herod’s hypocritical humility—“so that I may go and worship him” (v. 8)—deceived the Magi. Conscious of his success, Herod sent no escort with them. This was not**

**“absurdly trusting” (Schweizer, *Matthew*), since the deception depended on winning the Magi’s confidence. Herod could scarcely have been expected to foresee God’s intervention (v. 12).**

Matthew does not say that the rising star the Magi had seen (cf. on 2:2) led them to Jerusalem. They went first to the capital city because they thought it the natural place for the King of the Jews to be born. But now **the star reappeared ahead of them (v. 9) as they made their way to Bethlehem** (it was not uncommon to travel at night).

**Taking this as confirming their purposes, the Magi were overjoyed (v. 10).** The Greek text does not imply that the star pointed out the house where Jesus was; it may simply have hovered over Bethlehem as the Magi approached it. They would then have found the exact house through discreet inquiry since (Luke 2:17–18) the shepherds who came to worship the newborn Jesus did not keep silent about what they saw.

**<sup>11</sup> This verse plainly alludes to Psalm 72:10–11 and Isaiah 60:6,** passages that reinforce the emphasis on the Gentiles (cf. on v. 6). Nolan’s suggestion (pp. 206–9) that the closest parallel is Isaiah 39:1–2 is linguistically attractive but contextually weak. The evidence that Hezekiah served as an eschatological figure is poor and fails to explain why he should be opening up his treasure store to his visitors.

**Some time had elapsed since Jesus’ birth (Mt 2:7, 16), and the family was settled in a house.**

While the Magi saw both the child and his mother, their worship (cf. on v. 2) was for **him alone**.

***Bringing gifts was particularly important in the ancient East when approaching a superior (cf. Gen 43:11; 1 Sam 9:7–8; 1 Kings 10:2). Usually such gifts were reciprocated (Derrett, NT Studies, 2:28). That is not mentioned here, but a first-century reader might have assumed it and seen the Great Commission (Mt 28:18–20) as leading to its abundant fruition.***

Frankincense is a glittering, odorous gum obtained by making incisions in the bark of several trees; myrrh exudes from a tree found in Arabia and a few other places and was a much-valued spice and perfume (Ps 45:8; Song of Songs 3:6) used in embalming (John 19:39).

Commentators, ancient (Origen, *Contra Celsum* 1. 60) and modern (Hendriksen), have found symbolic value in the three gifts—gold suggesting royalty, incense divinity, and myrrh the Passion and burial. This interpretation demands too much insight from the Magi.

***The three gifts were simply expensive and not uncommon presents and may have helped finance the trip to Egypt. The word “treasures” probably means “coffers” or “treasure-boxes” in this context.***

**12** This second dream (cf. 1:20) mentions no angel. Perhaps Joseph and the Magi compared notes and saw their danger (cf. P. Gaechter, “Die Magierperikope,” *Zeitschrift für Katholische Theologie* 90 [1968]: 257–95); amid their fear and uncertainty, the dreams led them (vv. 12–13) to flee. **Which way the Magi went is unclear**; they might have gone around the north end of the Dead Sea, avoiding Jerusalem, or they might have gone around the south end of the sea.

## Notes

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- 1–2** The word ἀνατολή (*anatolē*) can mean “rising” or “east.” In v. 1 ἀπὸ ἀνατολῶν (*apo anatolōn*, “from the east”) is rightly translated by NIV, since the noun normally indicates the point of the compass when it is plural and anarthrous (cf. BDF, 253 [5]). By the same token ἐν τῇ ἀνατολῇ (*en tē anatolē*) in vv. 2, 9 is less likely to be “in the East” than “at its rising” (the article can have mild possessive force). Other suggestions—e.g., that the expression refers to a particular land in the east or to Anatolia in the west—seem less convincing; but the question is extraordinarily complex (cf. Turner, *Insights*, pp. 25–26; R.E. Brown, *Birth of Messiah*, p. 173).
- 2** The participle in the construction ὁ τεχθεὶς βασιλεύς (*ho techtheis basileus*, lit., “the born king”) is adjectival, not substantival, and is used attributively. Moreover there is no suggestion of “newborn” (cf. C. Burchard, “Fussnoten zum neutestamentlichen Griechisch II,” ZNW 29 [1978] 143–57), which is already ruled out by chronological notes (vv. 7, 16).  
The verb προσκυνέω (*proskyneō*, “worship”) occurs three times in this pericope (cf. vv. 8, 11) and ten other times in Matthew. In the NT the object of this “worship” is almost always God or Jesus, except where someone is acting ignorantly and is rebuked (Acts 10:25–26; Rev 19:10; 22:8–9). But Rev 3:9 is an important exception (NIV, “fall down at your feet”). Secular Greek used the verb for a wide variety of levels of obeisance, and it is precarious to build too much christology on the use of the term in the Gospels.
- 3** The words πᾶσα Ἱεροσόλυμα (*pasa Hierosolyma*, “all Jerusalem”) betray breach of concord, since *pasa* is feminine, but this form of “Jerusalem,” unlike the alternative Ἱερουσαλήμ (*Ierusalēm*), is not feminine but neuter plural. Possibly *pasa* is a precursor of modern Greek’s indeclinable *pasa* (so BDF, par. 56 [4]); but it is marginally more likely that the noun is being treated as feminine singular since there are other instances where it is construed as feminine singular even though no *pasa* is present.
- 5–6** Matthew uses the singular προφήτου (*prophētou*, “prophet”) even though two different passages, from the latter and former prophets respectively, are cited. Yet it seems a common practice to refer to one author, perhaps the principal one, when citing two or three (cf. 27:9; Mark 1:2–3).
- 7** Τότε (*tote*, “then”) is very common in Matthew, occurring ninety times as compared with Mark’s six and Luke’s fourteen; but in Matthean usage only sometimes does it have temporal force (as here), serving more frequently as a loose connective.
- 10** The words “they were overjoyed” render a cognate accusative, ἐχάησαν χαράν (*echarēsan charan*, lit., “they rejoiced with joy”), probably under Semitic influence (cf. Moule, *Idiom Book*, p. 32; BDF, par. 153 [1]).<sup>2</sup>

## ANSWERS IN GENESIS:

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<sup>2</sup> D. A. Carson, “[Matthew](#),” in *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary: Matthew, Mark, Luke*, ed. Frank E. Gaebelien, vol. 8 (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1984), 82–90.

# *Who Were the Magi Who Visited Jesus?*

Who were the magi, and should they be part of the Nativity?

by [Liz Abrams](#) on January 6, 2023

January 6 is traditionally celebrated as the day the magi visited Jesus, and it marks the end of the “Twelve Days of Christmas.” These magi, or wise men, saw the rising of a new star in the sky and traveled to Jerusalem to find the newborn king. When they understandably went to the palace to find this king, they set into motion events that would lead to Mary, Joseph, and Jesus fleeing to Egypt and also lead to the death of all boys two years and under in Bethlehem.

## “We Three Kings?”

The famous song speaks of “three kings,” but there is nothing in the biblical text to suggest that the magi were kings. **The Greek word used to describe them is *magos*, from which we get the word “magic.” It denotes a person who practiced astrology, dream interpretation, and various types of enchantment. This makes sense, because they made their journey because of a star that rose in the sky. It “was originally applied exclusively to members of a priestly caste of the Medes and Persian who had esoteric skills in interpreting dreams.** However, the use of the word broadened to embrace various categories of persons who were marked out by their superior knowledge and ability, including astrologers, soothsayers, and even oriental sages.”<sup>1</sup>



Matthew's text says they were "from the east," which makes it possible they were from Babylon, a popular interpretive option. Because the wise men presented three gifts to [Jesus](#) (gold, frankincense, and myrrh), tradition says that there were three wise men. In reality, the [Bible](#) doesn't say how many there were.

## How Did the Wise Men Know to Look for the Star?

The Messiah was promised to Israel, and the Jews were expecting him to come around that time. But how did these gentile astrologers know to look for him, and how did they know the vicinity of where to go?

**During the Judean exile to Babylon, Daniel rose to prominence among the royal court of wise men when he was able to interpret dreams and make true predictions. While we don't know the degree to which he converted anyone in the court, some seem to have kept records of his predictions—among which was the coming of the Jewish Messiah (Daniel 7:13–14, 9:24–27).**

## Were the Wise Men at the Manger?

Nativity sets often include the wise men, leading many to suppose that they were perhaps present at Jesus' birth alongside the shepherds. However, Nativity sets are in the tradition of religious artwork that exists to teach about biblical narratives, not exactly reproduce a moment in history.

Before the average person could read, imagery like the Nativity scene and other religious artwork

helped to teach about biblical events. While the magi are included in the infancy narrative of Matthew (hence their inclusion in the Nativity scene), they probably arrived between one and two years after Jesus' birth.

The Bible gives us several indications that the scene is different than that of the night of Jesus' birth. Mary and Joseph were situated in a house, while when Jesus was born they were somewhat inconveniently located in some sort of animal housing because there was no room in the upper room.<sup>2</sup> Early tradition suggests Jesus was born in a cave (caves were often used to house animals), and the Church of the Nativity is built over a cave site in Bethlehem which tradition states is the place. However, we cannot be certain because the birth accounts do not tell us

specifically *where* Jesus was born. However, by the time the magi came, the family was no longer housed with the animals. Furthermore, **Jesus is referred to as a “*young child*” with the Greek word *paidion*, not an “*infant*” with the Greek word *brephos*, as in [Luke 2:12](#).**

Why would it have taken so long for them to get there? Presumably, it took some time for the wise men to gather an envoy and get royal permission for the trip. Camels can travel around 25 miles a day going top speed, meaning the 1700-mile journey from Babylon to Jerusalem would have taken over two months even if the conditions were absolutely ideal.

And after their visit, Herod would not have immediately realized he was fooled and the wise men weren't coming back. He also may have adjusted the age up to ensure the right boy was killed. Herod

was known for being excessively murderous when he believed someone was after his throne. He was not a Jew—he was half-Edomite and half-Arab. He was only king because Rome made him the king. Rumors of a true heir to David would absolutely be enough for him to slaughter some children.

## What Was the Star?

There are all sorts of interesting astronomical theories about what the star could have been. However, it likely was not some sort of alignment of stars and planets. First, the star appeared and disappeared, and while the magi could follow it, Herod's men presumably couldn't.

Furthermore, the Bible never tells us to search the heavens for astrological signs, so why would [God](#) reveal Jesus' birth via an astrological sign?

Rather, it is likely that the wise men had some records of Daniel's prophecies, which included the timing of Jesus' birth (but not the place, which is why they went to Jerusalem, not Bethlehem). They were searching the sky for signs because that's all they knew to look for.<sup>3</sup> God graciously gave them a sign in the sky—not an astrological sign, but the rising of a new star, which was a miraculous occurrence, perhaps even a manifestation of God's glory. **This explains how the star could appear, disappear, appear again, and lead them to a particular house.**

*Their purpose in coming to see him was to “worship” him. The Greek work *proskyneo* has various levels of meaning, from showing deference to a person to worshipping God. However, if the magi merely viewed Jesus as human, it would be odd*

*for them to take a long journey to offer costly gifts and worship to a king that had no authority over them. But if they understood him to be God in human flesh, as they might have from Daniel's prophecies, they might have done exactly that. Matthew often contrasts the faith of gentiles with the faithlessness of Jewish leaders, and the worship of the magi compared with the apathy of the priests who pointed them (and Herod) to Bethlehem is a nice contrast.*

Why Gold, Frankincense, and Myrrh?

The gifts of the wise men were imbued with theological significance early in church history. Gold is meant to signify Jesus' royalty, frankincense his deity, and myrrh his sacrificial death. **If the magi meant to prophesy with their gifts, Scripture does not record this detail.** Gold,

frankincense, and myrrh are all precious and easily portable, so they were suitable to bring on a long journey to honor the newborn king.

Incidentally, **the wise men's gifts may have providentially been given just in time to fund the family's flight to Egypt.** We know from the offering they gave at his dedication that Jesus' family was poor. Even if Joseph was able to set up shop in Egypt to earn a living, travel would have been expensive.

## Jesus, the Savior of the World

While the Old Testament consistently prophesied that the Messiah would bring salvation for Israel, God repeatedly emphasized that the Messiah would not just save Israel, but the whole world

([Isaiah 11:10](#), [42:1–7](#), [49:6](#), [60:1–3](#)). Jesus came to reverse Adam’s curse for all of Adam’s descendants.

***The first people recorded as worshipping Jesus were lowly Israelite shepherds and foreign gentiles, while the people who might be expected to know the most about the Messiah’s coming—the Jewish elite with access to the Scriptures that told the exact location of his birth along with its timing—did not worship him but aided Herod in discovering which infants to slaughter.***

## *Is the Date of Easter of Pagan Origin?*

Misconception: The church borrowed the date of Easter from pagan celebrations, so Christians should not celebrate this holiday.

by [Roger Patterson](#)

Many claim that what we call Easter today was developed as Roman Catholicism co-opted pagan festivals celebrated in different regions in honor of various false gods and goddesses.

You may have heard the claim that Christians should not celebrate Easter because of its origins.

Many believe that what we call Easter today was developed as Roman Catholicism co-opted pagan festivals celebrated in different regions in honor of various false gods and goddesses. The claims are laced with names of scholars who have made connections between the names of the festivals and goddesses, the timing of the celebration, and the symbols used.

To take these scholars at their word seems charitable, but I question the wisdom of such wholesale abandonment of a celebration that is at the very heart of the [Christian](#) community and faith. Three separate issues need to be identified and evaluated: the date of the celebration, the name of the celebration, and the symbols employed in the celebration. My goal is to examine each of these ideas separately so we might understand the issue more fully, repenting of what is erroneous and embracing what is true.

This chapter will examine the date of the celebration held in the spring to mark the death and Resurrection of Jesus Christ. The next two articles in this series will cover the [name](#) and [symbols](#) of the celebration.

## The Centrality of the Crucifixion and Resurrection

There is no contention that within the orthodox Christian faith the doctrines surrounding the Crucifixion and Resurrection are fundamentals. Without Christ's substitutionary atoning death, taking the wrath of [God](#) against sinners upon Himself, we could not be forgiven of our sins. Without His renewal to life after lying dead in the tomb, it could not be said Christ has conquered death.

These ideas are confirmed by the writings of the Apostle Paul in his epistle to the Corinthian [church](#): *Moreover, brethren, I declare to you the [gospel](#) which I preached to you, which also you received and in which you stand, by which also you are saved, if you hold fast that word which I preached to you—unless you believed in vain.*

*For I delivered to you first of all that which I also received: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, and that He was buried, and that He rose again the third day according to the Scriptures . . . .*

*For if the dead do not rise, then Christ is not risen. And if Christ is not risen, your faith is futile; you are still in your sins! (1 Corinthians 15:1–4, 16–17)*

Christ's death and Resurrection are absolutely necessary elements of the faith. These truths should bring joy to the heart of everyone who has received God's forgiveness through Christ, giving great cause to celebrate. Throughout Scripture, God directs His children to mark His accomplishments on their behalf with feasts and celebrations. The most prominent Old Testament festival related to the celebration of Easter is the Passover.<sup>1</sup> This term was used to refer to the Christian feasts and commemoration of the Resurrection in the early church and continues today. There is no record of disputes about whether the festival was appropriate—the disagreements about the date and method of celebration were around as early as AD 120.

Phillip and David Schaff discuss the origin of the date and customs of the Resurrection celebration, giving us a good place to begin the discussion of its date:

The Christian Passover naturally grew out of the Jewish Passover as the Lord's Day grew out of the Sabbath; the paschal lamb being regarded as a prophetic type of Christ, the Lamb of God slain for our sins ([1 Cor. 5:7, 8](#)), and the deliverance from the bondage of Egypt as a type of the redemption from sin. It is certainly the oldest and most important annual festival of the church, and can be traced back to the first century, or at all events to the middle of the second, when it was universally observed, though with a difference as to the day, and the extent of the fast connected with it.<sup>2</sup>

## Early Church Practices

It appears clear from the earliest writings of the church fathers that the Resurrection was almost universally celebrated by the church. There were, however, differences in the manner and date of the celebrations. Fasting and feasting accompanied the remembrance of the date, but when to stop the

fasting and begin the feasting was disputed. The date question fell into two camps: should the celebration be held on the day of the Resurrection or the date of the Jewish Passover?

In Asia Minor, a group of churches claimed that the Apostles John and Phillip appointed Nisan 14 as the date of the celebration. This group became known as the Quartodecimans (from the Latin for fourteen; also Quartadecimanians) because they supposed the celebration should begin at the time when the disciples ate the Passover meal with Christ in the upper room (*Luke 22*). This group concluded the fast at this time and began the feasting and celebration of the Resurrection.

The date of Nisan 14 had been prescribed because God instituted the Passover meal and the Feast of Unleavened Bread upon the Exodus from Egypt ([Exodus 12:12–20](#); [Numbers 28:16–25](#)). This was the first month in the Hebrew calendar. The month would have begun on the new moon, and the fourteenth day would have been marked by the full moon. Unlike our current calendar, which begins shortly after the first part of winter, this was the beginning of the spring and had formerly been called Abib ([Exodus 13:4](#)).

Irenaeus (died c. 202) recorded an account of Polycarp (c. AD 70–155), who was Bishop of Smyrna and a disciple of the Apostle John. Irenaeus tells of Polycarp's visit to Rome where he discussed the issue with Anicetus, the bishop of Rome.

For the controversy is not merely as regards the day, but also as regards the form itself of the fast. For some consider themselves bound to fast one day, others two days, others still more, while others [do so during] forty: the diurnal and the nocturnal hours they measure out together as their [fasting] day. And this variety among the observers [of the fasts] had not its origin in our time, but long before in that of our predecessors. . . . And yet nevertheless all these lived in peace one with another, and we also keep peace together. . . . For neither could Anicetus persuade Polycarp to forego the observance [in his own way], inasmuch as these things had been always [so] observed by John the disciple of our



Lord, and by other apostles with whom he had been conversant; nor, on the other hand, could Polycarp succeed in persuading Anicetus to keep [the observance in his way], for he maintained that he was bound to adhere to the usage of the presbyters who preceded him. And in this state of affairs they held fellowship with each other.<sup>3</sup>

Polycarp understood from the Apostle John that the celebration was to be observed from the date of Nisan 14, while the tradition of the Western Church was to celebrate on the Sunday following the Passover. This difference did not lead them to break fellowship but to honor one another and continue with their practices in their respective regions. Other early church fathers who sided with Polycarp included Eusebius, Justin Martyr, Irenaeus, and Tertullian. Clearly, as early as the bishopric of Sixtus I in Rome (c. AD 114–128), there was a difference in the date of the celebration.<sup>4</sup>

The Western Church tradition, even as early as AD 150 according to the account of Polycarp above, was to break the fast on the Sunday following the Jewish Passover since this was the day of the week Christ rose from the tomb.<sup>5</sup> This was the dominant view in the church at this point and found its support in the fact that the celebration was in observance of the Resurrection. Since Christ rose from the tomb on Sunday (*Luke 24:1*), the fast was broken and the celebratory feast began on Sunday. The contention over the date of the celebration was basically between a small group in the East and the majority in the West. However, this was not seen as an issue of orthodoxy until Victor I threatened excommunication of Quartodecimans around AD 195—a threat he abandoned at the advice of several synods.

## The Council of Nicaea

For those who claim the celebration of Easter was assigned by Constantine as an accommodation of pagan practices, they must contend with the records of Irenaeus and others. However, at the Council of Nicaea in AD 325, the issue was finally settled by the church as a whole. The desire of

the churches as a whole, even prior to the council, was to unite the entire body of Christ on this all-important day of celebrating the Resurrection—the established date had nothing to do with conforming to pagan festivals.

Though we do not have the records of the discussions that framed the debate, copies of letters sent to absent bishops still exist. It seems that one of the major issues of contention was that the celebration of the Jewish Passover had slipped to a period before the vernal (spring) equinox.<sup>6</sup> To ensure the celebration did not continue to drift backward in time, the council members desired a date after the equinox. Thus, the council determined the date should be fixed to the first Sunday following the full moon after the vernal equinox. The Sunday observance was agreed upon by all and replaced the observance on Nisan 14 by the minority in the Eastern Church.

In light of the agreement by the council, a letter distributed to the synods of the Church of Alexandria stated:

We further proclaim to you the good news of the agreement concerning the holy Easter, that this particular also has through your prayers been rightly settled; so that all our brethren in the East who formerly followed the custom of the Jews are henceforth to celebrate the said most sacred feast of Easter at the same time with the Romans and yourselves and all those who have observed Easter from the beginning.<sup>7</sup>

This is not a date aligned to pagan celebrations but a date aligned to the Jewish date of Passover without being directly tied to it. The month of Nisan is a spring month and should rightly fall after the vernal equinox within a solar year. Thus, Christ's Resurrection was in the spring. Knowing the moon has a 28-day cycle, the full moon would be comparable to the fourteenth day since the Jewish month began with the new moon. So the Sunday following this full moon would approximate the day of the Resurrection—the focus of the feast. The Easter celebration was assigned a date that

corresponded to the Jewish Passover but was not necessarily tied to its date. With this calculation, the date of Easter is a movable date that may fall between March 22 and April 25 in our current calendar.

Now, let's further demonstrate the false nature of the claim that the date was set to concord with the pagan festivals. Constantine provided a rationale for his desire to set a common Sunday date. As misguided as some may consider his rationale, it is clear that it was for unity and to distinguish Christian practices from the Jews.[8](#)

When the question relative to the sacred festival of Easter arose, it was universally thought that it would be convenient that all should keep the feast on one day; for what could be more beautiful and more desirable, than to see this festival, through which we receive the hope of immortality, celebrated by all with one accord, and in the same manner? It was declared to be particularly unworthy for this, the holiest of all festivals, to follow the custom [the calculation] of the Jews, who had soiled their hands with the most fearful of crimes, and whose minds were blinded. . . . We ought not, therefore, to have anything in common with the Jews, for the Saviour has shown us another way. . . . As, on the one hand, it is our duty not to have anything in common with the murderers of our Lord.[9](#)

Even after the unifying efforts of the Council of Nicaea, the actual date on which the Resurrection was celebrated varied. Disputes remained about which astronomical cycle would be used and on which day the equinox fell. The Romans held to March 21 while the Alexandrians set the date as March 18. Also, some churches would not celebrate on the Sunday following the full moon. Though minor disputes continued, the dates for Easter from the Roman Church were set in tables followed by a majority of churches.

Another discrepancy emerged as the 84-year sun/moon cycle for calculating was changed to a 19-year cycle and the Gregorian calendar replaced the Julian calendar in 1582. The Eastern Church

continued to use the Julian calendar, and that observance continues today. Thus, the Western celebration often falls on a different day than the Eastern celebration.[10](#)

## Conclusion

*The date we celebrate today is a reasonable approximation of the Resurrection of Christ with no connection to pagan festivals.*

We must not forget that God gave the sun and moon for signs and seasons and for the marking of days and years ([Genesis 1:14–19](#)). The early Christians sought to honor Christ by celebrating His Resurrection with fasting and feasting. Although they didn't have an explicit command from Scripture, various traditions arose to commemorate the risen Savior. There was never a debate about whether the feast should be celebrated, only about exactly when and how. Unity was sought on the issue, yet the early church fathers allowed liberty within this celebration.

The date we celebrate today is a reasonable approximation of the Resurrection of Christ with no connection to pagan festivals. During this season, let us focus our attention on Christ and His completed work attested to by His Resurrection, knowing He is the author and finisher of our faith. Let us seek unity within the liberty afforded us by Scripture just as the early church did. Most importantly, let us not forget Paul's direction as we celebrate our Risen Lord.

*Receive one who is weak in the faith, but not to disputes over doubtful things. For one believes he may eat all things, but he who is weak eats only vegetables. Let not him who eats despise him who does not eat, and let not him who does not eat judge him who eats; for God has received him. Who are you to judge another's servant? To his own master he stands or falls. Indeed, he will be made to stand, for God is able to make him stand.*

*One person esteems one day above another; another esteems every day alike. Let each be fully convinced in his own mind. He who observes the day, observes it to the Lord; and he who does not observe the day, to the Lord he does not observe it. He who eats, eats to the Lord, for he gives God thanks; and he who does not eat, to the Lord he does not eat, and gives God thanks. For none of us lives to himself, and no one dies to himself. For if we live, we live to the Lord; and if we die, we die to the Lord. Therefore, whether we live or die, we are the Lord's. For to this end Christ died and rose and lived again, that He might be Lord of both the dead and the living. But why do you judge your brother? Or why do you show contempt for your brother? For we shall all stand before the judgment seat of Christ.*

*For it is written:*

*As I live, says the Lord,  
Every knee shall bow to Me,  
And every tongue shall confess to God.*

*So then each of us shall give account of himself to God. Therefore let us not judge one another anymore, but rather resolve this, not to put a stumbling block or a cause to fall in our brother's way. (Romans 14:1-13)*

## **REASONS FOR HOPE:**

# Who Were the Three Wise Men (Magi / Kings) ? Why Did Herod Fear Them?

by Shari Abbott, Reasons for Hope\* Jesus

The Bible refers to the three wise men in the gospel of Matthew:

[Matthew 2:1-2](#).

These verses tell that the wise men came “from the east to Jerusalem.” The land east of Jerusalem at that time was the Parthian Empire. It was the area that, at one time, had been the kingdom of Babylon (founded in 250 BC). The Parthian Empire rivaled Rome, and Israel served as a buffer state between the two contending empires.

## Wise Men/Magicians/Magi

The word our Bibles translate as “wise men” is “magos,” which means a Magian, Oriental scientist, a magician, a sorcerer, or wise man. **Modern day dictionaries define “magian” as relating to the magi of ancient Persia.**

**The Bible tells of the magi in the days of Daniel the prophet. Daniel had been taken to Babylon in 606 BC in Nebuchadnezzar’s first siege of Jerusalem, and he was appointed by Nebuchadnezzar to rule over all the “wise men of Babylon.”**

[Daniel 2:48](#) *Then the king made Daniel a great man, and gave him many great gifts, and made him ruler over the whole province of Babylon, and chief of the governors over all the wise men of Babylon.*

When the Medes and Persians conquered Babylon, they established a

hereditary priesthood of wise men, which was known as magicians or magi.

*Just as Nebuchadnezzar had made Daniel the ruler over all the wise men of Babylon, so also when Medo Persia's King Darius the Great reigned, he appointed Daniel to be master of the magicians.*

*Daniel 4:9* *O Belteshazzar [Daniel's Babylonian name], master of the magicians, because I know that the spirit of the holy gods is in thee, and no secret troubleth thee, tell me the visions of my dream that I have seen, and the interpretation thereof.*

A State Religion

**Because the Magi could interpret dreams, King Darius declared the magi to be the state religion.** The priestly caste of the Magi remained during the

Greek Empire and became very influential after the death of Alexander the Great when the empire was divided into three large kingdoms, the Seleucid, Parthian, and Sasanid Empires.

The Parthian Empire, which stretched from the northern reaches of the Euphrates (now central-eastern Turkey) to eastern Iran, contended with Rome during the time of Herod and occupied much of what we know as Palestine.

During this time, the Magi held a dual priestly and governmental authority. Some have called them “king-makers” because they had power to give rule and authority.

*From this hereditary priesthood came the Magi of the Persian Empire. They were the wise men who followed a star in search of the baby who was born King of the Jews.*

When the wise men entered Jerusalem and inquired of Herod, he was troubled ([Matthew 2:3](#)). Remember, these king-makers asked Herod questions about the birth of “he that is born King of the Jews” ([Matthew 2:2](#)). **Herod considered himself to be king of the Jews; and he knew that no heir to this title had been born in his house.** The wise men also said that they had “seen his star in the east” and they had “come to worship him.”

### More Than Three?

These wise men were *not* only three men on camels (as portrayed in Christmas traditions). The designation of only three comes from the fact that only three gifts are recorded as having been given to the Christ Child. **From historical information, it is likely a cavalry**



of formidable men on horseback rode into Jerusalem. No wonder Herod was troubled. So also was the entire city. ([Matthew 2:3](#))

### Threatened by the Baby

Herod was not only troubled. He also felt threatened. Rome had named him king of the Jews and sent him to rule in Jerusalem and have authority over the Jewish people. Another to come would threaten his rule.

It is evidenced that Herod took the claim seriously through his actions. He called upon the chief priests and scribes and demanded that they tell him where Christ would be born ([Matthew 2:4](#)). Interestingly, this reveals that Herod expected the Jewish Scriptures could answer his question — perhaps because he knew of prophecies that had already been fulfilled.

### The priests and scribes gave Herod the answer:

**[Matthew 2:5–6](#)** *...In Bethlehem of Judaea: for thus it is written by the prophet, And thou Bethlehem, in the land of Juda, art not the least among the princes of Juda: for out of thee shall come a Governor, that shall rule my people Israel.*

**Herod was so convinced that he conspired to secure his position and authority. With evil intent, he sent forth the wise men and deceitfully claimed a desire to worship the child.**

**[Matthew 2:8](#)** *And he sent them to Bethlehem, and said, Go and search diligently for the young child; and when ye have found him, bring me word again, that I may come and worship him also.*

**When the wise men did not return, Herod determined to eliminate any threat to his rule and ordered children two and under be killed ([Matthew 2:16](#)).**

Summary: Who Were the Wise Men?

**The wise men were the magi of the Parthian Empire.** The Bible only mentions three gifts presented to the Christ Child—gold, frankincense, and myrrh—therefore, it has been erroneously thought there were only three magi. However, **it is much more likely that there would have been a large cavalry of Parthian wise men/magi.**

Because of an out-of-context application of [Psalm 72:11](#) *Yea, all kings shall fall down before him...*, the magi have come to be known as The Three Kings. Tradition has even suggested that we know their names—Gaspar, Balthasar, and Melchior. But we must remember that the Bible does not support them being kings, nor does it give their names.

Although Herod's intentions and desires were evil and self-serving, God's purpose and plan always reign sovereign. Herod required that all children two and under were to be killed ([Matthew 2:16](#)). But God, in His providence and omnipotence, protected the promised Child who had been born a baby in Bethlehem.

*And being warned of God in a dream that they [the magi] should not return to Herod, they departed into their own country another way. And when they were departed, behold, the angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream, saying, Arise, and take the young child and his mother, and flee into Egypt, and be thou there until I bring thee word: for Herod will seek the young child to destroy him. When he arose, he took the young child and his mother by night, and departed into Egypt. ([Matthew 2:12-14](#))*

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# What is the Significance of the Wise Men's Gifts? And, Were These Men Kings (or Magi)?

by [Shari Abbott, Reasons for Hope\\* Jesus](#)

The Gospel of Matthew tells of the gifts that the Wise Men gave to Jesus ([Matthew 2:1](#)). While there were only three gifts mentioned, it's likely there were more than three Wise Men and, while they were noblemen, we are not told that they were kings.

## We Three Kings?

Every year we sing a popular Christmas song about three kings and the gifts they brought to the Christ child. The song is not technically correct because the Bible does not say they were kings. This assumption is probably made from the value of the gifts that they brought to Jesus and a misapplication of verses in Isaiah 60 that speak of the Millennial Kingdom. The Bible simply calls these men "wise men" ([Matthew 2:1](#)).

[Mat 2:1-2](#) *Now when Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judaea in the days of Herod the king, behold, there came wise men from the east to Jerusalem, Saying, Where is he that is born King of the Jews? for we have seen his star in the east, and are come to worship him.*

[Matthew 2:11](#) *And when they were come into the house, they saw the young child with Mary his mother, and **fell down, and worshipped him:** and when they had opened their treasures, they presented unto him gifts; **gold, and frankincense, and myrrh.***

These men were wise. They gave of their time, talents, treasures, and testimonies:

- They had journeyed far to see this Child—a gift of time.
- They had followed His star—a gift of talent (read: [How did the wise men know to follow His star?](#)).
- They desired to worship Him and brought Him gifts—a gift of treasures.

- When they came before Jesus, they “fell down and worshipped Him.” In doing so, they acknowledged both His Lordship and His Kingship—a gift of testimony. (read: [What does it mean to live your life as a testimony for Jesus? 3 Steps!](#))

## Gold, Frankincense, and Myrrh



The treasures the wise men brought were of significant value and prophetic importance. Gold, frankincense, and myrrh are gifts worthy of a king. Gold is symbolic of Christ’s deity as King, frankincense represents His purity as Priest of God, and myrrh is suggestive of His anointed work as a Prophet and of His death. Let’s look at what the Bible reveals about these gifts and what we sing about in the Christmas carol *We Three Kings*.

### Gold = Kingship of God

Gold in the Bible is symbolic of God. It represents the most precious of metals and is extremely rare in its purest form. The intrinsic value of gold has been established since ancient times and gold was used to honor kings. King Solomon had an ivory throne overlaid with the best gold ([1 Kings 10:18](#)). The furniture of the Tabernacle features gold, symbolically pointing to Christ and His deity. The Ark of the Covenant was constructed of acacia wood (symbolic of Jesus’ humanity) and overlaid with gold (symbolic of His divinity). The mercy seat and two cherubim were made of pure gold ([Exodus 25:10-21](#)). Since gold represents God, it’s no surprise that many idols and false gods were created of gold. Because gold is a pure and valuable metal, it is also associated with God’s precepts, principles, and promises—all of which are perfect and pure and supersede any that are set by man.

The gift of gold, given by one of the wise men, pointed to the begotten Son who was given by God to be King of His people. This wise man’s gift proclaimed Jesus to be King at birth ([Matthew 2:2](#)), as did others during His life:

Jesus proclaimed Himself as King:

[Matthew 27:11](#) Now Jesus stood before the governor. And the governor asked Him, saying, "Are You the King of the Jews?" So Jesus said to him, "It is as you say."

Some of the people proclaimed Jesus King:

[John 12:12-13](#) On the next day much people that were come to the feast, when they heard that Jesus was coming to Jerusalem, Took branches of palm trees, and went forth to meet him, and cried, Hosanna: **Blessed is the King of Israel that cometh in the name of the Lord.**

Pilate proclaimed Jesus King:

[John 18:39](#) But ye have a custom, that I should release unto you one at the passover: will ye therefore that I release unto you **the King of the Jews?**

[John 19:14](#) ...and he saith unto the Jews, **Behold your King!**

[John 19:19](#) And Pilate wrote a title, and put it on the cross. And the writing was, **JESUS OF NAZARETH THE KING OF THE JEWS.**

Jesus spoke 60 times of the Kingdom of God during His earthly ministry. That Kingdom is here on earth and is found in the hearts of all who belong to Jesus. Jesus is our King and He rules and reigns in our hearts.

**Verse 2 – We Three Kings**

Born a King on Bethlehem's plain  
Gold I bring to crown Him again,  
King forever, ceasing never,  
Over us all to reign.

## Frankincense = High Priest of God

Frankincense is an aromatic, clear resin obtained from trees in northern India and Arabia ([Isaiah 60:6](#); [Jeremiah 6:20](#)). It is used in incense and perfumes, and was treasured for its aroma and healing properties. Frankincense was an ingredient used in the sanctuary of the Lord ([Exodus 30:34](#)) as part of the meat offering ([Leviticus 2:1, 16](#); [6:15](#); [24:7](#)) and as a sweet savor (incense). Frankincense is also a symbol of prayer ([Psalm 141:2](#); [Luke 1:10](#); [Revelation 5:8](#); [8:3](#)).

Because of the use in the Temple, frankincense is considered to be emblematic of Jesus' office as a Priest of God ([Exodus 30:34-37](#)). It is also symbolic of the priest's work in offering the prayers of the people to the Lord, ([Luke 1:10](#), [Revelation 8:3-5](#)).

The gift of frankincense, given by one of the wise men, pointed to the work of Jesus as a Priest of God, who ministered for three and one half years to the people.

[Mark 10:45](#) For even the Son of man came not to be ministered unto, but to minister, and to give his life a ransom for many.

**Verse 3 – We Three Kings**

Frankincense to offer have I;  
Incense owns a Deity nigh;

Prayer and praising, voices raising,  
Worshipping God on high.

### *Myrrh = Prophet of God*

Myrrh was a spice used for medicine, cosmetics, and anointing oil. It was mixed into the oil that was used to anoint prophets for the divinely appointed work of revealing God and communicating His will and words to His people. Jesus came to the nation of Israel ([Matthew 15:24](#)) and He came as a Prophet in fulfillment of a prophecy of Moses:

[Deuteronomy 18:15](#) *The LORD thy God will raise up unto thee a Prophet [Jesus] from the midst of thee [Israel], of thy brethren, like unto me [Moses]; unto Him ye shall hearken.*

Jesus Himself confirmed His office as a Prophet to Israel. He attributed the office of Prophet to Himself with His words:

[Luke 13:33](#) *Nevertheless I must walk to day, and to morrow, and the day following: for it cannot be that a prophet perish out of Jerusalem.*

[Matthew 13:57](#) *And they were offended in him. But Jesus said unto them, A prophet is not without honour, save in his own country, and in his own house.*

Jesus also confirmed His office as a Prophet by His works:

1. **As a Prophet, Jesus did the will of the Father:** [John 4:34](#) *Jesus said unto them, My meat [food] is to do the will of him that sent me, and to finish his work.*
2. **As a Prophet, Jesus did the work of the Father:** [Matthew 11:27](#) *All things are delivered unto me of my Father...*
3. **As a Prophet, Jesus spoke the words of the Father:** [John 8:28](#) *Then said Jesus unto them...I do nothing of myself; but as my Father hath taught me, I speak these things.*

[John 12:49](#) *For I have not spoken of myself; but the Father which sent me, he gave me a commandment, what I should say, and what I should speak.*

The gift of myrrh also takes on another representation. In addition to anointing prophets, oil was used in the anointing of the dead. Myrrh was presented to Jesus at His birth pointing to His life as a Prophet and it was used at His death to anoint His body for the grave.

[Mark 16:1](#) *And when the sabbath was past, Mary Magdalene, and Mary the mother of James, and Salome, had bought sweet spices, that they might come and anoint him.*

[John 19:39](#) *And there came also Nicodemus, which at the first came to Jesus by night, and brought a mixture of myrrh and aloes, about an hundred pound weight.*

[John 19:40](#) *Then took they the body of Jesus, and wound it in linen clothes with the spices, as the manner of the Jews is to bury.*

**Verse 4 – We Three Kings**

Myrrh is mine, its bitter perfume  
Breathes a life of gathering gloom;  
Sorrowing, sighing, bleeding, dying,  
Sealed in the stone cold tomb.

## King, Priest and Prophet

Jesus came as King of Israel (Messiah), Priest of God (to atone for man's sins), and Prophet of God (speaking God's words). The wise men's gifts represented each of those offices in prophetic typology and pointed to all that Jesus would do in His incarnation and in His glorification.

Just as the Wise Men gave of their time, talent and treasures, so should we give. Before we close, let's remember one more "t" — Testimony! Be ready always to share your testimony! When we testify of His love and faithfulness, and all He has done for us and given to us...then we, too, are wise men!

*Verse 5 – We Three Kings*

**Glorious now behold Him arise;  
King and God and sacrifice;  
Alleluia, Alleluia,  
Peals through the earth and skies.  
O star of wonder, star of night,  
Star with royal beauty bright,  
Westward leading, still proceeding,  
Guide us to thy perfect Light.**

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Note: There's also a future prophetic type of each of these three gifts. Jesus was a prophet during His incarnation (spoke God's words and did His works), now He is our High Priest in Heaven interceding for us ([Hebrews 2:14-5:6](#)) and He will one day rule and reign on earth as King (His second advent, [Acts 1:11](#)). This article focused only on the prophetic aspect of these gifts given to Jesus at His birth and they were fulfilled in His incarnation. Many prophecies have a double reference—a near and far fulfillment. We've seen the near fulfillment and we keep looking up to see our Blessed Hope ([Titus 2:13](#)) and the far fulfillment of His rule and reign on earth ([Revelation 11:15](#)).

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## Who Were the Magi That Visited Christ? Their Names and Gifts

Alfred Edersheim

### Who were the Three Wise Men?

The Three Wise Men, also known as the Magi or the Three Kings, are figures mentioned in the Bible in the Gospel of Matthew. They are said to have visited the newborn Jesus in Bethlehem, bringing gifts of gold, frankincense, and [myrrh](#). The Bible does not specify the number of Wise Men; the idea of three Wise Men likely comes from the fact that three gifts are mentioned.

The Gospel of Matthew describes the Wise Men as following a star that led them to the location of Jesus' birth. The Bible doesn't provide detailed information about their identities, except that they were "Magi from the East." Tradition and folklore have added various details about them, such as their names (Caspar, Melchior, and Balthazar), their countries of origin, and their roles as representatives of different races or ages.

**Caspar:** Often depicted as a young man and sometimes as representing the continent of Europe.

**Melchior:** Traditionally portrayed as an older man, sometimes with a white beard, and representing Asia.

**Balthazar:** Frequently depicted as a middle-aged man of African descent, symbolizing Africa.

The visit of the Wise Men is an important part of the Nativity story, and their gifts are often interpreted symbolically. Gold is associated with kingship, frankincense with divinity or worship, and myrrh with the future death of Jesus. The account of



the Wise Men is celebrated in Christian tradition as the feast of Epiphany on January 6th, marking the manifestation of Jesus to the Gentiles.

## **The Magi Visit the Messiah: [Matthew 2](#)**

*"After Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea, during the time of King Herod, Magi from the east came to Jerusalem and asked, "Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews? We saw his star when it rose and have come to worship him."*

*When King Herod heard this he was disturbed, and all Jerusalem with him. When he had called together all the people's chief priests and teachers of the law, he asked them where the Messiah was to be born. "In Bethlehem in Judea," they replied, "for this is what the prophet has written:*

*"But you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for out of you will come a ruler who will shepherd my people Israel.' "*

*Then Herod called the Magi secretly and found out from them the exact time the star had appeared. He sent them to Bethlehem and said, "Go and search carefully for the child. As soon as you find him, report to me, so that I too may go and worship him."*

*After they had heard the king, they went on their way, and the star they had seen when it rose went ahead of them until it stopped over the place where the child was. When they saw the star, they were overjoyed. On coming to the house, they saw the child with his mother Mary, and they bowed down and worshiped him. Then they opened their treasures and presented him with gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh. And having been warned in a dream not to go back to Herod, they returned to their country by another route." ([Matthew 2:1-12](#))*

## **Bible Meaning of the Magi**

Concerning the group of magi who came to find the King of the Jews, [Matthew 2](#) says only that they arrived from the East by following "His star." According to other classical writers, the term *magi* meant either those who practiced magical arts (as in [Acts 8:9](#) and [Acts 13:6](#)) or Eastern priest-sages usually associated with the area near Babylon and said to look into the mysteries of the universe through astronomy, astrology, and natural sciences. The latter makes the most sense here.

Matthew's account does not even list the number of magi, but their knowledge of the expected Messiah (Christ) should be no surprise. During this time, many Jews lived in dispersion, scattered throughout the Roman Empire and the East. With them, they carried the hope of the Messiah as promised in what we call the Old Testament. As evidence, we need look no further than Yemen, whose kings professed the Jewish faith from around 120 B.C. to the sixth century of our era.

However, their understanding of prophecy proved somewhat limited since they did not know where Christ would be born. Instead, they followed a particular "star" to Judea and then headed for Jerusalem, the capital city and the place where one might expect to find a king.

The authorities of Israel directed the magi to Bethlehem, according to the prophecy in [Micah 5:2](#). Guided again by the star, though they likely only regarded this as confirmation of the location, the magi found and paid homage to Christ.

While some have claimed the account of the magi is nothing more than a myth designed to show how Jesus met the expectations of the Jewish Messiah, the account actually undermines this claim. The Jews of the time expected a Messiah the whole world would submit to and honor. The appearance of only a few magi seems almost a caricature of those expectations.

*Adapted from The Life and Times of Jesus the Messiah by Alfred Edersheim (Book II, Chapter VIII).*

## **What Can We Learn from the Wise Men?**

It is not known who these wise men were. Their names and dwelling places are alike kept back from us. We are only told that they came "from the East."

[Matthew 2:1-12](#) shows us that there may be true servants of God in places where we should not expect to find them. The Lord Jesus has many "hidden ones" like these wise men. The grace of God is not tied to places and families. The Holy Spirit can lead souls to [Christ](#) without the help of many outward means. Men may be born in dark places of the earth, like these wise men, and yet like them be made "wise unto salvation."

These verses teach us that it is not always those who have the most religious privileges who give Christ the most honor. We might have thought that the Scribes and [Pharisees](#) would have been the first to hasten to Bethlehem on the lightest rumor that the Savior was born. But it was not so. A few unknown strangers from a distant land were the first, except the shepherds mentioned by Luke, to rejoice at His birth.

These verses teach us that there may be knowledge of Scripture in the head, while there is no grace in the heart. Notice how King Herod sends to inquire of the priests and elders "where the Christ would be born." Notice also what a ready answer they return him and what an acquaintance with the letter of Scripture they show. But they never went to Bethlehem to seek for the coming Savior.

The conduct of the wise men described in this chapter is a splendid example of spiritual diligence. What trouble it must have cost them to travel from their homes to the place where Jesus was born! How many weary miles they must have journeyed!

It would be well for all professing [Christians](#) if they were more ready to follow the wise men's example. Where is our self-denial? What pains do we take about our souls? What diligence do we show about following Christ? What does our religion cost us? These are serious questions. They deserve serious consideration.

Last but not least, the conduct of the wise men is a striking example of faith. They believed in Christ when they had never seen Him - but that was not all. They believed in Him when the Scribes and Pharisees were unbelieving - but that, again, was not all. They believed in Him when they saw Him as a little infant on Mary's knee and worshiped Him as a king.

*Adapted from [The Gospel of Matthew](#) by J.C. Ryle (Chapter 2).*

## **Why Don't the Other Gospels Mention the Magi?**

In [Matthew 1:1-23](#), there's an incident recorded that is entirely passed over by the other Evangelists but is peculiarly appropriate in this first Gospel. This incident is the visit of the wise men (magi) who came from the East to honor and worship the [Christ](#) Child. The details which the Holy Spirit gives us of this visit strikingly illustrate the distinctive character and scope of Matthew's Gospel.

This chapter opens as follows, "Now when [Jesus](#) was born in Bethlehem of Judea in the days of Herod the King, behold, there came wise men from the east to Jerusalem, Saying, 'Where is He that is born King of the Jews? We have seen His star in the east and are come to worship Him.'" Notice, these wise men came not inquiring, "Where is He that is born the Savior of the world?" nor, "Where is the Word now incarnate?" but instead, "Where is He that is born King of the Jews?"

The fact that Mark, Luke, and John are entirely silent about this, and the fact that Matthew's Gospel does record it, is surely proof positive that this first Gospel presents Christ in a distinctively Jewish relationship. The evidence for this is cumulative: there is first the peculiar expression with which Matthew opens — "the book of the generation of," which is an Old Testament expression and met with nowhere else in the New Testament; there is the first title, which is given to Christ in this Gospel — "Son of David"; there is the Royal Genealogy which immediately follows; and now there is the record of the visit of the wise men, saying, "Where is He that is born King of the Jews?" - *Adapted from [Why Four Gospels? 1. The Gospel of Matthew](#), by A.W. Pink.*

## [GOTQUESTIONS.org](http://GOTQUESTIONS.org)

### [What did Joseph and Mary do with the gifts the magi brought to Jesus?](#)

By the time the magi arrived, Jesus was probably about two years old. The family had moved from the stable into a more suitable "house" accommodation. The magi bowed down and worshiped the Child, presenting Him with gifts of [gold, frankincense, and myrrh](#). Each of these gifts was extremely valuable. Gold and costly spices like frankincense and myrrh were gifts reserved for high-ranking figures, such as kings and queens ([1 Kings 9:28](#); [10:2](#)).

Immediately following the visit of the magi and presentation of their gifts, God spoke to [Joseph](#) in a dream, saying, "Get up" and "take the child and his mother and escape to Egypt. Stay there until I tell you, for Herod is going to search for the child to kill him"

([Matthew 2:13](#)). That same night the family departed for Egypt and stayed there until the death of [Herod](#).

The Bible does not say what Mary and Joseph did with the gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh, but many scholars have remarked that these gifts would have likely helped finance the family's material needs during their trip to Egypt and beyond.

Matthew does not specify the exact value or quantity of each gift, but the items were known to be treasured commodities in ancient times. Gold, the most valuable of all precious metals, was the standard currency of the day (see [Acts 3:4–6](#); [Matthew 10:9](#)). It was used in jewelry ([Genesis 24:53](#); [Exodus 35:22](#); [1 Peter 3:3](#)), in the priestly vestments ([Exodus 28:4–5](#); [11–15](#)), and extensively in the furnishings of the tabernacle ([Exodus 25:11–13](#); [38:21–24](#); [39:37–38](#)) and temple ([1 Kings 6:28, 30, 32, 35](#); [7:48–51](#); [1 Chronicles 22:14](#)).

It is no stretch of the imagination to think that Joseph would have used the magi's gift of gold to pay for the family's expenses.

Frankincense and myrrh, both aromatic resins, were used in worship because of their intensely fragrant properties. God instructed the Israelites to use frankincense as one of the pure ingredients of the most holy blend of incense reserved exclusively for ritual purposes. No other incense mixture was permitted on the altar of the Lord ([Exodus 30:9, 34–38](#)). Pure frankincense was set near the bread of the presence ([Leviticus 24:7](#)) and sprinkled in with the grain offerings ([Leviticus 2:1–2](#)). It was also used in perfumes ([Song of Solomon 3:6](#); [4:6, 14](#)).

This spice was expensive and precious for a couple of reasons. First, it had to be gathered from far-off regions of India, North Africa, and South Arabia and transported long distances by camel caravan back to Israel. The processing of frankincense was complex, taking months to harvest and distill.

Myrrh was another valuable spice used by merchants for trading in Bible times ([Genesis 37:25](#); [Revelation 18:11–13](#)). It was considered a sacred anointing oil ([Exodus 30:22–28](#)). Myrrh was also used to make perfumes ([Song of Solomon 1:13](#); [Psalm 45:8](#)), medicine ([Mark 15:22–23](#)), beauty treatments ([Esther 2:12](#)), and for anointing the dead ([John 19:38–40](#)). Like frankincense, myrrh production was time-consuming to process, and the raw material had to be imported from distant lands.

**Any of the gifts the magi brought to Jesus could have been sold or traded for supplies, accommodations, and living expenses.**

Some traditions speculate that Mary saved the frankincense and myrrh to use as ointments to anoint Jesus' body for burial. But the Bible doesn't mention this. Instead, John's Gospel states that Nicodemus brought "about seventy-five pounds" of a perfumed mixture of "myrrh and aloes" to anoint Jesus' body for burial ([John 19:39-40](#)).

Since the Bible does not reveal what Joseph and Mary did with the gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh, the best readers can do is hazard a guess.