

Matthew 2:1-12

- The birth of Christ announced -

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Introduction

- ❖ The visit of the wise men or Magi to the child Jesus is one of best-known stories of Jesus' childhood. It gave rise to one of the Christian festivals celebrated by the Western churches, the Epiphany on the 6th of January.¹
- ❖ This history is important for several reasons:
 - The Jewish leaders didn't expect the birth of the Christ in their time, although they were familiar with Scripture and the prophecies. But the prophecies indicated neither the time nor period of fulfilment.
 - The world represented in the person of King Herod was well aware of the consequences of the birth of the promised one. A strange situation emerged:
 - The wise men brought good tidings to Jerusalem.
 - King Herod believed their message and took action immediately.
 - The people of Jerusalem didn't believe the message of the wise men and feared the consequences of the possible actions of King Herod.
 - The church nowadays should be aware that the 'world' is well aware of the possible consequences of the growth of faith among Christians and the growth of the church.

Literary and Historical Context

- ❖ The story of the birth of Jesus Christ belongs to introductory chapters of this gospel:

¹ (n.d.). Retrieved January 2, 2016, from [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Epiphany_\(holiday\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Epiphany_(holiday)).

Mt 1:1-17	The genealogy of Jesus
Mt 1:18-25	The announcement and the birth of Jesus
Mt 2:1-12	The visit of the Magi and the announcement of the birth of the Christ in Jerusalem
Mt 2:13-18	The escape to Egypt
Mt 2:19-23	The return from Egypt

- ❖ In the gospel of Matthew a remarkable similarity is to be found between the stories of the announcement of the birth of Christ and the announcement of the resurrection of Christ to Jerusalem .

Announcement in Jerusalem	Birth of Christ (Mt 2:1-12)	Resurrection of Christ (Mt 28:11-15)
Messengers	The Magi from the east	The (Roman) soldiers guarding the grave
Recipient(s)	King Herod	The chief priests
Resolution	To kill all boys under the age of two in Bethlehem. To keep the ordinary people ignorant.	Spreading the lie of grave robbery. To keep the ordinary people ignorant.

- It is tragic to note that King Herod believed the truth of the message that the Christ had been born in Bethlehem, but that he saw the birth of Christ as a threat to his own position, not as a message of hope and salvation.
- It is even more tragic to note that the chief priests believed the truth of the message of the resurrection of the Christ from death, but that they understood this message as a defeat of their previous resolution to let Jesus be crucified, not as a message of hope and salvation.
- ❖ In the Roman-Greek (Hellenistic) world, it was commonly held that the birth (and death) of great men was heralded by the appearance of a star or a similar heavenly phenomenon² (meteorite or comet).
- ❖ Herod the Great was thoroughly influenced by this culture. He became king in 37 BC. He had many adversaries. Among them were the people of Jerusalem and the Pharisees. They objected

² Hagner, D.A. (1993, p. 25).

to him being an Idumean, a half-Jew, as well as to his friendship and relationship with the Romans, including the Roman emperor. He punished his adversaries and rewarded those who sided with him with favours and honours. The second group of adversaries belonged to the wealthiest people. He executed forty-five of them and confiscated their property. He built many theatres, fortresses and temples in Gentile territories. He also built the Temple of Jerusalem. The rebuilding of the temple was finished in AD 63, long after his death. He was a cruel emperor and the killing of the boys in Bethlehem after he had heard of the birth of Christ was no random incident.³

- The fact that he was an Idumean is important. The Idumeans were descendants from Edom or Esau, the elder brother of Jacob or Israel. When Rebecca was pregnant with Esau and Jacob, ‘The Lord said to her, “Two nations are in your womb, and two peoples from within you will be separated; one people will be stronger than the other, and the older will serve the younger”’ (Gen 25:23).

Form and structure

- ❖ The form and structure of this passage have the character of a short historical narrative.

Mt 2:1-2	<p>The search for the King of the Jews by the wise men</p> <p>The introduction of the Magi or wise men from the East and their arrival in Jerusalem, asking for the King of the Jews.</p>
Mt 2:3-8	<p>King Herod, the wise men and the search for the Christ</p> <p>The introduction of King Herod. He is informed about the arrival of the Magi and he summons the chief priests and scribes, asking them where the Christ will be born.</p> <p>King Herod invites the Magi to his residence, sending them to Bethlehem and asking them for a report about the child.</p>
Mt 2:9-12	<p>The wise men have found the child</p> <p>The Magi arrive in Bethlehem and, guided by the star. they find Mary and the child. They worship the child, presenting their gifts.</p> <p>The return of the Magi or wise men to their own country.</p>

³ Hoehner, H. (1992, pp. 317-322).

Exposition

Verse 1-2

- ❖ **“After Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea.”** The great news of the birth of the Christ had not yet reached the majority of the people of Jerusalem, although Bethlehem was not far away.
 - According to the Gospel of Luke, the shepherds in the fields of Bethlehem (Lk 2:7-20) heard the great news from the angels. When Jesus was presented to the Lord (Lk 2:21-40), two elderly people who were expecting the redemption of Israel spoke to all who shared the same hope.
 - By mentioning Bethlehem as the place where Jesus was born, Matthew provides a connection with the prophecies quoted by the chief priests in verse 6.
- ❖ **“during the time of King Herod.”**
 - Herod the Great died in 4 BC, therefore Jesus must have been born around 6 BC. Herod himself reckoned with two years between the birth of Christ and the visit of the wise men, who are introduced in the following verse.
 - The title ‘King’ stands in sharp contrast with the other title ‘king of the Jews’. King Herod was not the legitimate heir to the throne of King David. He was some sort of tyrant.
- ❖ **“Magi from the east came to Jerusalem.”**
 - **μάγος**, οὐ, ὁ. **1.** a Magus, a (Persian (...), then also Babylonian) wise man and priest, who was expert in astrology, interpretation of dreams and various other occult arts.⁴
 - We don’t know exactly where they came from. We also don’t know how many wise men arrived at Jerusalem. The number of three, the names “Melchior, Balthasar and Caspar” and that they were kings, belong to the realm of tradition. The scriptures do not mention these things.
 - Do they represent the nations?
- ❖ **“... We saw his star in the east and have come to worship him.”**
 - God announces the birth of the Christ in language appropriate to the world of those days:
 - By signs and wonders to the non-believing world;
 - By fulfilling of the Scriptures to his people.
 - Scholars have tried to identify “the star” with a natural phenomenon, but this is not possible. What is more important is that it is a sign from God. The Creator of heaven and earth makes use of impressive natural phenomena. Another example is found in Revelation 6:17. The coming Day of the Lord is heralded by different natural phenomena, such as a solar and a lunar eclipse.
 - They saw **“his star.”** A “star” as a symbol or a sign is often used for royal people and in our days for famous people. (Compare Num. 24:17). The wise men spoke of **“his”**, not **“a”** star.
 - **προσκυνέω** (Freq. used to designate the custom of prostrating oneself before persons and kissing their feet or the hem of their garment, the ground, etc.; the Persians did this in the presence of their deified king, and the Greeks before a divinity or something holy.) **to express in attitude or gesture one’s complete dependence on or submission to a high authority figure, (fall down and) worship, do obeisance to, prostrate oneself**

⁴ Arndt, W., Danker, F. W., & Bauer, W. (2000, p. 608).

before, do reverence to, welcome respectfully. A. to human beings, but by this act they are to be recognized as belonging to a superhuman realm. B. to God.⁵

- The wise men saw the 'King of the Jews' probably as a human belonging to a superhuman realm (meaning A). But within the context of the Gospel of Matthew this worship is pointing towards the godly realm (meaning B). God became human. This is made clear in Matthew 4:10 where the same word is used: "Jesus said to him, "Away from me, Satan! For it is written: '**Worship the Lord your God**, and serve him only.'""

Verse 3-8

- ❖ It is remarkable that the wise men didn't go directly to the palace where King Herod was residing. The news of their arrival reached Herod indirectly. King Herod is terrified by the news. The birth of this king is a direct threat to his own position.
- ❖ The people of Jerusalem are deeply troubled by the news. There is no sign of joyful expectation. The people fear this King. What will he do? What kind of atrocities will he commit?
- ❖ King Herod has made his plans. He makes the connection between:
 - 'The King of the Jews' and 'the Christ.' There is no indication that the chief priests and the teachers of the law had made this connection yet.

<p>1. King Herod calls the chief priests and the teachers of the law and asks about the birthplace of the Christ. Herod believes this prophecy.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • They are fully cooperative and give King Herod the necessary information, referring to Micha 5:2(-4).
<p>2. After he has consulted the chief priests, Herod calls the wise men in secret. He combines the two facts: a. the time of the appearance of the star; b. the prophecy of Micha 5:2-4. By providing the wise men with the necessary information for their continued search, he gains their trust.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The chief priests and teachers of the law are ignorant of the visit of the wise man to King Herod. • By doing so, he can keep the people of Israel ignorant of the fact that the Christ has been born.
<p>3. He sends the wise men to Bethlehem as spies.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Herod doesn't want to worship the Christ. Instead, he wants to kill him secretly.

- The chief priests and teachers of the law referred to Micha 5:2-4, not quoting the words of the prophet exactly as known from the Hebrew Bible or the Greek translation of the Old Testament:

⁵ Arndt, W., Danker, F. W., & Bauer, W. (2000, p. 882).

“But you, Bethlehem Ephrathah, though you are small among the clans of Judah, out of you will come for me one who will be ruler over Israel, whose origins are from of old, from ancient times.”

(...)

“He will stand and shepherd his flock in the strength of the LORD, in the majesty of the name of the LORD his God. And they will live securely, for then his greatness will reach to the ends of the earth.”

- The final words of the prophetic promise have been fulfilled in Matthew 28:19-20.

Verse 9-12

- ❖ The star reappears as a ‘personal’ guide to the wise men. It is divine guidance. It is not a strictly “natural” astronomical phenomenon⁶.
- ❖ **“When they saw the star, they were overjoyed.” = “rejoiced exceedingly with great joy.”⁷**
Unsurpassable joy.
- ❖ In this passage, all royal epithets are left out. The wise men saw the little CHILD and his mother Mary; Joseph is not mentioned. All attention is focused on the child, the precious presents and their worship.
 - Is the designation “child” an implicit reference to Isaiah 9:5? **“For to us a child is born, to us a son is given, and the government will be on his shoulders. And he will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.”**
- ❖ God is in control. He warns the wise men not to return to King Herod, probably for the sake of their own lives, and to allow Joseph, the child and Mary enough time to escape the revenge of King Herod. Soon afterwards, King Herod will take revenge in an ultimate attempt to kill the “King of the Jews” or “the Christ” (Mt 2:13-18).

Application

- ❖ God is speaking to this world, not only by words but also by signs and wonders. Sometimes people are receptive in an unexpected way.
- ❖ The adversaries of the gospel are very receptive to special “revelations.” King Herod did believe the wise men AND the Scriptures, but not unto salvation(!) “You believe that there is one God. Good! Even the demons believe that—and shudder” (James 2:19).
 - There is belief unto salvation and:
 - There is belief not unto salvation. This is not the same as unbelief. Herod believed the Scriptures and this belief evoked resistance and vengeance.
- ❖ Unsurpassable joy. The wise men set an example for all Christians and all nations when they worshipped the child, the King of the Jews, the Messiah. Worship is an important theme in the

⁶ Hagner, D.A. (1993, p. 30).

⁷ *English Standard Version*. (2001). (Mt 2:10).

gospel of Matthew. It recurs at the end after the resurrection when Jesus appears to his disciples on the mount in Galilee: “When they saw him, **they worshiped him**; but some doubted.” (Mt 28:17; also Luke 24:52).

- Nowadays we are called to worship Christ: “Therefore, I urge you, brothers, in view of God’s mercy, to offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God—this is your spiritual act of worship” (Rom 12:1).
 - There is a sharp contrast between the wise men and the Roman soldiers mocking Jesus (Mt 27:29). It will be the verdict written on top of the cross: “Above his head they placed the written charge against him: **THIS IS JESUS, THE KING OF THE JEWS.**” (Mt 27:37).
- ❖ We are awaiting the second coming of Christ. Do we believe the Scriptures and the promises, or are we asleep just like the people of Jerusalem at the time of the visit of the wise men?

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