

MATTHEW

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MATTHEW

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- I. Prologue/Introduction: Origin of Jesus the Messiah (1:1–2:23)
- B. Birth of Jesus the Messiah (1:18–25)
- ▶ C. Visit of the Magi (2:1–12)
- D. Escape to Egypt (2:13–15)

C. Visit of the Magi (2:1–12)

The RSV and Fenton (1963: 44–49) divide Matt. 2 into five sections, each containing a biblical allusion. This scheme places a break between 2:6 and 2:7 due to an unwarranted stress on the minor biblical allusions in 2:11. It is better to stress the four major biblical quotations and posit four sections (1–12, 13–15, 16–18, 19–23). The chapter can also be profitably viewed as a drama in two acts comprising 2:1–12 and 2:13–23 respectively (S. Brown 1977: 178–79). The worship of the magi in the first act contrasts with the treachery of Herod in the second. There is also the strange indifference of the chief priests and legal experts (2:4–6), who quickly display biblical knowledge but do not act on it. Through it all, God protects the nascent Messiah by angelic appearances in dreams to the magi and especially to Joseph, who obeys at each juncture. Matthew tells this story in language that tends to parallel that of the description of Pharaoh's attempt to kill Jewish male babies in the early chapters of Exodus (cf. Exod. 1:22; 2:15, 23; 4:19–20). Herod amounts to a new pharaoh and Jesus is the new Moses (Allison 1993b: 140–65).

Matt. 2:1–12 can be displayed chiastically. This helps place the focus of the pericope on the citation of Mic. 5:2 and thus on Matthew's characteristic emphasis on Jesus's continuity with biblical patterns and predictions.

Magi arrive from the east (2:1)

Magi have seen a special star and seek to worship Jesus (2:2)

Herod is terrified of the one born king of the Jews (2:3)

Herod questions the religious leaders (2:4)

Religious leaders answer Herod (2:5–6; cf. Mic. 5:2)

Herod plots against the one born king of the Jews (2:7–8)

Magi see the star again and are enabled to worship Jesus
(2:9–11)

Magi depart to their own country (2:12)

The events of Matt. 2 hint at two motifs that are stressed as Matthew's story of Jesus develops further. First, the worship of the magi implies that God's redemptive purposes extend beyond the nation of Israel.

Second, the treachery of Herod and the indifference of the religious leaders demonstrate that many within Israel will not believe in Jesus. Herod's unbelief is particularly blatant yet also instructive. He uses his newly acquired knowledge of Jesus the Messiah to plot against Jesus, but as the chapter closes, Herod is dead but Jesus is alive, still fulfilling the patterns and predictions of the Bible. Further occurrences of these motifs may be found in 8:10; 15:28; 21:31; 22:8–10.

The unit can be outlined as follows:

1. The magi's arrival and question (2:1–2)
2. Herod's response (2:3–4)
3. The biblical prediction (2:5–6)
4. Herod's deceptive plot (2:7–8)
5. The magi in Bethlehem (2:9–11)
6. Departure of the magi (2:12)

Exegesis and Exposition

¹Now after Jesus had been born in Bethlehem of Judea during King Herod's reign, some men from the east who studied the stars arrived ¹unexpectedly in Jerusalem ²and started asking, "Where is the one who was born king of the Jews? We saw his star when it arose, and we have come to worship him."

³When King Herod heard about this, he was alarmed, as was all Jerusalem. ⁴So he summoned all the chief priests and legal experts of the people and inquired from them where the Messiah was to be born. ⁵"In Bethlehem of Judea," they told him, ¹"for so it is written by the prophet":

⁶"And you, Bethlehem of Judea,
You are by no means least among the rulers of Judea.
For from you will come a ruler
who will shepherd my people Israel."

⁷Then Herod secretly summoned the men who studied the stars and found out from them exactly when the star had appeared. ⁸He sent them to Bethlehem with these orders: "Go and carefully search for the child. When you find him, report to me so that I can come and worship him too." ⁹When they had heard the king, they left, and suddenly the star that they had seen in the east went ahead of them until it stopped over the place where the child was. ¹⁰And when they saw the star, they were overwhelmed with joy. ¹¹When they went into the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother, and they knelt down and worshiped him. They opened their baggage and offered gifts to him of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. ¹²Later they were warned in a dream not to return to Herod, so they withdrew to their own country by another route.

1. The Magi's Arrival and Question (2:1–2)

2:1 The new pericope begins with a genitive absolute (see footnote 2 of the comments on 1:18), which sets the time of the arrival of the magi as some time after the birth of Jesus.¹ The passive genitive participle γεννηθέντος (*gennēthentos*, was born) is consistent with passive verb forms in 1:16, 20. A comparison of 2:1 with 2:7, 16 indicates that the magi evidently arrived about two years after the birth. Luke 1:26; 2:1–7 mentions Joseph and Mary's origins in Nazareth and their trip to Bethlehem in response to the decree of Caesar Augustus. Matthew says nothing about this background, simply mentioning that Jesus was born in Bethlehem and connecting this with Mic. 5:2. Readers of Matthew who were familiar with the Bible would recognize Bethlehem as David's city and connect it with Matthew's earlier stress on David (Matt. 1:1, 6, 17, 20). Luke 2:4, 11 explicitly stresses Bethlehem as the city of David (cf. John 7:42). It is clear that Matthew is not interested in historical, chronological, and geographical details for their own sake. Rather, these details are mentioned to the degree that they serve Matthew's theological interests. This is not to say that Matthew invents "history" to serve theology but that Matthew selects historical details that support his theological ends and omits other details.

Jesus was born during the reign of Herod the Great, and various modern scholars place the date of the birth from 7 to 4 BCE (see Vardaman and Yamauchi 1989). The puzzling BCE dating of Christ's birth is due to mistakes made when the Christian calendar was instituted in 525 CE by Dionysius Exiguus. Herod the Great ruled from 37 to 4 BCE. Half-Jewish and half-Idumean, he was known for his shrewd diplomacy and his public works program, the remains of which may be seen yet today: the western retaining wall (the Wailing Wall) of the Temple Mount in Jerusalem, the city of Caesarea, the Masada and Herodion (near Bethlehem) fortresses, and the enclosure at Machpelah (the traditional burial site of Sarah; cf. Gen. 23) in Hebron. But Herod's personal life was a shambles, and palace intrigue was rampant. He had several wives and sons, some of whom he ordered murdered because of his fear that they were plotting against him. The Bethlehem atrocity (Matt. 2:16) was in keeping with Herod's usual manner of guarding his throne from any potential usurpers. In this connection, Macrobius's (ca. 400 CE) report rings true: the emperor Augustus spoke of Herod in a pun, saying that it was safer to be Herod's sow (ὕς, *hys*) than his son (υἱός, *huios*). However, this report is probably not historical (*Saturnalia* 2.4.11).²

1. Once again ἰδοὺ introduces a startling new development in the story. See footnote 4 of the comments on 1:20 for discussion.

2. Josephus, *Ant.* 14–18, is the primary ancient source for the life of Herod. For a helpful summary of the life of Herod the Great and the Herodian dynasty and for a bibliography,

In light of later developments, it is significant that Matthew refers to Herod as king and specifies that the magi arrive in Jerusalem. Herod's kingship is merely a political office, and he will go to great lengths to guard against any potential rival. Jesus's kingship, like David's (1:6), is genuine and legitimate, given to him by God at birth (2:2). It is appropriate that the magi arrive in Jerusalem, David's capital city, the city of the great king (5:35; Ps. 48:2). It is the city of Solomon's temple, but Jesus is greater than Solomon and his temple (12:6, 42). He must cleanse the temple when he enters the city as its rightful king (Matt. 21), only to be crucified there a few days later (Matt. 27).

According to popular tradition, the magi (μάγοι, *magoi*), often called the wise men (cf. Powell 2000), were three kings named Balthasar, Caspar, and Melchior, whose relics now reside in the cathedral at Cologne. Beyond the fact that one might deduce that there were three men from the number of the gifts they gave Jesus, there is no basis in Matthew for this tradition. The magi were not kings but more likely were prominent priestly professionals who studied the stars and discerned the signs of the times.³ They may have come from Arabia, Babylon, or Persia (cf. Maalouf 1999). Perhaps there are historical connections between them and the "Chaldeans" mentioned in Daniel (1:4; 2:2; 4:7; 5:7), who were adept in the interpretation of dreams. Elsewhere in the NT μάγοι are viewed quite unfavorably (Acts 8:9; 13:6, 8). One hesitates to call them astrologers because of the unsavory connotations of the term today (thus the translation above, "men who studied the stars"), but perhaps this is the best one-word translation. How these men came to interpret the star as an indication of the birth of the Messiah is a mystery, but some speculate that they were somehow aware of the prophecy of Balaam in Num. 24:17. The inclusion of the pericope about the magi does not amount to a sanction of astrology, which is condemned and forbidden in the Bible (e.g., Isa. 47:13–15; Jer. 10:1–2). Rather, Matthew includes the incident to contrast the mysterious insight of the magi with the obtuseness of Herod and the religious leaders.

The historicity of the magi's visit is frequently denied (Schnackenburg 2002: 20). Beare (1981: 74–75) explains the magi as a Christian reflection on the visit of an Armenian king to the emperor Nero in AD 66. Gundry (1994: 26–27) views the account of the magi as an imaginative midrash on Luke 2:8–20, the story of the annunciation to the shepherds. Others take the story as a midrash on the biblical account of Balak enlisting

see H. Hoehner in Green and McKnight 1992: 317–26. The classic studies of Herod and his dynasty are Perowne 1973, 1974.

3. For a study summarizing the historical background of the magi and affirming the historicity of Matthew's account, see Yamauchi 1989: 15–39. See also Allison 2005b: 17–41; Böcher in Schenke 1988: 11–24; Delling, *TDNT* 4:356–59; Ferrari d'Occhieppo in Vardaman and Yamauchi 1989: 41–53; Hoehner 1977: 11–28; R. Horsley 1989: 53–60; Keener 1999: 99.

Balaam to prophesy against Israel, only to have Balaam bless Israel instead (Num. 22–24). Another similar biblical story is the Queen of Sheba’s visit to Solomon (1 Kings 10; 2 Chron. 9). It is likely that Num. 24:17 (“a star will come out of Jacob, a scepter will rise out of Israel”) is echoed in this story, but this does not necessarily bring the historicity of the story into question. (See Yamauchi 1989: 18–23 for a critique of these positions.)

2:2 The magi come from the east (cf. Matt. 8:11; 24:27) and inquire where the king of the Jews was born because they have seen his star⁴ ἐν τῇ ἀνατολῇ (*en tē anatolē*, when it arose). This phrase should not be translated “in the east” (NASB) because points of the compass occur without the article in the NT (as in 2:1; cf. BDF §141.2; 253.5). Additionally, this might imply that the magi came from the west toward an eastern star, which would contradict 2:1. Rather, the phrase describes the rising of the star (BDAG 74; NIV margin; NLT, NRSV). Modern readers wonder whether the rising of the star may be explained scientifically as a comet, a planetary conjunction, or a supernova providentially arranged by God. Whether these modern explanations have merit or not, Matthew would evidently view the occurrence as a miracle.⁵

In some mysterious manner, the rising star has led the magi to Jerusalem to worship the one born king of the Jews (ὁ τεχθεὶς βασιλεὺς τῶν Ἰουδαίων, *ho techtheis basileus tōn Ioudaiōn*). The participle τεχθεὶς functions as an attributive adjective that portrays Jesus as the “born-king” of the Jews. This contrasts with Herod’s kingship, which is merely the result of shrewd political manipulation. Jesus’s genuine kingship is due to his Davidic sonship, as made clear in the genealogy. Yet Jesus is also the Son of God, as implied in 1:18–25 and made more explicit as the narrative proceeds. As the born-king of the Jews, Jesus will be able to resist Satan’s test in offering him all the world’s kingdoms (4:8). He will be able to affirm his superiority to King Solomon (12:42) and promise a glorious future return to the earth (16:28; 19:28; 20:21; 25:34). Yet he will be able to enter Jerusalem humbly (21:5) and endure the unspeakable mockery leading to his crucifixion (27:11, 29, 37, 42). The resurrection will vindicate his claims and validate him as the born-king of the Jews, to whom all power has been given (28:18).

The wise men come to “worship” (προσκυνῆσαι, *proskynēsai*) Jesus. This word is not limited to religious contexts and may simply signify bowing or kneeling to pay homage or respect to a superior, such as a king (18:26). Thus it is often translated “kneel down” in the NIV, even in contexts that describe Jesus (8:2; 9:18; 15:25; 20:20). In other contexts,

4. For discussion of the position of the possessive pronoun αὐτοῦ before the definite noun τὸν ἀστέρα, see BDF §284.

5. On the star, see Allison 1993c; Aveni 1998; Boa and Proctor 1985; Ferrari d’Occhieppo 1994; Humphreys 1992; Kidger 1999; Parpola 2001.

the NIV does translate the word as “worship” (2:2, 8, 11; 14:33; 28:9, 17). Given Matthew’s high Christology, however, it seems that religious worship is at least implied in every passage (Carson 1984: 86, 90 cautions otherwise). Although reverence for a fellow human being is all that is indicated in 18:26, Jesus’s exchange with Satan indicates in the strongest terms that worship is to be given only to God (4:9–10). This implies that when Jesus is the object of “worship,” more than mere respect for a superior is meant. Comparison of Matthew’s stress on such worship with the relative absence of this theme in the other Gospels (Mark 5:6; 15:19; Luke 4:7, 8; 24:52; John 4:20–24; 9:38; 12:20) also supports this point. Throughout Matthew, Jesus is presented as the Son of God, Immanuel. Thus it is not surprising that Jesus is frequently worshiped as God the Son. Just how much of this the magi understand is debatable, but on a literary level more than homage to a king is implied.

2. Herod’s Response (2:3–4)

The conjunction *δέ* (*de*) introduces this verse with a note of explanation or perhaps mild contrast. The magi have come to worship the newborn king, but when King Herod hears of it, he becomes quite disturbed at this threat to his own rule. The aorist passive verb *ἐταράχθη* (*etarachthē*, was troubled) should be viewed as ingressive or inceptive (BDF §331; Wallace 1996: 558–59), indicating that when Herod hears (*ἀκούσας*, *akousas*, a temporal or causal participle) the wise men’s inquiry, he becomes disturbed. For similar syntax, see 8:10; 14:13; 17:6; 19:22, 25; 20:24. A genuine king of Israel would have rejoiced at the prospect of the Messiah’s birth and would have known where the Messiah would be born. Instead, Herod’s response is anxiety and fear, and this fear is shared by all Jerusalem.

2:3

Jerusalem’s fear is variously explained. It seems unlikely that “all Jerusalem” would fear the born-king of the Jews for the same reason King Herod would. Thus Carson (1984: 86) believes that Jerusalem was afraid that this news would provoke Herod to further violence and cruelty. Beare (1981: 77) thinks that this may refer only to popular messianic excitement over the rumors of Jesus’s birth. W. Davies and Allison (1988: 238–39) and R. Horsley (1989: 49–52) believe that “all Jerusalem” refers to the Jerusalem establishment that controlled the politics, economics, and religious activities of the rest of the nation. Many of the leaders of the Jerusalem establishment would be Herod’s political bedfellows whose fears would closely parallel Herod’s if a potential rival was on the horizon. This last suggestion seems preferable. As Matthew’s story proceeds, this same Jerusalem establishment will unite in diametrical opposition to the born-king of the Jews (see 15:1; 16:21; 20:17–18; 21:1, 10; 23:37).

Because he fears the news brought by the magi, Herod gathers the chief priests and legal experts (also paired in 20:18; 21:15) of the people (cf.

2:4

21:23; 26:3, 47; 27:1) to find the answer to their question about the place of Jesus's birth. This reveals Herod's ignorance of the Hebrew Scriptures as well as his quick response to a potential rival. He assembles a meeting of the chief priests, which evidently would include the present and former high priests, the heads of the twenty-four main divisions of priests (cf. Luke 1:5, 8), and temple officers. Along with the Sadducean priestly hierarchy, Herod summons the scribes (γραμματεῖς, *grammateis*) of the people.⁶ These men were not primarily professional copyists of the Bible but teachers of its meaning and application to Jewish life. Such legal experts were often Pharisees, and Matthew links the two terms several times (5:20; 12:38; 15:1; 23:2, 13, 15, 23, 25, 27, 29). This mention of the chief priests and legal experts at Jesus's birth tends to anticipate their active involvement in his death (16:21; 20:18; 21:15; 26:57). Herod will soon die (2:19), but the religious leaders remain to oppose Jesus.⁷

Herod asks the religious leaders where the Messiah will be born. The imperfect verb (ἐπυνθάνετο, *epynthaneto*) could be viewed as appropriate for the incomplete action inherent in asking a question (BDF §328), or it may have just an inceptive nuance ("he started asking"). Herod's question equates the magi's "king of the Jews" with "the Messiah." The linkage of Messiah with king also appears in the passion narrative (26:63, 68; 27:11, 17, 22, 29, 37).

3. The Biblical Prediction (2:5–6)

2:5 The Sadducean high priests and the Pharisaic legal experts do not always agree on matters of doctrine, but they univocally answer Herod's question and cite Mic. 5:2 (combined with 2 Sam. 5:2) in support. They believe that the Messiah will be born in Bethlehem of Judea, which was also the home of Jesse and David (1 Sam. 16:1; 17:12, 15). It has been so written by the prophet (οὕτως γὰρ γέγραπται διὰ τοῦ προφήτου, *houtōs gar gegraptai dia tou prophētou*). This introductory formula recalls that in 1:22 but differs from it in that a form of the verb πληρώω (*plēroō*, fulfill) does not appear. The leaders cite the Bible here as a text that proves their

6. Cf. Josephus, *Ant.* 6.120; 7.110, 293, 319, 364; 9.164; 10.55, 58, 94, 95, 149; 11.22, 26, 29, 128, 248, 250, 272, 287; 12.142; 16.319; 20.208–9; *J.W.* 1.479, 529, 532; *Ag. Ap.* 1.290.

7. For further discussion of the high priests and legal experts, see Jeremias 1962: 160–81, 233–45. Matthew mentions the chief priests in 2:4; 16:21; 20:18; 21:15, 23, 45; 26:3, 14, 47, 59; 27:1, 3, 6, 12, 20, 41, 62; 28:11 (the high priest himself is mentioned in 26:51, 57, 62, 63, 65) and the legal experts in 2:4; 5:20; 7:29; 8:19; 9:3; 12:38; 13:52; 15:1; 16:21; 17:10; 20:18; 21:15; 23:2, 13, 15, 23, 25, 27, 29, 34; 26:57; 27:41. Another group connected at times to the high priests and legal experts is the elders (πρεσβύτεροι). See Jeremias 1962: 222–32 and 15:2; 16:21; 21:23; 26:3, 47, 57; 27:1, 3, 12, 20, 41; 28:12. The three groups are portrayed together plotting against Jesus in 16:21; 26:57; 27:41. Evidently, these three groups made up the high court, or Sanhedrin. The phrase "the people's legal experts" occurs only here in Matthew, but "the elders of the people" occurs in 21:23; 26:3, 47; 27:1. See also Gale 2005; Klijn 1959: 259–67; Schwartz 1992: 89–101; and Twelftree in J. Green and McKnight 1992: 728–35.

answer to Herod. This would make little sense unless they understood Mic. 5:2 as a direct prediction of the Messiah's birthplace. The abiding authority of the Bible as God's revelation is implied by the force of the perfect-tense verb γέγραπται, which presents the ancient text as something that stands written contemporaneously with the NT situation (cf. BDF §340; Wallace 1996: 574–76). The passive verb should be viewed as a divine, or theological, passive, implying God's agency (Zerwick 1963: §236; Wallace 1996: 437–38). The prepositional phrase διὰ τοῦ προφήτου expresses the human means used by the divine agency.

Micah 5:2 LXX is an accurate translation of the Hebrew Bible, but the form of the text appearing in Matthew differs from both MT and LXX in four obvious ways. Three of these are relatively inconsequential. First, Matthew has “Bethlehem in the land (γῆ, *gē*) of Judah” whereas the MT has “Bethlehem Ephrathah” and the LXX has “Bethlehem house [οἶκος, *oikos*] of Ephrathah.” It may be that Ephrathah (cf., e.g., Gen. 35:19; 48:7; Ruth 4:11; 1 Chron. 4:4) is an archaic term, unfamiliar to Matthew's audience (Carson 1984: 87), and that Matthew wishes to highlight Jesus's ancestor Judah (Matt. 1:2–3; cf. Gen. 49:10). Or perhaps Bethlehem of Judah anticipates the mention of Judah in the next line of Mic. 5:2. At any rate, Bethlehem of Judah is also found in the Bible (Judg. 17:7–9; 19:1–2, 18; Ruth 1:1–2; 1 Sam. 17:12) to distinguish it from another Bethlehem of Zebulon in Galilee (Josh. 19:15).

2:6

Another difference between Matthew and the text of both MT and LXX is Matthew's use of the word ἡγεμῶν (*hēgemōn*, ruler) to describe Bethlehem's insignificance among the rulers (*hēgemones*) of Judah instead of the “clans” (lit. “thousands”) of Judah in MT and LXX. This may again be due to anticipation of the participial cognate ἡγούμενος (*hēgoumenos*, ruler) in the next line, or perhaps Matthew understood the MT word translated “thousands” as “princes,” which is possible if the consonants are repointed (W. Davies and Allison 1988: 243). Another minor difference is Matthew's insertion of γάρ (*gar*, for) in the third line of the quotation, “for from you will come forth a ruler.” The reason for this addition becomes clear when the next change Matthew makes in the verse is discussed.

The key difference between Matthew and MT/LXX is his addition of the word οὐδαμῶς (*oudamōs*, by no means) to the second line of the quote. Whereas MT and LXX make a simple assertion to the effect that Bethlehem is insignificant among the clans of Judah, Matthew's addition asserts the contrary: “You by no means are least among the rulers of Judah.” But this contradiction is only superficial. In MT and LXX the geographical insignificance of Bethlehem is implicitly contrasted with its theological significance in a concession-result semantic pattern. The same contrast is present in Matthew but is expressed in a negation-reason semantic pattern. One could interpretively translate

the MT as follows: “*Even though* you are insignificant among the clans of Judah, *nevertheless* from you one will go forth for me to be ruler in Israel.” Micah foresees that the Messiah will rise from a geographically insignificant town. As Matthew looks back to Micah’s prophecy, he notes in hindsight that the birth of Jesus has transformed the significance of Bethlehem. From Micah’s view, Bethlehem has prospective significance. From Matthew’s retrospective view, Bethlehem is not at all insignificant. In the flow of redemptive history, Bethlehem’s theological significance has finally overcome its geographical insignificance. Thus Matthew also adds the particle *γάρ* in line 3 to identify the birth of Jesus as the event that brings Bethlehem from the wings to center stage in the drama of redemptive history.

The biblical quotation is actually a combination of Mic. 5:2 and 2 Sam. 5:2. Matthew omits the end of Mic. 5:2, “whose origins are from long ago, from ancient times.” Instead, he appends a line from 2 Sam. 5:2 (cf. 1 Chron. 11:2) to the effect that Jesus will shepherd God’s people Israel. Whereas the last line of Mic. 5:2 is certainly compatible with Matthew’s high Christology, the material from 2 Samuel fits Matthew’s Davidic emphasis. In 2 Sam. 5 Saul had died (2 Sam. 1:1) and David had been anointed king over Judah in Hebron (2:3–4). After seven and a half years there (2:11), representatives from Israel came to Hebron and anointed David king of Israel as well. To consolidate his reign, David conquered Jebus/Jerusalem and reigned there for thirty-three years (5:5–10). The words Matthew includes from 2 Sam. 5:2 were originally spoken by the representatives from Israel who were recounting God’s earlier promises to David (cf. 1 Sam. 18:5, 13, 16; 25:30; Ps. 78:70–72). The image of Jesus as shepherd fits into Matthew quite well (Matt. 9:35–36; 14:14; 15:32; 25:31–46; 26:31; cf. Golding 2006) and is based on the Hebrew Bible (cf. Ps. 23; Jer. 23; Ezek. 34; Mic. 2:12–3:3). There is also an implicit contrast between Jesus as the genuine Davidic shepherd of Israel and Herod, who with his religious leaders is a false shepherd (Matt. 9:36; John 10:11–16) and a counterfeit successor of David. (On the biblical citation, see Heater 1983; Jenson in Satterthwaite et al. 1995: 189–211; Lust in Tuckett 1997: 65–88; Petrotta 1985, 1990.)

4. Herod’s Deceptive Plot (2:7–8)

2:7–8 By the time Herod secretly summons the magi, he has already concocted his scheme to murder Jesus. He needs to ascertain from them the time when the star that marked the birth of Jesus first appeared (cf. 2:16).⁸ In their naïveté, the magi unwittingly give Herod the information he needs. Herod also deceptively asks them to search carefully for the child and

8. The verb ἠκρίβωσεν occurs only here and in 2:16. The related adverb ἀκριβῶς occurs in 2:8.

report his whereabouts so that Herod can also go and worship him.⁹ Then he sends them off to Bethlehem, only about five miles to the south. As the unknowing magi eagerly press on in the last leg of their long journey, Herod knows when the helpless baby was born and where he evidently is living. If the magi report back to him as he has requested, he will know exactly who the child is, and his plot will be absurdly easy to accomplish.

From a literary standpoint, this is a remarkable situation. Matthew the narrator knows all about Herod's duplicity, but the magi as characters in the story have not yet even a clue of it. The perceptive reader might gradually pick up on this, perhaps with previous knowledge of Herod's character (2:3), with possible suspicion of Herod's ignorance of the Messiah's birthplace (2:4), and with probable suspicion of Herod's conspiratorial, if not sinister, secret meeting with the magi (2:7–8). The reader's suspicions are confirmed as the story unfolds in 2:12–23.

5. The Magi in Bethlehem (2:9–11)

After learning from the king that they should go to Bethlehem and becoming unwitting accomplices in his plot to murder Jesus, the magi set out on the short journey. As they go, the star they originally saw unexpectedly reappears and miraculously leads¹⁰ them to the vicinity of Jesus, perhaps to his exact location. This astral guarantee of God's guidance exhilarates the magi. Whatever the merit of positing a providential basis for what the magi saw earlier (2:1), no comet, supernova, or planetary conjunction would exhibit the phenomena observed here by the magi. It is ironic that the birth of Jesus produces only anxious fear in the leaders of Israel (2:3) whereas it is the occasion of overwhelming joy in the mysterious gentile magi.¹¹ The devotion of the magi is in stark contrast to Herod's treachery and the seeming apathy of the chief priests and legal experts. Why are the magi the only ones who travel to Bethlehem?

2:9–10

9. For other constructions with the participle πορευθέντες and the aorist imperative (here ἐξετάσατε), cf. 9:13; 11:4; 28:19. This use of the participle is sometimes styled "pleonastic" (BDAG 853; BDF §419.2; Moulton and Turner 1963: 154; Moulton 1908: 230), "graphic" (Zerwick 1963: §363), or even "redundant" (Wallace 1996: 649–50) because, strictly speaking, it is unnecessary, since its meaning is implied by the imperative. This is generally spoken of as a Semitic idiom. Such a participle takes on an imperatival flavor because of its association with the imperative.

10. The imperfect verb προήγεν should probably be viewed as inceptive (Moule 1959: 9), describing the beginning of a process: the star "began to go before" or "started going before" the magi. Similarly the aorist verb ἐστάθη, following the aorist participle ἐλθών, indicates the point when the star arrived and "came to stand" or "began to stand" over the place where Jesus was (BDF §331). Cf. Viviano 1996.

11. The emphatic construction ἐχάρησαν χαρὰν μεγάλην σφόδρα utilizes the cognate accusative (BDF §153; Wallace 1996: 189–90) with the adverb σφόδρα (cf. 17:6; 21:5; 27:54) to doubly stress the extent of the magi's joy.

2:11 Led by the miraculous star, the magi arrive at the house where Jesus resides. Matthew's "house" is not a contradiction to the "manger" of Luke 2:7 (contra W. Davies and Allison 1988: 248), since perhaps as much as two years have passed since Jesus was born (Matt. 2:16). The focus of the magi is on the child Jesus, not his mother, Mary, who is mentioned, or his adoptive father, Joseph, who is not. They fall before Jesus and worship him. In this commentary at 2:2 it was argued that the worship of the magi implies more than mere homage to a superior, and here is an additional reason to see in their worship insight into a high Christology (Keener 1999: 105). If the aorist verb προσεκύνησαν (*prosekynēsan*, they worshiped) implies only a kneeling down in obeisance to a king, the aorist participle πεσόντες (*pesontes*, having fallen down) is superfluous (cf. 4:9 but 18:26). After worshiping Jesus, they open their treasures (cf. 6:19–21; 19:21) and give Jesus gifts appropriate for a king: gold, frankincense (Exod. 30:34–38; Lev. 2:1–2, 14–16; 6:14–18; 24:7; Neh. 13:5, 9; Isa. 60:6; Jer. 6:20), and myrrh (Gen. 37:25; Exod. 30:23; Esth. 2:12; Ps. 45:8; Song 1:13; 3:6; Mark 15:23; John 19:39). Frankincense and myrrh were both aromatic gum resins derived from trees and bushes and imported from the east (cf. Kruse 1995; Kügler 1997; Van Beek 1960).

Commentators from Origen (*Contra Celsum* 1.60) to Hendriksen (1973: 171–76) have found symbolic significance in these gifts: gold for a king, frankincense for Jesus's divinity, and myrrh for death (W. Davies and Allison 1988: 249–50). It is much more likely that 2:11 alludes to biblical passages such as Pss. 72:10–12; 110:3; Isa. 60:1–6. Solomon received gifts from gentile visitors, and the prophets foresaw glorious days when gentile tribute would be brought to Zion (Rev. 21:24–26; cf. Sim 1999a).

6. Departure of the Magi (2:12)

2:12 Before they unwittingly participate in Herod's monstrous scheme, the magi are warned by God in a dream not to go back to Herod. Dreams occur frequently in Matthew's infancy material (1:20; 2:12, 13, 19, 22), but angelic visitation is not mentioned here or in 2:22. The magi return by another route, evidently bypassing Jerusalem entirely and following trade routes through the wilderness of Judah to the east. They could have traveled either north or south of the Dead Sea, but it seems that the southern route would have promised more secrecy.¹²

12. The departure of the magi is expressed by the verb ἀνεχώρησαν. In Matthew this verb usually (9:24 and 27:5 are exceptions) expresses what might be called "strategic withdrawal" from those who oppose Jesus and the message of the kingdom. Thus the magi, along with Joseph, Mary, and Jesus, withdraw at crucial times to a place of safety (2:12, 13, 14, 22). When John is imprisoned, Jesus withdraws to Galilee and begins his ministry there (4:12). Aware of the murder plot of the Pharisees, Jesus withdraws from their company and forbids those he has healed from making him known, evidently to lessen publicity that would provoke further opposition (12:15). When John is executed by Herod the tetrarch, Jesus withdraws to a remote place (14:13). After the confrontation