



Matthew 2—Commentary Notes*

A. Introduction

The people of Israel had long known and been taught the prophecies concerning the Messiah, but when the One for whom they had been anticipating actually arrived, they rejected Him (John 1:11). The Messiah they were waiting for was a king who would build an earthly kingdom for them. Therefore, when they saw that Christ, who claimed to be the Son of God, came from a lowly and despised town, they could not accept Him. They did not understand that the Prophet Isaiah had already described that the Messiah would come as a suffering servant (Isa 52:13–54:12).

Even though the world did not welcome Christ, God revealed Him to Gentile wise men in the east through a supernatural but visible sign—a star in the east. The first sign of Christ’s birth was a bright star that shone in a dark Gentile country!¹

Matthew provided evidence to the Jews that Jesus was a King and presented His unusual birth according to God’s plan. He continued to give accounts of Jesus’s extraordinary childhood.² Matthew narrated the significance of Jesus’s birth to mankind and how it fulfilled the prophecies from long ago (2:6, 15, 18). He also told of the Magi’s visit to worship Jesus, showing that Bethlehem was His birthplace (Matt 2:5; Mic 5:2). Matthew also described the opposition and persecution that Jesus faced soon after His birth (Matt 2:13).³

B. Outline

- I. 2:1-8 In Jerusalem, the news of the birth of the newborn King of the Jews created great stress for King Herod.
- II. 2:9-12, 16-18 In Bethlehem, the Magi worshiped Jesus.
- III. 2:13-15 In Egypt, Jesus’s family fled Herod’s persecution and lived there for some time.
- IV. 2:19-23 In Nazareth, God led Jesus’s family to return to Israel from Egypt and settle there.

C. Content

- I. **2:1-8 In Jerusalem, the news of the birth of the newborn King of the Jews created great stress for King Herod.**

This passage records the birth of Jesus in Bethlehem and how it fulfilled the Old Testament prophecy in Micah 5:2.

2:1-2 — “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 in the east and have come to worship him.’” Matthew began his narrative in this chapter in Jerusalem because the Magi had first arrived in Israel’s capital. They came to Jerusalem, asking

* Translator Note: These Commentary Notes were originally compiled in Chinese and translated into English for use by Chinese Christian Fellowship International’s (CCF International’s) English classes. All sources listed in the table (only listed in English when applicable) at the end of these notes were used and consulted in the original Chinese compilation. Please refer to the table for the references of each numbered annotation. For more information on the sources consulted, please contact CCF International. All biblical references are taken from The Holy Bible, New International Version® NIV® Copyright © 2011 by Biblica, Inc.® Used by permission. All rights reserved worldwide.

about the birthplace of the King. A period of time had lapsed since the birth of Jesus because the Scripture records that Jesus was no longer an infant but a small child. Furthermore, the Magi saw Jesus in a “house” and not in a manger (2:9, 11).

2:3-4 — “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 Christ was to be born.” We see four types of people in this chapter and their responses to the birth of Jesus. Their responses also represent the attitudes of people today towards Christ.

1. The Magi

According to ancient documents, these Magi (who were warlocks or astrologers) might have been Medes who later became priests in the Babylonian or Persian Empire. They were knowledgeable in astronomy, geography, natural sciences, philosophy, and medicine. Their conversation (2:1) revealed that they knew about the prophecy that “a star will come from Jacob” (Num 24:17).⁴ Therefore, when they saw the appearance of this unusual star, they knew that the King of the Jews had been born. Therefore, they sought this newborn King by following the star. Through this bright star, God revealed to the Magi and aroused in them a desire to seek Christ. (According to tradition, there were three wise men who came, but the Bible does not specify their number.)⁵ It was a difficult journey from Persia to Jerusalem. They embarked on this long journey only to see the Christ who was born. They came just to “worship Him” (2:2). This was the ultimate purpose of their trip. Perhaps their original purpose was only to study science, but God’s intention was to lead them to the knowledge of Christ through a visible star that He had created (Rom 1:19–20). When the Magi responded with a heart of humility, God led them to His Son. The star that the wise men saw was only a sign. Genesis 1:14 says: “And God said, ‘Let there be lights in the expanse of the sky...let them serve as signs.’” Stars serve as mere signs, but only the true light can lead people to God. Jesus said, “I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness but will have the light of life” (John 8:12). Today, as long as we choose to follow the light that God has already given, it will lead us to His Word and to Christ. In Jerusalem, these wise men responded to God’s light obediently and as a result, they built a personal relationship with Jesus. Not only did they honor and worship Him, they also received God’s guidance and life’s immense joy.

2. Herod the Great

Herod was an Idumaeen or an Edomite and thereby, a descendant of Esau (Gen 36:8). He was not a king in the line of David. Rather, he was appointed by Rome to oversee Judea, Samaria, Galilee, and Idumaea. (Unlike the Caesar of the Roman Empire, Herod was only a regional ruler under Rome.) Herod was troubled when he heard that Christ was “born to be the King of the Jews” because Jesus was not his child and therefore, he was fearful that his rule would be threatened. Herod had fought several wars for the Romans and earned their trust. He received the honor of lordship from 37-4 BC and was called Herod the Great. His only contribution was the rebuilding of the Temple of Jerusalem. According to ancient records, King Herod the Great was ruthless, suspicious, and cunning, which grew worse as he aged. If he suspected someone of threatening to overthrow his throne, he would immediately put an end to the threat. He even killed his own wife and son. When he was seventy and knew that he was close to death, he retired to Jericho and at the same time, falsely accused most of the prominent leaders in Israel, had them imprisoned, and ordered that they be executed when he died. He did so because he knew that people would rejoice over his death, but he wanted them to weep instead.⁷

News of the Magi’s arrival in Jerusalem in search of a newborn King reached the palace and greatly disturbed Herod. Actually, Herod was not unfamiliar with the Messianic prophecies of the Old Testament. Perhaps he was hoping that this prophecy would never be fulfilled, or at the very least, not while he still sat on the throne. But as it was, the promise was fulfilled. His cruelty and insecurity caused him to draft up a plan to kill the newborn King. Herod cunningly asked the scribes about the birthplace of the Messiah. He secretly wanted to obstruct God’s plan for salvation as it was

prophesied in the Old Testament. Herod was not willing for God to be the King of his life. Rather, he wanted to be lord himself. Herod thus opposed God's sovereignty, and soon, he would face his own death. Herod thought that he could kill the newborn King, but who can stop what the Almighty intends to do? Herod had at least seven sons, three of whom he had executed. His four remaining sons ruled Palestine after his death. Among them, Herod Antipas, who killed John the Baptist and tried Jesus, is mentioned the most in Scripture (Luke 23:11, 15).

3. The People's Chief Priests and Teachers of the Law

When Herod summoned all the people's chief priests and teachers of the law to inquire about Christ's birthplace, they answered: "In Bethlehem in Judea...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'" (2:6). Chief priests were the religious leaders at that time. They possessed great power. The group consisted of previous high priests and several influential priestly families. The current high priest presided over them. The scribes were the teachers of the law, who were well versed in the Old Testament and the Mosaic Law and whose specialty was to preach and explain the law. Hence, they were also called the teachers of the law. When Herod called them together, they immediately quoted the prophecy⁸ from Micah 5:2 and told Herod that the Messiah was to be born in Bethlehem. They knew the prophecies concerning the Christ, but their attitude towards His birth was apathetic. None of them went to seek the Messiah or pay homage to Him. This makes it clear that a person may possess biblical knowledge but not necessarily have a personal relationship with Christ.⁹ True faith responds and reflects in obedience to God through action.

4. All Jerusalem

Not only was Herod disturbed, but "all Jerusalem with him" (2:3b). People in Jerusalem were familiar with Herod's cruelty. Therefore, they were concerned for the possible calamity that might come upon them as a result of the arrival of a newborn King. Because they only cared about their own well-being, they neglected God's most precious gift—the Savior and His salvation for all mankind.¹⁰ They chose the ruthless Herod rather than the Messiah to be their king because they feared that the Christ would cost them their peace and stability. Indeed, when we choose to reject the king of this world (Satan) or refuse to allow sin to control us, when we acknowledge Christ as the King of our lives, we will also experience initial battles. However, true freedom, peace, and joy will always follow after warfare.¹¹

2:7-8 — "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.'" Herod was not really interested in worshiping Christ. He was only deceiving the Magi so that he could kill Jesus after they come back to report the whereabouts of the newborn King.¹²

II. 2:9-12, 16-28 In Bethlehem, the Magi worshiped Jesus.

Bethlehem means "house of bread" and its original name is Ephrathah. It is located about six miles south of Jerusalem so it is not too far for the Magi to travel coming from Jerusalem. The early home of King David was also in Bethlehem (1 Sam 16:1; 17:12; 20:6). Therefore, when it came time for the census, all of David's descendants (including Joseph and Mary) had to return and register in their hometown of Bethlehem. As a result, Jesus was born in Bethlehem as was prophesied (Mic 5:2).¹³

2:9-10 — "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." Bethlehem was a well populated city. How were the Magi able to find Christ? Before the Magi arrived there to pay homage, they already saw a star in the east. Now that

they reached Bethlehem, but did not know which way to turn, the same star reappeared (it had left them for quite some time). The Bible described that the star reappeared suddenly and went ahead of them until it stopped over the place where the child was. It was obvious then that this was not a common star. Just as God had once guided the Israelites with pillars of cloud and fire before they entered into the Promised Land, He now used this star to guide the wise men to find the promised offspring. This special star was a sign of God's presence with them. The Magi's experience of seeking is an example of what Jesus promised: "Seek and you will find" (Matt 7:7-8).¹⁴ These Magi from the east proactively responded to God's leading with actions and closely followed the only "light" God provided. They greatly rejoiced when they found Christ in Bethlehem (2:10). It was a kind of unspeakable joy and satisfaction after a long journey.¹⁵

2:11 — "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." You would assume that if the Magi saw the child with his mother, Mary, they would have worshiped them both. However, Matthew carefully emphasized that they only "bowed down and worshiped *him*." The word "him" is the object of the verb "worship" and a third person, masculine pronoun, which matches "the child."¹⁶ Furthermore, Matthew also emphasized the worship of men toward Christ throughout his Gospel account (Matt 8:2; 9:18; 14:33; 28:9, 17). The Magi worshiped by falling prostrate, which signified the highest honor and obedience. When one willingly and joyously obeys Christ, he will experience profound joy and contentment. Not only did the Magi worshiped Christ, they also brought gifts. Genuine worship is usually accompanied with gifts. These gifts were what the wise men considered to be most precious. As they offered their treasured possessions to Christ, Christ later became their treasure. The Magi brought gifts that were fit for a king, which was fitting for Christ the King. Below are the specific meanings and significance of these three gifts:

- 1) Gold: Gold was the most precious metal offered to a king (1 Kgs 10:2). This signified Christ's kingship.
- 2) Frankincense: Frankincense was a fragrant spice that the ancient Arabs made from a tree sap. It was an expensive medicinal ingredient (Gen 37:25). What is most significant is that frankincense was the main ingredient in making the incense for the altar of incense in the tabernacle. The Israelites were not allowed to duplicate it for personal use (Exod 30:34-38). It was also used as an offering for worship (Lev 2:1). This gift signified that Jesus was a priest. It also represented the fragrance of the life of the Lord.
- 3) Myrrh: Myrrh is also a type of tree sap and can be used as a medicine. However, its most prominent use in the Bible was for the preservation of a corpse. This gift signified God's work of redemption. Christ died for the sins of the world and was raised to life. Death had no hold or authority over Him.¹⁷

2:12 — "And having been warned in a dream not to go back to Herod, they returned to their country by another route." The Magi had not realized that they were being used by Herod in his evil plan to kill Jesus. However, God's way is higher than man's ways. God saved the Magi from Herod's scheme. God warned them in a dream, and they returned to their country by another route as the Lord had instructed.

Let us briefly jump to 2:16-18. Herod became angry when the Magi did not report back to him and consequently killed all the boys in Bethlehem who were two years and under. Agonizing cries filled the town and fulfilled the prophecy of Jeremiah: "A voice is heard in Ramah, weeping and great mourning, Rachel weeping for her children and refusing to be comforted because they are no more" (Jer 31:15).

Bethlehem's long history existed two thousand years before the birth of Jesus. Rachel (Jacob's beloved wife) died of childbirth and was buried there. Jacob built a pillar next to her tomb in remembrance of her (Gen 35:20; 48:7). Jeremiah's prophecy was actually fulfilled twice. The first time was when the Israelites passed by as they were being taken captive into Babylon. It was a

dreadful scene, as if Rachel (representing the mother of Israel) wept for her children, for they (the Israelites) were being killed or taken captive. The second time was after the birth of Christ when Herod ordered all boys two years and under in Bethlehem to be killed. Mothers in Bethlehem wept for their babies who were murdered. They wept loudly just as “Rachel weeping for her children and refusing to be comforted because they are no more.” Humanly speaking, Herod’s execution of all those baby boys was cruel and selfish. However, the true mastermind was Satan—the king of this world. He used Herod in an attempt to destroy God’s plan of salvation. This was the same tactic used long ago when the Pharaoh of Egypt killed all Hebrew baby boys (Exod 1:16-22).¹⁸

III. 2:13-15 In Egypt, Jesus’s family fled Herod’s persecution and lived there for some time.

Joseph brought Jesus back from Egypt to Israel, fulfilling the Old Testament prophecy in Hosea 11:1.

2:13-14 — An angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream and instructed him to take his family to flee to Egypt to escape Herod’s murderous plan. Joseph woke up and immediately obeyed God’s command and left that very night. Egypt was more than two hundred miles from Bethlehem and the journey would have taken many days by foot. There were more than a million Jews living in the city of Alexandria and other cities in Egypt at that time. Therefore, when they escaped to Egypt, their neighbors may not have all been strangers. Some of them may have even been friends. The thing most worthy of thanksgiving was God’s provision. The expensive gifts offered by the Magi supplied for their travel expenses as well as their lives in Egypt while they remained there.¹⁹

2:15 — “[W]here he stayed until the death of Herod. And so was fulfilled what the Lord had said through the prophet: ‘Out of Egypt I called my son.’” Their return to Israel from Egypt indeed fulfilled the words of the Prophet Hosea that “out of Egypt, I called my son” (Hos 11:1). However, the prophet’s original intent was not to prophesy but to describe how God called the Israelites (His sons) out of Egypt (Exod 4:22; 12:41). Matthew added a new significance to Hosea’s words by relating how God guided Joseph to bring Jesus safely to Egypt and then to return to Israel with Israel’s exodus from Egypt. Hosea was simply narrating the historical account of how the Israelites were delivered, but Matthew regarded these words as prophecy of how God will call his Son, the Messiah, out of Egypt. Jesus’s mission was much like that of the Old Testament Moses, whom God used to save the Israelites from slavery in Egypt. In like manner, God used the Lord Jesus to save His people from enslavement to sins (Matt 1:21).²⁰ In the Book of Hosea, the Israelites were God’s sons, albeit disobedient ones (Hos 11:2). Yet here in Matthew, Jesus as God’s Son was very much on the contrary. He was a perfectly obedient and good Son of God!

Apart from Genesis and the Book of Daniel, the Old Testament does not record many dreams. As for the New Testament, only Matthew mentions dreams (Matt 1:20; 2:12, 13, 19, 22; 27:19), and every one of them announced news or issued a warning. As for Jesus, He Himself never mentioned dreams. Today, God can still speak to us through dreams. However, we now have a complete Bible with both the Old and the New Testaments, which is God’s Word, and we can rely on it. In addition, God has given us the indwelling Holy Spirit to help us. Therefore, if we seek God’s guidance through dreams alone and do not seek His will in His Word, we will be easily misled. Know that evil spirits can also use dreams. They pretend to be angels of light and deceive us (Deut 13:1-3; 2 Cor 11:14; 1 John 4:1). The Holy Spirit dwells in us when we believe the Lord and guides us with God’s Word (the Bible) so that we may know His will for our daily lives.

IV. 2:19-23 In Nazareth, God led Jesus’s family to return to Israel from Egypt and settle there.

2:19-20 — “After Herod died, an angel of the Lord appeared in a dream to Joseph in Egypt and said, ‘Get up, take the child and his mother and go to the land of Israel, for those who were trying to take the child’s life are dead.’” Herod finally died. Matthew only mentioned Herod’s death as a

matter-of-factly without giving much detail about his dreadful end. Yet historians say that Herod suffered from intestinal ulcers and died of excruciating spasms.²¹

2:21-23 — After Herod died, his kingdom was divided. Herod's three sons were given portions of his territory: (1) to Philip, the northeastern region of the Jordan River; (2) to Antipas, Galilee; and (3) to Archelaus, Judea. Herod's son, Archelaus, was also an evil and cruel ruler. Therefore, when Joseph heard that Archelaus ruled the region of Judea, he did not return to Bethlehem which was in Judea.

As Joseph hesitated, he must have prayed to God, who heard his prayers and guided him to go to Galilee and settle in Nazareth instead. This is how God leads man. "If the Lord delights in a man's way, He makes his steps firm" (Ps 37:23). It is our human nature to desire that God would make plain to us His plans for our entire lives all at once, but God usually reveals and guides day by day and step by step. His purpose is for us to follow Him by faith.

Matthew pointed out once again in this passage that the events of Jesus's life were prophesied long ago. We want to take note that the word "prophet" used in Matthew 2:23 is not in the singular form but plural. Even though we cannot find reference in Old Testament prophecies that the Christ will be a Nazarene, many biblical scholars explain that Matthew actually used a homonym to shed light on the prophecy of the Prophet Isaiah that the Messiah will be brought forth like a shoot: "from the stump of Jesse, from his roots a Branch will bear fruit" (Isa 11:1; Jer 23:5). The consonant in the Hebrew word for "shoot" (branch) is similar to those in the Greek name of "Nazareth." Furthermore, since a "Nazarene" was a degrading term to address a person (John 1:46), some other scholars believe that "Nazarene" referred to the Messiah, who according to the Old Testament was rejected and despised (Ps 22; Isa 53:2, 3, 8).

God often chooses those who are despised to accomplish His plans so as to give all glory to Himself and not to man. As we reflect on our current situations, are we willing to accept the job or ministry God has given to us no matter how lowly it is? Will we do it willingly in order to manifest God's glory in the work we have been called to?

D. Conclusion

God used an unusual star to guide the Magi to Jerusalem from afar. God also used Herod's direction to lead them to Bethlehem to worship Jesus Christ. Even though Herod's plan was evil, it could not destroy God's plan. Through dreams, God instructed the Magi not to report back to Herod and led Joseph to take his family to flee Herod's murderous plan. It becomes clear that God is always victorious. When a man opposes God with all kinds of evil schemes and deeds, it only reveals his own foolishness and insignificance. As the psalmist said, "Why do the nations conspire...the kings of the earth rise up...against the Lord and against his anointed...The One enthroned in heaven laughs; the Lord scoffs at them" (Ps 2:1-4).

Jesus is God's Anointed One. Even though He was persecuted right after His birth, the Almighty God protected this newborn King. God took Him to Egypt to escape Herod's murder plans and then brought Him out of Egypt and hid Him in the small town of Nazareth until the fullness of time, when John the Baptist—the forerunner for Jesus, prepared the way for Him and pointed out His mission: "Look, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!" (John 1:29). John the Baptist will be the focus of our study in the next lesson.

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List of Sources Consulted

Sources Consulted

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