

Matthew's gospel does not share the account of the actual birth of Jesus. We are informed that the birth took place in Bethlehem, but we are not informed about the census, the inn, the stable, the manger, the angels, or the shepherds. All of those details are provided in Luke's gospel. Matthew begins a few months after the birth of Jesus in Bethlehem. Joseph, Mary, and Jesus must have remained there up to two years after the birth. The Lord's timing is impeccable. They were waiting for some special visitors to arrive and for word of this special birth to begin to be heralded throughout Judea.

A Star in the East (2:1-6)

Bethlehem was a village approximately five miles south of Jerusalem. It did not hold a special place of distinction among the other communities surrounding Jerusalem. Jerusalem itself was the holy city, the location of the temple, the capital of Judea and a logical place for Jesus' visitors to go seeking Him.

THE MAGI (WISE MEN)

It is not possible to definitively identify the wise men that came to Jerusalem. The phrase "wise men" in the King James Version is translated as "Magi" in other translations. It is short for "magician". Our concept of magician is different from the archaic use of the word, which applied to scholars familiar with languages, astronomy, astrology, and the highest learning of the day. They were advisors to kings and probably considered the wisest men in the world. They were not Jewish, were from the East (perhaps the vicinity of Babylon) and were highly educated. They held positions of prestige and wealth and were entertained by King Herod himself upon their arrival in Jerusalem. They were considered the "king makers" of the Orient. Why would they come to this birth? How would they know about the King of the Jews? We can likely trace their arrival back through the Jewish captivity in Babylon. A certain Jewish boy, named Daniel, was brought into King Nebuchadnezzar's court and trained as a magician (Daniel 1:3-4, 1:18-21). Daniel held a position among the magi for at least 50 years, if not more. In fact, he was eventually named the chief of the magi (Daniel 4:9, 5:11). It is likely that Daniel, a devoted follower of the Lord, taught the magi Jewish prophecy and the teachings were passed down to this generation of magi.

What did it mean when they asked, "Where is he that is born King of the Jews?" See Isaiah 9:6; Luke 2:11; John 1:49; and Matthew 21:2-5; 27:11,29,37,42.

Jesus was born a King. He had the lineage and the mandate from His Father. He was born with the government upon His shoulders and was called the Lord at His birth. He was recognized as King by Nathaniel at the beginning of His ministry, came into Jerusalem as King, admitted to this title at His crucifixion, and died as King upon the cross.

Why did the Magi come from so far to see Jesus?

They had seen His star and were led by the Lord to come to Jerusalem. The Magi did not come to make Him a king, but to recognize His existing kingship and worship Him.

How did they know to associate this star with the birth of Jesus? See Numbers 24:17 and Isaiah 60:3.

They could have received special revelation from God. There was, however, existing revelation about a Star rising out of Jacob, and Sceptre (king) rising out of Israel. The Gentiles came to Him in response to the light that shown about Him.

THE STAR

There are many conjectures about the origin of the star that shined after the birth of Jesus. Many have tied it to an astronomical event, such as the aligning of Jupiter and Saturn, forming the sign of the fish. Others have suggested a comet. We do know that the Magi originally saw the “star” while they were in the East and knew to come to Israel. They came to Jerusalem because it seemed like a logical place to seek the King. After they left Jerusalem, the “star” reappeared and led them to the specific house where Jesus lay. This does not appear to be an ordinary star or astronomical event. One possible explanation for this moving and guiding light is that it was similar to the pillar of fire that guided the Israelites after they left Egypt on their journey to the Promised Land (Exodus 13:20-22). The fire and cloud signified God’s leadership and presence with His people. It preceded them as they journeyed and rested upon the tabernacle when they were to remain. It was a manifestation of His glory. It would have been a fitting symbol as the Lord had come and “tabernacled” among men, hidden in the body of this little baby (John 1:14).

The Chief Priests and Scribes were able to help the Magi upon their arrival because they knew the prophecy from God’s Word. Interestingly, none of them seemed compelled to accompany the Magi on their short journey to Bethlehem, but were content to allow them to take the journey for them.

PROPHECY

“But thou, Bethlehem Ephratah, though thou be little among the thousands of Judah, yet out of thee shall he come forth unto me that is to be ruler in Israel; whose goings forth have been from of old, from everlasting.” – Micah 5:2

Ephratah was the name for Bethlehem before the Israelites took over the Promised Land. It was the place where Jacob’s wife, Rachel died and was buried (Genesis 35:16-20). It was always a small village. Why was Bethlehem chosen by God as the birthplace of Jesus Christ? See 1 Samuel 17:12,15.

It was the place where David was born and raised and henceforth called, “the City of David”.

The term, “Goings forth” means a **family descent**. What was this prophecy about? See Psalm 90:2.

This is additional evidence that the One born in Bethlehem was not just a man, but was truly God.

Herod’s Scheme (2:7-12)

KING HEROD

King Herod is more commonly known as Herod the Great. He was the first in a line of “Herods” that ruled in Judea under the Roman government. He was not a Jew, but rather an Idumaen (Edomite, descendant of Jacob’s brother Esau). His father, Antipater was made the procurator (Roman governor of a province) of Judea by Julius Caesar. Antipater divided the region between his four sons, with Herod assuming rule over Galilee. He was eventually made tetrarch (ruler over the four parts of the territory) of Judea by Mark Antony and then later made King of Judea by the Roman Senate.

Herod was a bloodthirsty man full of ambition and suspicion. He spent lots of money beautifying his kingdom. Perhaps most notably, he began a major renovation and expansion of the Jewish temple and the area surrounding it. He also banished one wife, murdered another wife, his mother-in-law, a brother-in-law, and two sons. Jewish historian Josephus states that Herod was so concerned that no one would mourn his death that he ordered a large group of distinguished Jewish men to be murdered upon his death so that Judea would mourn. It is said that his son, Archilaus, did not carry out this wish.

The Gospel of Matthew

BIRTH & EARLY YEARS (2:1 - 2:23)

Why would Herod have such a great interest in the birth of the Messiah?

As a paranoid individual, he was concerned about anyone with a claim to His throne or dynasty. He was known for murdering others who stood in his way. This would be par for the course for him. He could not be open with his plans because it could upset the Jews and the wise men who journeyed to see Christ.

Why do you think the Lord had the wise men go to Jerusalem rather than leading them directly to Bethlehem with the star?

The news of the birth of Christ was initially spread abroad by the shepherds. The arrival of the wise men did not go unnoticed in Jerusalem, but word of their presence and purpose spread all over the place. It appears that most people did nothing about it. But, those who were looking (like Anna and Simeon) surely were blessed to see yet another affirmation that this child was truly the Son of God.

Young Child – the term used here is different than the one used in Matthew to describe Christ on the night of His birth (babe). It is likely that the Christ child was several months old, even perhaps over a year old at the time of their visit.

Upon seeing the child, the wise men fell down and worshipped Christ. They may not have known where to find this child, but they did know who they were looking for. As we have already discussed, these men may have been royalty themselves. They were used to being in the presence of royalty. This act toward a child demonstrates a spiritual insight afforded them. As Jesus later told Simon Peter when he identified Jesus as the Christ, the Son of God, “flesh and blood hath not revealed it unto thee, but my Father which is in heaven” (Matthew 16:17).

The wise men (Magi) brought three special gifts with them to present to the Christ child. The word used to describe them (treasure or gifts) literally means “wealth”. These were very expensive gifts fit for a king. Discuss the meaning of each gift and what it represented.

Gold – a precious metal representing royalty.

Frankincense – an incense used in worship, representing the deity of Christ. See Exodus 30:34-38. This was to be a unique scent that would come to be associated with the tabernacle/temple, reminding them of the presence of God.

Myrrh – an anointing oil, used in making the special oil of the tabernacle/temple. See Exodus 30:22-33. It was to be a one of a kind oil (once compounded) and used exclusively for the Lord’s purposes. Myrrh was also used in preparation for Christ’s burial in John 19:39.

The Lord providentially took care of the wise men and the Christ child by directing them to leave by another route and thereby buy time for the escape of Joseph, Mary, and Jesus before the slaughter.

The Gospel of Matthew

BIRTH & EARLY YEARS (2:1 - 2:23)

Out of Egypt (2:13-15)

Joseph, Mary and Jesus' departure to Egypt was timed immediately after the departure of the Magi. The Lord again used an angel to speak to Joseph in a dream, much like He did when He instructed Joseph to proceed with his marriage to Mary.

How could Joseph and Mary afford an expensive trip and stay in Egypt?

The gifts of the wise men could be sold to pay for their trip and lodging while in Egypt.

Their flight to Egypt and the time they spent there was not an accident, but another prophetic sign of this child's identity. The Old Testament prophecy referred to in Matthew 2:15 is likely Hosea 11:1

PROPHECY

"When Israel was a child, then I loved him, and called my son out of Egypt." - Hosea 11:1

Read Hosea 11:1-4. What is the immediate context of this passage?

The Lord is speaking about the nation of Israel. He loved this nation as a son, yet Israel continued to rebel against the Lord. He supplied their needs, but they were unaware of God's provision.

How can this passage be applied to Jesus Christ?

In a sense, Christ may be the true Israel. He is the fulfillment of the ultimate promise made to Abraham and is the glory of Israel (Luke 2:25-32). He is the pathway to the blessings promised to Israel (Romans 4:13). There are other parts of His ministry that mimics the history of Israel, such as His baptism and trial in the wilderness. As we go forward with this study, we should hold this theory tentatively and test it against the relevant passages we find to see if it holds up.

2:16-18 – Rachel Weeping

The actions of Herod are consistent with his behavior towards others who he believed threatened his reign. Bethlehem was located inland, many miles from the Mediterranean Sea. The reference to "coasts" in the King James means, "vicinity". Every male child, two years and younger in the areas surrounding Bethlehem was murdered. The age of children he slew was determined by the timeframe in which the Magi initially noticed the star, which ultimately led them to Bethlehem.

The prophecy referenced by Matthew is from Jeremy (Jeremiah) the prophet. This passage expressing the grief of Rachel is found in the midst of a passage of promise.

PROPHECY

"Thus saith the LORD; A voice was heard in Ramah, lamentation, and bitter weeping; Rahel weeping for her children refused to be comforted for her children, because they were not." – Jeremiah 31:15

Ramah was a city approximately five miles north of Jerusalem, originally a city of the tribe of Benjamin, the child of Rachel, Jacob's wife. Rachel died while giving birth to Benjamin and was buried in

Bethlehem. Ramah was also a holding place the Babylonians used for the Jews that were deported to Babylon at the time of the captivity (see Jeremiah 40:1).

What is the immediate context of Jeremiah 31:10-17?

It is a message of hope to those going into captivity. The message was that though there was weeping in Ramah because of the captivity; there would be a day the captives would return. This promise was to cause them joy.

In what way does this passage provide us with prophecy about Christ?

Rachel weeping for her children in Ramah is symbolic of the Jewish mothers weeping for their children that were murdered by Herod in and around Bethlehem. The birth of Christ, however, is the ultimate source of hope and peace for mankind because through Him, they can find deliverance from sin.

2:19-23 — Deliverance from Egypt

The title, “Nazarene” is very similar to the word, “Nazarite” in the Old Testament. They have no common connection though. A Nazarite was a Jew who consecrated themselves to God and demonstrated this consecration by abstaining from all fruit of the vine and by growing their hair long. A Nazarene, however, was a person from the City of Nazareth, located in the region of Galilee.

Looking at Old Testament scriptures, there is no clear passage that refers to Jesus being raised in the City of Nazareth. In fact, Nazareth is not even mentioned explicitly in the Old Testament. It is located on land originally allocated to either the tribe of Zebulun or Issachar. Matthew 2:23 implies that more than one prophet made a prediction that he would be called a Nazarene. Maintaining our conviction in Biblical inerrancy, we are left with two options regarding how to interpret this passage. The first possibility is that Matthew is referring to prophecies not contained within the Old Testament. It is not unheard of for Biblical writers to make references to books not contained within the Canon of Scripture (See Joshua 10:13 and Jude 14-15 as examples).

Our second possibility is that the reference to Jesus being from Nazareth is not blatantly obvious and is a bit more obscure. Consider the following questions:

What did it mean to be a Nazarene at the time of Christ? See John 1:46 and 7:41-42, 50-53.

Nazarenes were objects of scorn, as they were considered a wicked, vile, and perhaps uneducated people in general. The title, “Jesus of Nazareth” was not a title of acclaim.

How could Jesus’ time in Nazareth allow him to fulfill not only one, but two or more prophecies of the Old Testament? See Isaiah 53:3, 49:7, Psalm 22:6-8

By virtue of being a Nazarene, He was an object of scorn and mockery. His very identity did nothing to promote His ministry in the mind of men.

Which of the two interpretive theories makes the most sense to you?