

Vicarious Sacrifice: Review: Matthew 2:1–12: Magi Arrive in Jerusalem; Consult Herod Who Quizzes Sanhedrin on Messiah’s Location; Infanticide Plotted by Herod; Magi Go to Bethlehem; Legend of the Well; Magi Worship Jesus & Present Gifts

Review: Matthew 2:1–12:

That the Holy Spirit would inspire Matthew to record this event means that it must contain important information about the Lord. Here is the expanded translation of the passage:

Matthew 2:1¹ - After Jesus had been born in Bethlehem of Judea [17 June 2 B.C.] in the days of Herod the king, Magi from regions to the east arrived in Jerusalem, saying,

In this verse Matthew confirms Micah’s prophecy that the Messiah was born in Bethlehem and that it occurred during the reign of Herod the Great, king of the Jews. The Magi are identified as being from the east. We have documented they were from the Parthian Empire and specifically from its capital city of Hecatompylos (present-day Damghan \däm-ghän\, Iran).

Matthew 2:2 - “Where is presently He who has been born previously the King of the Jews? Because we saw His star in the east [ἐν τῇ ἀνατολῇ, *en tēi anatolēi*: rising in the east²] and we have come to prostrate ourselves before Him in worship as our superior.”

The Magi have learned about the virgin pregnancy of the Messiah and His birth by observing the signs declared through the constellations Leo and Virgo, the planets Jupiter and Venus, and the star Regulus. Their question indicates confidence in the fact but curiosity regarding the Lord’s present whereabouts.

The Magi said they had observed “His star” rise in the east. His star turns out to be Jupiter which they did observe rise in the east during its three conjunctions with Regulus.

However, the event that sealed the deal was seen in the west when Venus conjuncted with Jupiter: the planet associated with the virgin conjuncted with the planet associated with Israelite kings in the constellation of Leo, the royal constellation.

This was the culmination of a stunning set of unusual stellar phenomena that were judged by the Magi as fulfillment of Daniel’s Messianic prophecies in the ninth chapter of his book.

The Magi declared they were in Judea to worship the virgin-born King of the Jews, a piece of information that stunned Herod and put him on the defensive.

Matthew 2:3 - When Herod the king heard this, he had great trepidation, and all Jerusalem with him.

Herod moved into trepidation which indicated trembling and hesitation. He was shocked there could be a legitimate pretender to his throne. His murderous defense of his position of power and fame were directed toward even the members of his family including his own children. He would not be deterred by the threat of a mere Child.

Matthew 2:4 - Assembling together all the chief priests, who were Sadducees, and scribes, who were Pharisees, of the Jews, Herod grilled them about where the Christ was to be born.

¹ The following translation of Matthew 2:1–12 has been expanded to present details from the original Greek that are not included in renderings by major English versions of the Bible.

² “Or ‘in its rising,’ referring to the astrological significance of a star in a particular portion of the sky. The term used for the “East” in verse 1 is ἀνατολαί (*anatolai*, a plural form that is used typically of the rising of the sun), while in verses 2 and 9 the singular ἀνατολή (*anatolē*) is used. The singular is typically used of the rising of a star and as such should not normally be translated “in the east” (*The Net Bible* [Dallas: Biblical Studies Press, 2001], 1735tn15).

Herod's advisors were the Jewish hierarchy whose jobs included observance of the night skies in order to schedule the rituals, sacrifices, feast days, and Sabbaths mandated by the Mosaic Law. These men were supposed to be expert astronomers but, like Herod, they had eyes to see but did not see "His star."

Herod is intent on obtaining precise information and therefore he grills the Sadducees and Pharisees separately to determine if they each agree on the answer to his question.

The Magi had tracked the heavenly signs that communicated the sequence from the virgin pregnancy to the Child's birth. They are no doubt astonished that the Jewish king and the leaders of the Jewish religion did not know about the birth of the Messiah or His whereabouts.

Herod now wants to know the Lord's location with the same intensity as the Magi, but with an entirely different motivation. They want to worship Him; Herod wants to kill Him.

Matthew 2:5 - **They [the priests and scribes] said to him [Herod],**
 "In Bethlehem of Judea; for this is what has been written in the past and thus stands written forever by the prophet:

v. 6 - "And you, Bethlehem, land of Judah, are by no means least among the leaders of Judah; for out of you shall come forth a Ruler who will shepherd My people Israel."

The present location of the Messiah is conceivably different from the place of His birth. The religious Pooh-Bahs know the answer to the place of birth and confirm it to be Bethlehem from a prophecy found in:

Micah 5:2 - "But as for you, Bethlehem Ephrathah, too little to be among the clans of Judah, from you One will go forth for Me to be Ruler in Israel. His goings forth are from long ago, from the days of eternity."

Micah indicates that Bethlehem was not among the cities mentioned among the locations designated to the tribe of Judah in Joshua 15:20-63 because it was "too little." The theologians who advise Herod misquote Micah, but in doing so leave the proper impression that Bethlehem is now by no means least among the leaders of Judah.

Messiah is indeed destined to "shepherd My people Israel" according to 2 Samuel 5:2b. Although the quote is not precisely correct it does answer the question posed by Herod: the birthplace of the Messiah was prophesied to be at Bethlehem.

Matthew 2:7 - **Then Herod met privately with the Magi and determined from them the exact time the star appeared.**

We have documented in our study that the virgin pregnancy occurred in early September of 3 B.C. and that the virgin birth occurred on June 17, 2 B.C. This is a span of fifteen months between the virgin pregnancy and the arrival of the Magi in Jerusalem in late December 2 B.C.

This means that the Lord was not a toddler but a baby of six months age at the time of the Magi's arrival. Matthew's use of the word **παιδίον (paidion)**, translated "young Child" in verses 8, 9, 11, 13 (2), 14, 20 (2), and 21 of chapter 2, is appropriate up to seven years of age. Had the Lord been a new born infant at the time, the word used would have been **βρέφος (bréphos)**.

When Herod met with the Magi to learn how long ago they had sighted the "star" he came away believing that no more than two years had passed. His rationale apparently considered the possibility that the original sighting of the star in September of 3 B.C. could have been the moment of the virgin birth.

To be absolutely certain that the Child is eliminated, Herod's order in Matthew 2:16 stipulated that all of Bethlehem's children aged two or younger were to be murdered.

Knowing the approximate age of the Messiah, Herod tries to use the Magi to set a trap for regicide:

Matthew 2:8 - And he sent them to Bethlehem and said, "Go and search carefully for the young Child; and when you have found Him, assuming that you do, report back to me, for the purpose that I, too, may come and worship Him."

This is duplicity for the purpose of accomplishing a hidden agenda. Herod's rhetorical veil is his wish to go and worship Jesus should the Magi find Him in Bethlehem.

This conceals while it advances Herod's hidden agenda: maintaining his and his progeny's claim to the Palestinian throne.

Matthew 2:9 - After hearing the king, they departed, and the same star [Jupiter], which they had previously seen in the east, proceeded before them until it came to a halt [entered retrogradation] where the Child was.

The "same star" is Jupiter. In late December of 2 B.C., it is located in the southern sky in the constellation Virgo.

Jupiter Stops over Bethlehem.12-25-2BC

How this event instructed the Magi is explained by this excerpt from Seiss's *The Gospel in the Stars*:

On their way to Bethlehem, by some means or other, to their great joy, their star began to serve them again the same as it did before. How this came about is explained by a well-preserved and beautiful old tradition which we have no reason to discredit. (pp. 441–42)

Though Bethlehem is only about six miles from Jerusalem, it is said that these distinguished visitors stopped on the way, and tarried by the side of a deep well. What they halted for in so short a journey it would be hard to tell, except it was to take another midnight observation of their star. For this purpose the well, with its perpendicular walls, would serve them the same as a fixed observatory.

So these wise men, by looking down the well, and observing the reflection of their bright star in the still water at the bottom, could find with great accuracy whether it was exactly vertical over them, or in what respect, if any, it was not. And so the tradition is, that they looked into the well and saw their star, and perceived that it "stood over"—was exactly vertical at—not Jerusalem, but *Bethlehem*, "where the young child was." (p. 442)

These men, indeed, had not yet reached the object of their search, but they were now doubly sure of finding and seeing the illustrious virgin-born Saviour of the world, of whom the heavens and all sacred story had been telling and prophesying from remotest antiquity, and in whom they felt more interest than in all the earth besides.³ (p. 443)

Where the child was, was Bethlehem. The passage does not say that the star stopped over the house in which the Child lived with His parents. It reads that it "came to a halt where the child was."

We have established that Jesus was about 6-months old. Jupiter's "stop" had indicated to the Magi that during this period the family had not left the community but was still living there.

Verse 11 informs us they lived in a house. In such a small village this was enough time for the residents to know Joseph and Mary along with their young Son. The only thing the Magi had to do was inquire of their home's location and then consult with Joseph for an audience with the King.

Matthew 2:10 - When they saw the star, they entered into a state of overabundance of happiness with great exultation.

³ Joseph A. Seiss, *The Gospel in the Stars* (Philadelphia: The Muhlenberg Press, 1884), 441–43.

The news that the object of their six months of planning and traveling to worship the King of the Jews has been successful, the Magi celebrated with an overabundance of happiness. Upon entering the city they found Joseph's address. It was early morning on 25 December 2 B.C.

Matthew 2:11 - When they entered the house they saw the Child with Mary His mother; they threw themselves down prostrate and worshipped Him. Then opening their treasures, they presented Him gifts of great wealth: gold, frankincense, and myrrh.

After consulting with Joseph, explaining who they were and the reason they had come to his home, Joseph allowed a small contingent of the Magi to go inside and visit his Son.

Upon entering, the Magi immediately went before Jesus, threw themselves down, and worshipped Him. Afterward they presented him with costly gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh.

These gifts provided the holy family with the capital it would need to provide for and protect Jesus until He entered into adulthood. That night, there would be a more ominous use of the Magi's gift of treasures. Herod's plot was being hatched that evening and these gifts would provide the overhead for Joseph to take his wife and Child to the safety of Egypt until after Herod's death.

Matthew 2:12 - And having been divinely warned in a dream not to return to Herod, the Magi left for Parthia by the King's Highway.

The Magi were advised by Gabriel to avoid Herod and no doubt informed them of the king's plot and the fact that God would provide required protection for the Christ Child. For political reasons the Magi could not become involved in a confrontation with Herod lest it foment war with Rome. Instead, they immediately followed the angel's advice, packed up their belongings, and headed southeast where they turned north on the King's Highway. This ancient thoroughfare would take them to Damascus where they would link up with the Silk Road, turn east, and travel home to Parthia.

For detailed research on the Herod's death in 1 B.C. and confirmation of the 2 B.C. date for the virgin birth, consult the twenty-nine page article, "When Did Herod the Great Reign?" by Andrew E. Steinmann in *Novum Testamentum* 51 (© 2009 by Koninklijke Brill NV. Leiden):

http://historiantigua.cl/wp-content/uploads/2011/08/When_Did_Herod_the_Great_Reign.pdf

This brings us back to Isaiah's prophecy of our Lord's entry into human history in Isaiah 53:2.