

# St. Matthew

## Chapter 2

The second chapter in Matthew continues with the “infancy narrative,” the account of Jesus' childhood. Matthew tells us of the visit of the Magi from the east and the series of events that their visit sets in action, including the flight to Egypt and the slaughter of the innocents. In these events three prophecies are fulfilled: Micah 5:2; Hosea 11:1, and Jeremiah 31:15. We will consider each of these events in turn.

### The Visit of the Magi (2:1-12)



*The Magi.* Who are the Magi? The Gospel text is bare, saying simply “wise men [*magi*] from the East.” They are apparently, from the text, astronomers who were familiar with and believed the promises of the Jewish Scriptures that there would be born a Messiah and King in Israel. Such expectation could have survived in the east from the teachings of the prophet Daniel or through the many synagogues scattered throughout the East.

From where in the east did these magi come? Some say Persia, others Babylon, others India, and some (especially in art) picture wise men from all three. The text does not indicate anything more specific than “the east.” What is perhaps more important is where they are *not* from: Jerusalem.

These are Gentiles, pagans who come from afar to worship Jesus while His own people miss His birth almost entirely.

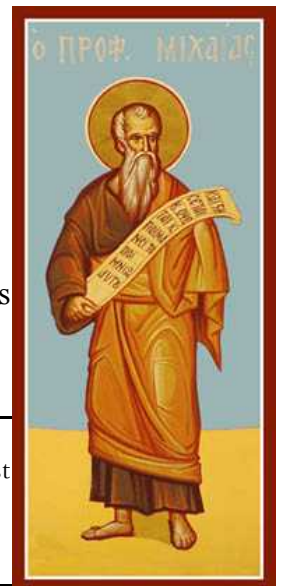
And it's not that the Jewish people were not expecting Him. When Herod gathers the chief priests and the scribes and asks them of the Messiah's birthplace, they unanimously quote Micah 5:2: Bethlehem. All the nation was expecting the Messiah to be born in Bethlehem [See *John 7:40-44*]. This provides a stark contrast, for after Herod privately inquires about the time of the appearance of the star (we already see his wicked plot unfolding), the Magi travel the two hours to Bethlehem alone, with no delegation from Herod, no accompaniment from the priests and scribes.

*The Star in the East.* What are we to make of the star that appears around the time of Jesus' birth? Some commentators have gone to great lengths to show this star as a natural phenomenon, but the Bible speaks otherwise. It appears simply “in the East” to guide the Magi there, then seemingly disappears as they arrive in Jerusalem. Then reappears after they are directed to Bethlehem and travels in front of them until it stops “over where the young child was.” [Matthew 2:9] This star is presented to us as a miraculous sign (just as the messages of the angels in the dreams of Joseph and the Magi). It is important to note, however, that the Lord uses the star to get the Magi to His Word, namely the words of the ancient prophet Micah...

*Micah 5:2.* Here are some notes on Micah 5:1-5...

5:1 Marshal your troops – Jerusalem is being attacked by the pagan nations, yet they are not to give up. “Even though you will lose, fight.” Why should they fight? Here comes one of the greatest promises of the Bible:

5:2 But you, Bethlehem – This text is so familiar because it is quoted in the Christmas story [see St



Matthew 2:3-6]. But note, at this time, how amazingly unlikely this prophecy is to come true. Micah predicts the birth of Jesus in a very small village over 700 years before hand. This is like us predicting where something would happen in the year 2800! We're not even sure where our next Bible Class will meet in two weeks! This is one of the wonderful proofs of the inspiration of Holy Scripture. "All Scripture is breathed by God" 1 Timothy 3:16, and God, in His power, causes to come to pass what He promised.

### **Matthew's Heavenly Vision**

St Matthew quotes this verse in 2:6, but he adds one word: "not". Instead of saying, "You are the least of the clans..." Matthew writes, "You are *not* the least of clans." This is a pretty big change; it makes the verse say the very opposite thing. So... which is it? Is Bethlehem the least or the greatest? Micah sees the humility of Bethlehem, but Matthew sees with a heavenly perspective: "Even though it is a humble little village, it is the home of Jesus, and that makes it the grandest place on earth."

Though you are small – Bethlehem is a small, humble town. No place for a king to be born. But, our God is a humble God. Jesus has humble origins, etc. [See Philippians 2:4ff]

out of you will come – This is a prophecy concerning Jesus' birth according to His human nature.

Rule over Israel – This shows that the kingdom of the Messiah would be a spiritual kingdom, for Israel would be destroyed and never brought back. As Jesus said to Pilate, "My kingdom is not of this world." [St John 18:36]

Whose origins are from old, from ancient time – This teaches the eternity of Jesus according to His divine nature. The Son of God is eternal; there was never a time when He did not exist. The Nicene Creed: "Begotten of the Father before all worlds." The Athanasian Creed: The Father eternal, the Son eternal, and the Holy Ghost eternal. And yet there are not three Eternals, but one Eternal."

This verse (5:2) tells us everything we need to know about the person of the Messiah. Everything from the first line (of the explanation of the second Article) of Luther's Small Catechism could have been taken from this verse: "I believe that Jesus Christ, true God, begotten of the Father before all worlds, and also true man, born of the virgin Mary, is my Lord."

**The Eternal Generation of the Son** Here we note that the Son of God (Jesus) was not born or created, He always existed. But He did have His source or generation from the Father. The word to describe this is "begotten". See St John 1:1; 8:58; 16:28.

5:3 Therefore – This verse goes back to the imagery of birth pangs (see 4:9-10), and now we know what Israel is in pain to deliver: the Son of God who would become a man to be the Messiah. How the Old Testament is filled with words about Jesus!

5:4 He will stand – Jesus will die, but then rise again. [See, for a verse about 'standing' and resurrection, Job 19:23-27]

Shepherd – The Bible is full to overflowing of this imagery, God shepherding His people [Psalm 23; Ezekiel 34, etc.]. Of course, these promises come to a crescendo in the office of Jesus who is our Good Shepherd who (!) lays down His life for the sheep [St John 10]. He does this by becoming a sheep like us (the Incarnation). "Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!" [St John 1:29].

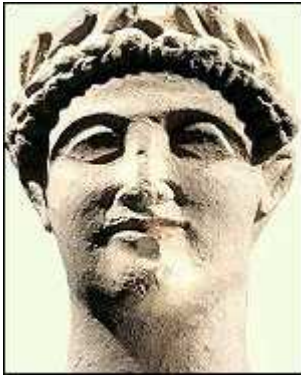
And how does this Shepherd rule over His flock? In the strength of the LORD, in the majesty of the name of the LORD – In other words, by His word. This is not like an earthly kingdom that is ruled by power and might. Jesus' kingdom is a spiritual one, ruled by God's word. (This, by the way, is why, when St John sees the vision of Jesus in Revelation 1:16, the sword is coming out of Jesus' mouth, and not in His hand. St Paul says something similar in Ephesians 6, "Take up the Sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God.") The church is ruled, not by power, but by God's Holy Word.

They will live securely - This is the peace of the Gospel. [See Romans 5:1; St John 16:33]

the ends of the earth – It is as Jesus said, "Go unto all nations." The kingdom of the church will fill the earth (like it has and continues to do).

5:5 He will be their peace. - There is no peace outside Jesus and the forgiveness of our sins, but in Christ we are at once at peace with God and all of creation. Write this verse in gold on your heart: Jesus is our peace.

*Herod.* The wickedness of King Herod is known both from this account, but also from history. Herod was a jealous man, and any news of a new king would have caused him to fear. The people, on the other hand, would fear Herod's wrath and the terrible things that he might do to continue to secure his reign. Here is a brief summary of Herod's life from *Smith's Bible Dictionary*:



**I. Herod the Great** was the second son of Antipater, an Idumean, who was appointed procurator of Judea by Julius Caesar, B.C. 47. Immediately after his father's elevation, when only fifteen years old, he received the government of Galilee, and shortly afterward, that of Coele-Syria. (Though Josephus says he was 15 years old at this time, it is generally conceded that there must be some mistake, as he lived to be 69 or 70 years old, and died B.C. 4; hence, he must have been 25 years old at this time. -- Editor). In B.C. 41, he was appointed by Antony, tetrarch of Judea. Forced to abandon Judea, the following year, he fled to Rome, and received the appointment of king of Judea. In the course of a few years, by the help of the Romans, he took Jerusalem (B.C. 37), and completely established his authority throughout his dominions. The terrible acts of bloodshed which Herod perpetrated in his own family were accompanied by others, among his subjects, equally terrible, from the number who fell victims to them.

According to the well-known story, he ordered the nobles whom he had called to him in his last moment, to be executed immediately after his decease, so that, at least, his death might be attended by universal mourning. It was at the time of his fatal illness, that he must have caused the slaughter of the infants at Bethlehem. [Mat 2:16-18](#). He adorned Jerusalem with many splendid monuments of his taste and magnificence. The Temple, which he built with scrupulous care, was the greatest of these works. The restoration was begun B.C. 20, and the Temple itself was completed in a year and a half. But fresh additions were constantly made in succeeding years, so that it was said that the Temple was "built in forty and six years," [Joh 2:20](#), the work continued long after Herod's death. (Herod died of a terrible disease at Jericho, in April, B.C. 4, at the age of 69, after a long reign of 37 years. -- Editor).

*The Worshipping Magi.* The climax of this dramatic history comes when the Magi reach the house and worship Jesus. "And when they had come into the house, they saw the young Child with Mary His mother, and fell down and worshiped Him. And when they had opened their treasures, they presented gifts to Him: gold, frankincense, and myrrh." [[Matthew 2:11](#)]

Lenski comments, "The great fact must ever be noted that the Magi fell down and worshipped this child, born in this little village and not in Jerusalem; living in a house and in surroundings of the poorest kind; lying in the arms of a mother who was ranked among the lowliest of the land. And these were men who were often in the presence of the king of Babylon, themselves high, mighty and wealthy. From the capital and King Herod they had come to this poor house. They treat it as the grandest of palaces and this little child as the most glorious king. How could they do this? Their hearts must have beheld what their eyes did not see."



In a sermon on this text, Luther points out how the Magi must have looked like "great fools." "When the wise men had overcome their temptation [to doubt] and were born again by the great joy they were strong and took no offense at Christ, they had overcome in the trial. For although they enter a lowly hut



and find a poor young wife with a poor little child, and find less of royal appearance than the homes of their own servants presented, they are not led astray. But in a great strong, living faith they remove from their eyes and their minds whatever might attract and influence human nature with its pretense, follow the word of the prophet and the sign of the star in all simplicity, treat the Child as a King, fall down before Him, worship Him, and offer gifts. This is a strong faith indeed, for it casts aside many things which impress human nature. Perhaps there were some people present who thought: What great fools are these men to worship such a poor child. They must indeed be in a trance to make of Him a king.” [Martin Luther, *Complete Sermons of Martin Luther*. I.I.363]

Worshipping this Jesus must indeed seem to the world to be the greatest of foolishness, but it is the wisdom of Christ, the great insight of faith, that this Babe, cradled in the arms of His virgin mother, is the Lord of all and the Savior of Mankind.

*The Gifts.* From ancient times the church has understood the three gifts of the Magi as indications of the great person of Christ: gold because He is a king, frankincense because He is God, and myrrh because He is born to die.

It is good to note how the Gospel of Matthew begins and ends with the worshipping of Jesus. [2:11; 28:17] The Gospel begins with the Gentiles coming to worship Jesus, and ends with the disciples sent out to the Gentiles, that all nations might worship Him as their King, God, and Savior.



## The Flight into Egypt (2:13-15)

The Magi and the Holy Family are both warned by God of the wrath of Herod and the impending destruction it will cause. The Magi are simply sent secretly away, but that prophecy might be fulfilled, the angel instruct Joseph in a dream to flee to Egypt and wait there until he hears word to return. They all do as instructed, and the next morning Bethlehem is void of the Christ, His family and His Gentile worshippers.

This, then, is the fulfillment of Hosea 11:1, "Out of Egypt I called My Son." There is much debate about this passage, if the prophet is speaking of the nation Israel or Jesus or both. The simplest understanding is to read the text as St Matthew gives it to us, the return of Christ from the Egyptian sojourn is the fulfillment of the prophet's words and intention. Such a conclusion also arises from a close reading of the outline of Hosea.



## The Slaughter of the Innocents (2:16-18)

When the Magi do not return to Herod with news he is enraged and sends his soldiers to Bethlehem to slaughter all the boys two years old and younger. The age is determined from the date of the star's appearance (which Herod had deceitfully ascertained from the Magi). We assume that Herod gave himself a wide margin for errors, preferring to kill more children than to risk letting the child survive. These murdered children are considered the first Christian martyrs.

Estimating the population of Bethlehem and the average number of infant boys in such a population have led people to guess that there were six or seven boys murdered. Some people guess as high as thirty.

The church commemorates the slaughter of the innocents on December 28<sup>th</sup>, the third of three saints days that follow after Christmas. (December 26<sup>th</sup>: St Stephen, December 27<sup>th</sup>: St John). The Antiphon in the Introit appointed for Holy Innocents is Psalm 8:2:

Out of the mouth of babes and nursing infants  
You have ordained strength,  
Because of Your enemies,  
that You may silence the enemy and the avenger.

The Collect for the day is beautiful:

O Lord God, heavenly Father, who out of the mouths of babes and nursing infants ordained strength, suffer us not to despair of the Holy Innocents, whose lives were given that Your Son might live and give His life for them and for all who suffer the hostilities of sin with a love stronger than death; through the same, Jesus Christ, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.

This terrible event is the fulfillment of Jeremiah's prophecy, 31:15.





## The Return to Nazareth (2:19-23)

On the death of Herod, Joseph gets the promised word for the angel, “Return.” Two things prompt him to settle back in Nazareth (instead of Bethlehem or some other Judean village), the rule of Archelaus and the warning of God in a dream.

*Called a Nazarene.* Matthew ends the section concerning Jesus' childhood with the mention of another fulfilled prophecy, not of *a* prophet, but of *the* prophets, “He shall be called a Nazarene.” [2:23] This passage has vexed many a commentator. This is not a quote from any Old Testament book, but we should not expect that, for Matthew is not quoting a prophet, but the prophetic accord. So we see that Jesus was despised in His life as being from Galilee of the Gentiles. “Can anything good come from Nazareth?” [John 1:46] “Search and look, for no prophet has arisen out of Galilee.” [John 7:52] It is part of Jesus rejection and humiliation that He is called a “Nazarene.” This rejection is the common description of the Messiah in the prophets. [See Psalm 22:6; Isaiah 49:7; 53:3; Daniel 9:26]

