

## Lesson 2

# Gospel of Matthew



## *In Pursuit of the King*

Early World	Patriarchs	Egypt & Exodus	Desert Wanderings	Conquest & Judges	Royal Kingdom	Divided Kingdom	Exile	Return	Maccabean Revolt	Messianic Fulfillment	The Church

## Introduction

In all of history, there's never been a figure who's stirred the world as much as Jesus Christ. The second chapter of Matthew's Gospel describes opposing reactions to news of the birth of Jesus. Overcome with joy and awe at finding the infant king of the Jews, the wise men from the East represent the first Gentiles to recognize the kingship of Jesus. Meanwhile, an extremely paranoid King Herod plots to kill the long-awaited Savior—who's chosen to make his appearance in the world as a vulnerable child. The Evangelist begins pointing out the similarities between Moses and Jesus, who will continue to be portrayed as a new Moses throughout the first Gospel. A series of Old Testament prophecies emphasize that Jesus Christ is indeed the Messiah who's been promised by God to deliver the descendants of the 12 tribes of Israel.

## Matthew 2:1-23

**2**<sup>1</sup>Now when Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea in the days of Herod the king, behold, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem, saying, <sup>2</sup>“Where is he who has been born king of the Jews? For we have seen his star in the East, and have come to worship him.” <sup>3</sup>When Herod the king heard this, he was troubled, and all Jerusalem with him; <sup>4</sup>and assembling all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Christ was to be born. <sup>5</sup>They told him, “In Bethlehem of Judea; for so it is written by the prophet:

<sup>6</sup>“And you, O Bethlehem, in the land of Judah,  
are by no means least among the rulers of Judah;  
for from you shall come a ruler who will govern my people Israel.””

<sup>7</sup>Then Herod summoned the wise men secretly and ascertained from them what time the star appeared; <sup>8</sup>and he sent them to Bethlehem, saying, “Go and search diligently for the child, and when you have found him bring me word, that I too may come and worship him.” <sup>9</sup>When they had heard the king they went their way; and lo, the star which they had seen in the East went before them, till it came to rest over the place where the child was. <sup>10</sup>**When they saw the star, they rejoiced**

**Matthew 2:1-23**

**exceedingly with great joy;** <sup>11</sup>**and going into the house they saw the child with Mary his mother, and they fell down and worshiped him.** Then, opening their treasures, they offered him gifts, gold and frankincense and myrrh. <sup>12</sup>And being warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they departed to their own country by another way.

<sup>13</sup>Now when they had departed, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream and said, “Rise, take the child and his mother, and flee to Egypt, and remain there till I tell you; for Herod is about to search for the child, to destroy him.” <sup>14</sup>And he rose and took the child and his mother by night, and departed to Egypt, <sup>15</sup>and remained there until the death of Herod. This was to fulfil what the Lord had spoken by the prophet, “Out of Egypt have I called my son.”

<sup>16</sup>Then Herod, when he saw that he had been tricked by the wise men, was in a furious rage, and he sent and killed all the male children in Bethlehem and in all that region who were two years old or under, according to the time which he had ascertained from the wise men. <sup>17</sup>Then was fulfilled what was spoken by the prophet Jeremiah:

<sup>18</sup>“A voice was heard in Ramah,  
wailing and loud lamentation,  
Rachel weeping for her children;  
she refused to be consoled,  
because they were no more.”

<sup>19</sup>But when Herod died, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared in a dream to Joseph in Egypt, saying, <sup>20</sup>“Rise, take the child and his mother, and go to the land of Israel, for those who sought the child’s life are dead.” <sup>21</sup>And he rose and took the child and his mother, and went to the land of Israel. <sup>22</sup>But when he heard that Archelaus reigned over Judea in place of his father Herod, he was afraid to go there, and being warned in a dream he withdrew to the district of Galilee. <sup>23</sup>And he went and dwelt in a city called Nazareth, that what was spoken by the prophets might be fulfilled, “He shall be called a Nazarene.”

*[Please Note: One of the best ways to meditate on God’s Word is through memorization. A suggested memory verse is always highlighted in the Scripture text, or you may choose a verse of your own.]*

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## Study Questions

It's best to read all of **Matthew 2:1-23** and *Points to Ponder* before responding to the study questions. To aid in discussion, please note Scripture verses where you find your responses.

### Wise Men Came from the East

#### Matthew 2:1-12

1. Matthew 2:1 records that Jesus was born in Bethlehem, a small village south of Jerusalem. In Luke 2:4, Bethlehem is called the “city of David.” Why is this a fitting place for the Messiah to be born (see *1 Sam* 16:1-13)? In the Hebrew language, Bethlehem means “house of bread.” How does this relate to Jesus (see *Jn* 6:51), and how does breaking the bread of the sacrament of the Eucharist represent a pledge of heavenly glory (see *CCC* 1405)?
2. Matthew 2:1-2 presents both Jesus and Herod as kings. Why was Herod troubled when he learned from the wise men that a child had been born king of the Jews? What Old Testament prophecy did Herod fear was being fulfilled (see *Num* 24:17)? What disaster did that same prophecy foretell for Herod’s family, the Edomites (see *Num* 24:18)?
3. Matthew 2:6 is a combined citation from two different Old Testament passages—Micah 5:2 and 2 Samuel 5:2. How do these Scriptures point to messianic expectations?
4. **When they saw the star, they rejoiced exceedingly with great joy; and going into the house they saw the child with Mary his mother, and they fell down and worshiped him.** In Matthew 2:10-11 (our suggested memory verses), wise men from the east are the first to recognize the kingship of Jesus. What is the name of the Church feast that celebrates this event, and how does the wise men’s worship of the infant Jesus reflect the role that Jesus is to play in salvation history (see *CCC* 528)? The wise men offered gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh to the newborn king. What do these gifts represent?

## **Matthew Lesson 2 Study Questions**

5. What had Herod instructed the wise men to do once they'd found the king of the Jews? In Matthew 2:12, what prevents the wise men from following Herod's instructions?

### **Escape to Egypt**

#### **Matthew 2:13-18**

6. Matthew 2:13-22 records that Joseph is warned in a dream to take Jesus and Mary to Egypt. How is this reminiscent of Joseph, the eleventh son of the Old Testament patriarch Jacob (refer to *Mt* 1:20-21, and see *Gen* 37:5-11 and *Gen* 45:16-20)? What other similarities exist between these two Josephs (refer to *Mt* 1:16 and see *Gen* 30:19-24; also refer to *Mt* 1:19 and see *Gen* 39:7-18)?
7. The prophet Hosea is quoted in Matthew 2:15: "Out of Egypt have I called my son." What Old Testament event does this prophecy recall (see *Hos* 11:1 and *Ex* 4:22-23a)? How is Jesus' departure from Egypt related to this event (see *CCC* 530)? List as many similarities as you can between Moses and Jesus.
8. In Matthew 2:16, what is Herod's reaction when he learns that he's been tricked by the wise men? This fulfills a tragedy prophesied in Jeremiah 31:15. Why did the prophet Jeremiah view Ramah as a place of sorrow and exile (see *Isa* 10:29, *Hos* 5:8, and *Jer* 40:1)?
9. Who was Rachel, and how is she linked to Bethlehem (see *Gen* 35:17-19)?

## Return from Egypt Matthew 2:19-23

10. Matthew 2:23 records that after the Holy Family returns from Egypt, they settle in the town of Nazareth in order “that what was spoken by the prophets might be fulfilled, ‘He shall be called a Nazarene.’” Since there’s no exact Old Testament prophecy that corresponds to this, how do Scripture scholars connect this statement to messianic prophecies?

### Voices of the Saints

*For in this persecution even tiny infants and nursing babies were killed on Christ’s behalf and attained to the consummate praise of martyrs. . . . Thus it is that those blessed babies have deservedly lasted beyond others. They were the first who were worthy to die on Christ’s behalf.*

—**St. Chromatius, a contemporary to Sts. Ambrose and Jerome**

### Questions for Reflection

**The following questions are designed to help you reflect further about how ideas in Matthew 2:1-23 might apply to your own life:**

1. In the *Rome to Home* excerpt, Pope John Paul II compared the wise men’s search for truth with the faith journey of modern Christians. The wise men were able to discover signs of God’s action in the world in the midst of their own daily routines, and this led them to embark on a long journey to find Jesus Christ. St. John Chrysostom preached that the wise men rejoiced because “they found what they were seeking.” What are some ways that God might be trying to reveal his presence to you in the mundane things of life?
2. The Church considers the murdered children of Bethlehem to be the first Christian martyrs, and their feast is celebrated on December 28. Often tragedies involving innocent persons, especially children, adversely affect our faith. How can Christians oppose such senseless violence without losing sight of God’s goodness?

## Opportunities for Additional Study

### Points to Ponder—*Matthew 2:1-23*

#### Herod and the Star Out of Jacob

Herod's extreme reaction to the birth of Jesus strikes many readers as far-fetched—some even accuse Matthew of inventing the story. Closer inquiry into the historical evidence tells a different tale. Historians paint a picture of Herod that shows a profoundly paranoid ruler. To protect his throne, he had some of his own children put to death—leading Caesar Augustus to remark: “It's better to be Herod's swine than his son.” As he lay dying, Herod issued orders that the principal leaders of Judea were to be held in the hippodrome at Jericho and slaughtered as soon as Herod had passed away. The dying ruler reasoned that this would ensure the occasion of his death would cause at least some mourning. His cruel plan never was carried out.

Scripture itself provides a motivation for why Herod over-reacted to the news of a newborn “king of the Jews.” Herod, although he was functioning as king of the Jews, wasn't really a Jew. He was an Edomite, or Idumaeon, as these descendants of Esau had come to be known at the time immediately preceding the birth of Jesus. Esau was the brother of Jacob. It was Jacob who received the blessing and birthright from his father Isaac, although it had been intended to go to Esau, the first-born (*Gen 27:1-29*). Ever afterwards, rivalry exists between the brothers' descendants. When Moses leads the Israelites from Egypt toward the Promised Land, he's refused passage through Moab—a country whose people were closely allied with the Edomites. In fact, the Moabites go so far as to attempt to destroy the Israelites. The Moabite king, Balak, even hires the prophet Balaam to place a curse on the Israelites (*Num 22:1-6*). This plan backfires, however, because no matter how hard Balaam tries, he's only able to bless God's chosen people.

Balaam's fourth attempt to curse the Israelites results in the greatest blessing of all, a prophecy widely regarded as messianic by the time of Herod: “I see him, but not now; I behold him, but not nigh: a star shall come forth out of Jacob, and a scepter shall rise out of Israel; it shall crush the forehead of Moab, and break down all the sons of Sheth. Edom shall be dispossessed, Seir also, his enemies, shall be dispossessed, while Israel does valiantly. By Jacob shall dominion be exercised, and the survivors of cities be destroyed!” (*Num 24:17-19*). Would an Edomite king with Herod's psychological track record be unnerved by wise men following a star in hopes of locating a newborn “king of the Jews”? You bet he would. Would he hesitate to slaughter the children of a few nameless peasants in an obscure village if he thought it would protect his throne from being “dispossessed”? To paraphrase Caesar Augustus: “In such a situation, it would be better to be Herod's swine than Herod's subject.”

#### The Wise Men and Their Gifts

The pervasive influence of Christmas carols and popular legend leads many people to think the wise men Matthew writes about were “three kings.” But were there three wise men, and were they royal? How did they attain their fixed number and crowns when Matthew records nothing of the sort?

It's easy to understand how legend could arrive at the idea of three wise men—there were three gifts so there must have been three givers presenting the gifts. This is pure conjecture, however, and scholars have no real idea how many wise men visited the infant Jesus. Explaining the visitors' royalty is more complicated. Based on information from the Greek historian Herodotus, some scholars think it's possible that these sages were pagan priests who belonged to a sacred caste of the Medes, a people who lived in what is now the northwestern part of Iran. The prophet Jeremiah refers to one of these priestly figures, Nergalsharezer, as "the Rabmag" or leading sage (*Jer 39:3*). Involved in various religious and political struggles in the ancient Middle East, the influence of these wise men appears to have extended throughout the geographic area.

Epiphany is the Church's celebration of the wise men's visit to Bethlehem. The messianic prophecy that's one of the liturgical readings for that solemnity clearly refers to the long-awaited Savior's influence over Gentile kings: "And nations shall come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your rising" (*Isa 60:3*). This connection is reinforced a few verses later when Isaiah announces a prophecy that describes some of the gifts that will be brought to the Messiah: "A multitude of camels shall cover you, the young camels of Midian and Ephah; all those from Sheba shall come. They shall bring gold and frankincense, and shall proclaim the praise of the LORD" (*Isa 60:6*).

The wise men sometimes are called magi, which comes from the Greek. Although the word "magi" is related to the English word "magic," it isn't quite accurate to assume that they're "magicians." The wise men lived during an age in which the attempt to control and understand nature by means of what is now called science hadn't yet been distinguished from what is now thought of as magic. Like most people of their time, the wise men believed there was some connection between events that occur on earth and the actions of the stars and planets in the heavens. Through the practice of astrology, the wise men tried to extract meaning from the movements of the stars, and they practiced rudimentary astronomy as well.

The gifts offered by the wise men—gold, frankincense, and myrrh—have theological significance. Gold, a traditional symbol of royalty, represents the kingship of Jesus. Frankincense, which was used in worship rituals, symbolizes his priesthood and divinity. Myrrh, a burial ointment, relates to death and symbolizes Jesus' humanity. The gifts of the wise men anticipate the sacrificial death of Jesus Christ, king of the Jews and a priest according to the order of Melchizedek (*Heb 5:5-6*). Fathers of the Church subsequently looked upon the wise men as the first Gentiles to recognize the kingship of Jesus Christ. This well could explain how the wise men themselves came to be considered royalty.

In the liturgy of the Church, Matthew's story about the wise men is coupled with this Old Testament passage: "May the kings of Tarshish and of the isles render him tribute, may the kings of Sheba and Seba bring gifts! May all kings fall down before him, all nations serve him!" (*Ps 72:10-11*). The wise men no more were from Tarshish (to the northwest and not to the east of Judea) than they were kings. As sometimes happens, a liturgical accommodation of a biblical text eventually comes to be commonly considered an authentic interpretation of the Gospel. In reality, however, Psalm 72 was paired with the story of the wise men in order to express the spirit of the Gentiles' homage to Jesus Christ.

## Rachel Weeping for Her Children

Matthew takes pains to show the similarities between the Joseph written about in the Old Testament and the Joseph who is married to the Blessed Virgin Mary in the New Testament. Besides sharing the same name, both have fathers named Jacob (*Mt* 1:16 and *Gen* 30:19-24); both receive prophetic dreams from God (*Mt* 1:20-21, *Mt* 2:13-23, and *Gen* 37:5-11); both were chaste (*Mt* 1:19 and *Gen* 39:7-18); and both rescue their families by taking them to Egypt (*Mt* 2:13-15 and *Gen* 45:16-20). These connections between the two Josephs point to a larger pattern of Old Testament types and fulfillments that Matthew will continue to emphasize.

By referring to an Old Testament prophecy made by Hosea: “When Israel was a child, I loved him, and out of Egypt I called my son” (*Hos* 11:1), Matthew also clearly is drawing a parallel between Moses and Jesus, and he’ll continue to portray Jesus as the new Moses throughout his Gospel. Both Moses and Jesus have their lives threatened as infants by imperial decrees ordering the death of all Hebrew male children—Moses by Pharaoh’s edict (*Ex* 1:15-16) and Jesus by Herod’s (*Mt* 2:16). Both were protected by a member of their immediate family (*Ex* 2:1-10 and *Mt* 2:13-15). Both found sanctuary in Egypt (*Ex* 2:5-10 and *Mt* 2:14-15). Both were called back to their homes after a period of exile (*Ex* 4:19 and *Mt* 2:20).

A prophecy of Jeremiah’s is used to emphasize Herod’s paranoid and senseless slaughter of Hebrew male infants and toddlers in Bethlehem: “A voice is heard in Ramah, lamentation and bitter weeping. Rachel is weeping for her children; she refuses to be comforted for her children, because they are not” (*Jer* 31:15). The Church considers these children first Christian martyrs, and the feast of the Holy Innocents is celebrated on December 28. Jeremiah’s prophecy looks to Ramah, a city a few miles north of Jerusalem with a history of tragedy and sorrow. The city saw the death of many Israelites when it was overrun by the Assyrians in the eighth century B.C., and during the Babylonian captivity, Ramah was the place where Jews crossed over to be carried away into exile.

Jeremiah’s prophecy, which actually is part of a restoration prophecy that refers to the New Covenant God intends to establish with the house of Judah and the house of Israel (*Jer* 31:31), makes a poignant reference to Rachel, the favorite wife of Jacob who later was renamed Israel (*Gen* 32:28). After being unable to bear children for many years, Rachel finally becomes the mother of two of the 12 sons of Israel—Joseph and Benjamin. She died in Bethlehem giving birth to Benjamin, the youngest of the 12 sons. Genesis 35:19 records that Rachel was buried in Bethlehem.

Matthew ends the second chapter of his Gospel by writing about a final restoration prophecy: “And he went and dwelt in a city called Nazareth, that what was spoken by the prophets might be fulfilled, ‘He shall be called a Nazarene’” (*Mt* 2:23). Scripture scholars have difficulty explaining this passage because there’s no mention of Nazareth or Nazarene anywhere in the Old Testament. Matthew’s attribution of this quote to “prophets” rather than to a single prophet suggests he intends the reader to understand that he’s basing his statement on several different Old Testament prophets. Nazareth is related to *netzer*, the Hebrew word for branch. The most likely explanation is that Matthew is thinking about the numerous references to the Messiah as a “branch” on the family tree of Jesse, who was the father of David (*Jer* 23:5, *Jer* 33:15, *Dan* 11:7,

and *Zech* 3:8). One of the most obvious of these references is from the prophet Isaiah: “There shall come forth a shoot from the stump of Jesse, and a branch shall grow out of his roots. And the Spirit of the LORD shall rest upon him, the spirit of wisdom and understanding, the spirit of counsel and might, the spirit of knowledge and the fear of the LORD, and his delight shall be in the fear of the LORD” (*Isa* 11:1-2).

## Catechism Connections

- *CCC* 330 teaches that angels are purely spiritual creatures, surpassing in perfection all visible creatures.
- For more information about the feast of Epiphany, which celebrates the adoration of Jesus by the wise men, see *CCC* 528.
- The flight into Egypt and the massacre of the innocents make manifest the opposition of darkness to the light. To learn more, see *CCC* 530.
- *CCC* 533 teaches about Jesus’ obedience to Mary and Joseph during his hidden life growing up in Nazareth.

## Rome to Home

Pope John Paul II compared the wise men’s search for truth with the faith journey of modern Christians.

The magi, representing the pagan peoples, are a model in our search for God. They discern his silent presence in the sign of creation. In order to find the truth, which they have only caught a glimpse of, they set out on a journey filled with risks and the unknown. Their journey ends in a discovery and an act of profound adoration of the Child Jesus, whom they see together with his mother. They offer them their treasures, receiving in exchange the inestimable gift of faith and Christian joy. Let us listen to the exhortation of St. Basil the Great: “Let us adore the Child with the magi.”

—homily, January 6, 1986

## Summary

### **In Matthew 2:1-23, we observed that:**

1. Wise men following a star they've seen in the East ask Herod where they might find the newborn king of the Jews.
2. Prophecies indicate that the Messiah was to be born in Bethlehem of Judea, and Herod feigns interest in also worshiping the child.
3. The wise men find Jesus in Bethlehem and offer him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh—symbolic of Jesus' kingship, his priesthood, and his humanity.
4. The wise men are warned in a dream not to return to Herod, so they take a different route home.
5. Joseph is warned in a dream to take Mary and Jesus to Egypt, which he does.
6. Herod, in a furious rage, has all the young male Hebrew children in Bethlehem killed.
7. After Herod's death, Joseph is told in another dream that it's now safe to return with Mary and Jesus to the land of Israel.
8. Joseph is warned once again in a dream to settle his family in Nazareth of Galilee, a remote area away from Judah, which is where Herod's son is reigning.

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