

THE KING OF KINGS: A STUDY OF MATTHEW

The King's Arrival: A Study of Matthew 1–7

STUDY FOUR

Wise Men, Wicked Men . . . and Us

Matthew 2:1–12

Let me urge you, after you study this passage, to do like the wise men did, and like wise men and women still do: bow down and worship Christ, who is the King above all who would make themselves king and Lord above all who want to make you think they're lords.

—Pastor Charles R. Swindoll

FALSE ideas sometimes creep into tradition, coloring our imagination so vividly that they lodge themselves in our beliefs. Take one of our favorite Christmas songs “We Three Kings of Orient Are.” Verse one reads:

We three kings of Orient are;
bearing gifts we traverse afar,
field and fountain, moor and mountain,
following yonder star.¹

While the magi likely served kings, they weren't kings. The “king” label probably originated with early church teachers like Tertullian and Augustine. They reasoned from texts such as Psalm 72 and Isaiah 60 that the magi must have been kings because those passages refer to kings giving gifts to the anointed one.²

More than 1500 years later, we are still singing about “three kings.” In fact, we know very little about these magi. We don't even know how many there were. But Matthew tells us all we need to know about them. No need to speculate. It's time to set aside the clutter of tradition and learn just how significant and instructive these magi prove for us today.



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Committed to Excellence in Communicating Biblical Truth and Its Application

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Matthew 2:1–12



PREPARE YOUR HEART

Before the magi presented their gifts to Jesus, they bowed in worship. Likewise, before we explore the treasures of God's Word, we bow our hearts before God in prayer.

Father of light, every good gift I have comes from You. I thank You for them. My relationships, my worship community, the clothes on my back, and food in my stomach. You are truly a good Father. I especially thank You for Your Word. Use it to instruct my mind and fuel my soul that I may fall on my knees like the magi and worship You in Spirit and in truth. In Christ's name, amen.



TURN TO THE SCRIPTURES

For his Jewish audience, Matthew had to address an important question. How could Jesus be the Messiah if He hailed from Nazareth? Micah had prophesied that the “ruler of Israel whose origins are in the distant past” would be born in Bethlehem (Micah 5:2).

Matthew confirmed that Jesus was indeed born in Bethlehem just as Micah had prophesied. But Matthew went even further by describing the events *after* Jesus' birth. For, these events affirmed Jesus' authority as eternal Ruler of Israel. Let's find out what happened.



Observation: Letting Scripture Speak

Observe [Matthew 2:1–12](#). Note below the four sets of characters and three locations mentioned.



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What two ways did God engage, or lead, the wise men?

1. _____
2. _____

What facts in Matthew's account are missing from the traditional story of the magi that you are familiar with? Are there any facts new to you?

In his account of Jesus' birth, Luke used a Greek word translated, "baby," to identify Jesus as a newborn (Luke 2:16). Luke also hinted at the location as a stable by saying that Jesus was laid in a feeding trough, or "manger," because "there was no room for them in the inn" (2:7 NASB).

Matthew, however, identified Jesus *not* as a baby and His location *not* near an inn at the time of the magi's visit. According to Matthew 2:11, what words did Matthew use? And what do these words suggest about the timing of the magi's visit?

Imagine the wonder that rushed upon Mary and Joseph at the sight of these elegant and exotic men who had traveled so far to worship Jesus. Despite how our nativity sets depict this scene, however, this worshipful moment didn't occur on the night of Jesus' birth. The setting was a house, not a stable; and Jesus was likely a toddler, not a newborn. A Christmas myth debunked!



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Interpretation: A Tale of Two Kings

Matthew's account did portray kings . . . two in fact. Let's take a closer look at the first, Jesus the Messiah King.

The Messiah King—Matthew 2:1–2; 4–6

What title did the wise men give Jesus, according to [Matthew 2:1–2](#)? And what titles did the “leading priests and teachers of religious law” use in the prophesy they quoted, according to [2:4–6](#)?

Herod knew what these titles meant. *King*, *ruler*, and *shepherd* pointed to only one individual in Jewish Scriptures, and, according to [2:4](#), Herod immediately identified Him as the Messiah.

Do a brief background study of this individual foretold in the Old Testament by reading the online article “*Messiah*” in the *Encyclopedia of the Bible* at [biblegateway.com](#). Specifically, note the section titled, “The Ideal King.” Record what you discover in the space below.



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In his commentary, *Insights on Matthew 1–15*, Pastor Chuck Swindoll explains that the magi were from Persia, the land where the exiled Jews once lived. They had probably read about the Messiah in “Jewish Scriptures like the books of Isaiah and Daniel, which would have been known among Jewish communities spread through Arabia, Persia, and Babylon.”³

After the wise men followed the star to the house, they reacted to the child in three ways (*Matthew 2:10–11*). List them below.

Reflect on the symbolic meaning of the magi's actions. Why do you think Matthew included the account of the magi in his gospel?

These wise men wisely saw Jesus for who He truly was, the ultimate King at whose feet all people will one day bow. As commentator William Barclay insightfully observed, the coming of the magi was “the first sign and symbol of the world conquest of Christ.”⁴

The “Monster” King—Matthew 2:3, 7–8

In contrast is the “monster” king—the insanely paranoid King Herod who later ordered the massacre of children in Bethlehem under the age of two (*Matthew 2:16–18*).



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Read pages 35–36 of Pastor Chuck Swindoll's commentary, *Insights on Matthew 1–15*, and summarize key points about Herod the Great's brutal reign.

Pastor Chuck's favorite Bible dictionary, *The New Unger's Bible Dictionary*, sums up the character of King Herod:

Herod was not only an Idumaeon in race and a Jew in religion, but he was a heathen in practice and a monster in character. During his administration as king he proved himself to be exceedingly crafty, jealous, cruel, and revengeful. He exercised his kingly power with the disposition of a very despot.⁵

How does Herod's history of treachery shed light on his true intentions in his response to Jesus' birth (Matthew 2:3) and his desire to locate the child-King (2:7–8)?

Jesus was "born king of the Jews" (Matthew 2:2); Herod, on the other hand, was not a Jew and took his crown by force. Jesus, the "Prince of Peace . . . will rule with fairness and justice" (Isaiah 9:6–7). Herod's rule was marked by violence and persecution. No greater chasm of extremes exists between two kings.



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Correlation: From Bethlehem

Let's take a closer look at the prophecy quoted by the priests and teachers of the Jewish law. They actually quoted two passages from the Old Testament. Read *Micah 5:2* and *2 Samuel 5:2* together. Now read Matthew 2:6 below and notice how the verse in Matthew combines and interprets the two Old Testament verses.

“And you, O Bethlehem in the land of Judah,
are not least among the ruling cities of Judah,
for a ruler will come from you
who will be the shepherd for my people Israel.” (Matthew 2:6)

1. From Micah 5:2, “Ephrathah” changed to _____
2. From Micah 5:2, “are only a small village” changed to _____
3. From Micah 5:2, _____ was omitted
4. What phrase from 2 Samuel 5:2 was included with Micah 5:2? _____

Bethlehem “in the land of Judah” emphasized the tribe and birthplace of David where the Messiah must be born. Matthew also carefully showed that the One born would rule like a shepherd over Israel, not like tyrannical, narcissistic Herod nor the ambivalent, negligent religious leaders who did not go to Bethlehem to look for the Messiah.



Application: Joining the Wise

As we conclude this study, let's reflect on Matthew's cast of characters—King Herod, the religious leaders, and the Gentile magi—who model three responses to Jesus.

1. Herod responds to Jesus' birth with hostility masked in devotion and interest.
2. The religious leaders understood God's plan but felt indifferent toward Him.
3. The magi knew little about God but embraced His plan and worshiped the Messiah.



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Can you identify these types of people in your world? What do those who are hostile or indifferent toward Christ do? What do true worshipers do?

What is one thing you can do (or stop doing) to help you avoid the pitfalls of hostility or indifference and help you worship Jesus with a heart of devotion like the magi?

Although God had called Israel's kings and priests to lead the nation in worship, ironically, the true worshipers in Matthew's account were pagan magi. These wise men were truly wise, not because they could read the stars but because they could recognize the only One worthy of adoration.

Matthew 2:1–12 needs no added color from false traditions. Once understood on its own merits, God's purpose shines right through. Even at the Messiah's birth, the nations came to fall on their faces, give their gifts, and worship.



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A FINAL PRAYER

Let's conclude our study in praise of the Christ-child, offering Him your heart as a gift. Write down your final prayer of worship.

ENDNOTES

1. John H. Hopkins, "We Three Kings of Orient Are," hymnary.org, https://hymnary.org/text/we_three_kings_of_orient_are.
2. R. T. France, *The Gospel of Matthew* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007), 62.
3. Charles R. Swindoll, *Insights on Matthew 1–15*, Swindoll's Living Insights New Testament Commentary, vol. 1A (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale House, 2020), 34.
4. William Barclay, *The Gospel of Matthew*, vol. 1, rev. ed., The Daily Study Bible Series (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1975), 27.
5. Howard F. Vos, "Herod," in *The New Unger's Bible Dictionary*, ed. Merrill F. Unger and R. K. Harrison (Chicago: Moody Press, 1988), 556.

