

Although the account of the wise men is a well-known part of the Christmas story, Matthew's real reason for including it in his gospel is to provide further evidence that Jesus Christ is the promised King for whom the Jews have been waiting. His birth fulfilled multiple Old Testament prophecies and God intervened multiple times to guide the wise men to where Jesus was and to protect Him from harm.

¹ Now when Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judaea in the days of Herod the king, behold, there came wise men from the east to Jerusalem, ² Saying, Where is he that is born King of the Jews? for we have seen his star in the east, and are come to worship him.

“Now when Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judaea” – The birth of Jesus is mentioned in the previous verse (Matt. 1:25) but obviously Matthew does not mention the Roman decree that compelled Joseph and Mary to travel to Bethlehem when she was nearing the time to give birth (Luke 2:1-5). He does, however, confirm that Jesus was born in Bethlehem, the town where scripture predicted that the promised king would be born (vs. 5-6).

“in the days of Herod the king” – This is Herod the Great, the first of a series of kings using the name “Herod.” This particular man, who ruled from 37-4 B.C., was a cruel despot who guarded his throne jealously as we will see later in this chapter.

“behold, there came wise men [magicians] from the east to Jerusalem” – The Greek word translated “wise men” (magos) refers to men educated in various disciplines, such as religion, philosophy, astrology or mystical arts. These particular men were apparently educated in astrology as evidenced by their preoccupation with the star that they had seen. The number of wise men is not mentioned but tradition fixes the number at three simply because of the number of gifts they bring (v. 11). They come from somewhere east of Judea but Matthew does not give us their point of origin. Some commentators suggest they came from the region of Babylon and that they may have obtained their knowledge of the coming King of the Jews from copies of the scriptures once owned by Daniel the prophet.

“Saying, Where is he that is born King of the Jews?” – The fact that it is stated that they came to Jerusalem (not specifically to Herod) and the way that the events in vs. 1-7 are described suggests that they were searching around the city asking questions to see if anyone could help them locate this newly born king.

“for we have seen his star in the east, and are come to worship him” – It's also unclear why they associated a star that they observed while they were still in the east with a coming King of the Jews. Perhaps they somehow determined from their observations of the star that it was over the land of Judea and then consulted their copies of the Jewish scriptures and discovered prophecies predicting the birth of a King of the Jews. Also unclear is what the star actually was. Normal astronomical phenomena is unlikely since the star reappears later in this chapter after apparently being absent during their long journey to Jerusalem. Most likely this star was a supernatural occurrence since it seems that these wise men were the only ones aware of its appearance.

³ When Herod the king had heard *these things*, he was troubled, and all Jerusalem with him.

“When Herod the king had heard these things” – Another clue that these wise men had not come to Herod first – he apparently heard second-hand that there were wise men from the east in town searching for the King of the Jews. The fact they had not come to his palace looking for this King of the Jews obviously bothered him.

“he was troubled [anxious; agitated; distressed], and all Jerusalem with him” – Herod was an Edomite (a descendant of Esau) and therefore not a true Jew. He had been appointed to be king by Rome and so his claim on the throne was not based on his bloodline. Becoming aware that a true “King of the Jews” may have been born, he considered this child to be a threat to his throne. Jerusalem was also troubled because they knew all too well of the cruelty of Herod and that he would do whatever it took to remain on the throne. They knew that they would likely also suffer as a result of Herod's anxiety because trouble for Herod meant trouble for them.

⁴ And when he had gathered all the chief priests and scribes of the people together, he demanded of them where Christ should be born. ⁵ And they said unto him, In Bethlehem of Judaea: for thus it is written by the prophet, ⁶ And thou Bethlehem, *in the land of Juda*, art not the least among the princes of Juda: for out of thee shall come a Governor, that shall rule my people Israel.

Herod obviously believed that this “King of the Jews” was the Messiah that had been prophesied to come because he consults with the Jewish religious leaders to discover where Christ (the Messiah) was predicted to be born. They answer that the place is the town of Bethlehem in Judea and then they quote from **Micah 5:2**: “*But thou, Beth-lehem 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.*” It is interesting that these chief priests and scribes knew the scriptures but apparently did not bother to investigate the potential birth of their Messiah.

⁷ Then Herod, when he had privily called the wise men, inquired of them diligently what time the star appeared. ⁸ And he sent them to Bethlehem, and said, Go and search diligently for the young child; and when ye have found *him*, bring me word again, that I may come and worship him also.

“Then Herod, when he had privily called the wise men” – Herod may have wanted a private interview with the wise men in order to gain information from them without drawing public attention to their quest or giving it legitimacy.

“inquired of them diligently what time the star appeared” – Herod wanted to know exactly when they saw the star that announced the birth of King of the Jews. This is the first clue that this is not happening on the night that Jesus was born but sometime later. It may have taken weeks or even months for them to travel from the east to Jerusalem.

“And he sent them to Bethlehem, and said, Go and search diligently for the young child” – Herod supplies them with the information that the chief priests and scribes had given him because he wants the wise men to locate the child so that he can kill him. Although the Greek word translated “young child” can mean “infant,” it is not the usual word used for a newly born infant. The word is usually used for older children up to seven years old. This is further evidence that the events of this chapter are not happening the night that Jesus was born.

“and when ye have found him, bring me word again, that I may come and worship him also” – Herod is being dishonest because he is only helping the wise men in order to identify the child so that he can kill Him. He knows they are searching for the child in order to worship Him and so he pretends that he also wants to worship the child. He is using the wise men for his own selfish ends.

⁹ When they had heard the king, they departed; and, lo, the star, which they saw in the east, went before them, till it came and stood over where the young child was. ¹⁰ When they saw the star, they rejoiced with exceeding great joy.

After leaving the presence of the king they again see the star that they saw when they were in their own land in the east. The fact they rejoiced when they saw it implies that the star had not been visible during their journey to Jerusalem but had only appeared temporarily (perhaps one night) before disappearing when they first observed it. There must have been something distinctive about this star which prompted their interest and caused them to associate it with the Jewish Messiah because when it reappears they immediately recognize it as being the same star. The star also appears to be mobile because it “went before them” and then it “stood over where the young child was.” They obviously recognize its reappearance as divine intervention because it thrilled them when they see the star again.

¹¹ And when they were come into the house, they saw the young child with Mary his mother, and fell down, and worshipped him: and when they had opened their treasures, they presented unto him gifts; gold, and frankincense, and myrrh.

“And when they were come into the house” – Mary and Joseph are no longer in a stable. By now they are residing in a house, further evidence that some time has elapsed since Jesus’ birth.

“they saw the young child with Mary his mother, and fell down, and worshipped him” – Jesus is not described as a “babe” but as a “young child,” further implying that time has elapsed since the birth. The wise men fall down on their knees and worship Jesus when they see Him. As some commentators have pointed out, we don’t know if these wise men recognize that Jesus is God or if they are merely showing their respect and honor to a divinely ordained king. Matthew, however, is making the point that Jesus is King. Also, notice that their worship was focused on Jesus alone; they did not worship Mary.

“and when they had opened their treasures, they presented unto him gifts; gold, and frankincense, and myrrh” – The general assumption is that the wise men had brought these gifts with the intent to present them to the child king but it’s also possible that these gifts were spontaneous, inspired by worshipping in the presence of Jesus. It is also suggested that the three gifts have symbolic meaning: **gold** being a reference to the royalty and/or deity of Jesus; **frankincense** being a reference to either His deity or priestliness; **myrrh** (a fragrant substance often used when embalming) being a reference to Jesus’ death and burial. Likely these wise men were not aware of the symbolic and even prophetic meanings behind their gifts.

¹² And being warned of God in a dream that they should not return to Herod, they departed into their own country another way.

God intervenes once again and warns the wise men in a dream against revealing the location of the child to Herod. As a result they chose an alternate route when leaving the area to head back to their home in the east in order to avoid confrontation with Herod. Perhaps they were also advised which route to take in the dream.

¹³ And when they were departed, behold, the angel of the Lord appeareth to Joseph in a dream, saying, Arise, and take the young child and his mother, and flee into Egypt, and be thou there until I bring thee word: for Herod will seek the young child to destroy him.

“And when they were departed, behold, the angel of the Lord appeareth to Joseph in a dream” – After the wise men left, the Lord intervenes once again, this time speaking to Joseph also in a dream. Perhaps the dreams of Joseph and the wise men occurred the same night. Matthew is emphasizing that Jesus is indeed the King of the Jews ordained by God by describing how God intervened in order to protect Jesus.

“saying, Arise, and take the young child and his mother, and flee into Egypt, and be thou there until I bring thee word” – Egypt was near enough that it was not too strenuous of a journey for Mary and her young child but far enough away that it was outside of Herod’s influence. Jesus would be safe there until God informed Joseph that it was safe to return.

“for Herod will seek the young child to destroy him” – Joseph is informed of the source of the danger. Herod may have deceived the wise men but God understood what Herod’s true intentions were and what steps he would take to eliminate the competition for his throne.

Verses 14-23: Joseph apparently gets up that night, packs up Mary and Jesus, and immediately leaves for Egypt. He remains there until the death of Herod, which was not long after. However, when Herod realizes that the wise men have not respected his request to return with the location of the child, he becomes intensely angry. He decides to attempt to wipe out Jesus by killing all the children (presumably sons only) in Bethlehem and the surrounding region under the age of two. He chose this age based on the testimony of when the wise men said that the star appeared (v. 7). Matthew quotes from the prophet Jeremiah to demonstrate that this slaughter of the innocents fulfilled prophecy. After Herod’s death, the Lord again speaks to Joseph in a dream to notify him that it was safe to return to Israel. However, when Joseph hears that Herod’s son was now ruling in his father’s place, he is afraid to live under the jurisdiction of a son of Herod in Judea and instead goes to Galilee and settles in the village of Nazareth. Matthew points out that this choice also fulfills prophecy since it was predicted that the Messiah would be called a Nazarene.