

Matthew 2:1-23 – The Magi and the Flight to Egypt  
Gospel reading for the feast of the Holy Family (Year A)

If Matthew 1 was the “who?” and “how?” of Jesus’ birth, Matthew 2 is the “where?”

- It was widely known that the Messiah would come from Bethlehem. It was also widely known that Jesus was raised in Nazareth. Here, Matthew explains how this came to be. (Matthew: Bethlehem → Nazareth. Luke: Nazareth → Bethlehem) Son of David motif continued from Ch. 1.

Themes to watch for:

- Jesus as New Moses
- The story of Balaam
- The worship of the gentiles
- The cross and the crib
- Gospel in miniature

v.1: “Bethlehem” – small village five miles south of Jerusalem. “Of Judea” perhaps to distinguish it from Bethlehem of Galilee, seven miles northwest of Nazareth.

- Literally: “House of bread” – Think: “I am the bread of life...”
- Hometown of David and his family (1 Sam 16:1), and where David was first anointed (1 Sam 16:4-13) – so this carries on the Son of David idea from chapter 1.

“Herod the King” – Herod the Great, ruler of Palestine. From a non-Jewish family, the Roman senate gave him title “King of the Jews” in 40 BC. Took power in Jerusalem in 37 BC. Was a master builder, and a harsh and inflexible ruler. Well known for his cruelty. Was known to have killed his wife and three of his sons.

“wise men from the east”:

- Literally “*magoi*” – magi
- “wise men”- to vague
- “Kings” – probably inaccurate
- Most likely astronomers/astrologers from Persia. Magi were seen as having special knowledge, would watch the stars for signs, practice magic, etc. There is both a good and evil connotation in ancient literature. Here in Matthew it is clearly positive.
- **The First gentiles to recognize the kingship of Jesus. (Universality, and a contrast to the feigned worship of Herod)**
- Why “kings?” Is 6:3’6: “And nations shall come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your rising...all those from Sheba shall come. They shall bring gold and frankincense.” And also Psalm 72:10: “May the kings of Tarshish and of the isles render him tribute, may the kings of Sheba and Seba bring gifts!”
- Why 3? Three gifts!
- Background on Magi, see Numbers 24 and the story of Balaam. The king Balak of Moab feared the Israelites led by Moses were out to destroy him. He asks the well known seer Balaam to prophesy against Israel. Instead, Balaam blesses Israel saying, “a star shall come forth out of Jacob, and a scepter shall rise out of

Israel.” By the time of Jesus, contemporary writing was calling Balaam a “magus.” So a foreign magus, asked to do harm to God’s Son (Israel, Jesus), instead tricked the king and did good.

- Also, Herod was from a non-Jewish, Edomite family. Numbers 24:18: “Edom shall be dispossessed.”

V. 2 – the star:

- A supernova?
- A comet? Halley’s comet was visible in 12 BC
- A planetary conjunction? Saturn and Jupiter and Mars were aligned in 7-6 BC; happens only every 805 years.

The Three gifts (Allegorical interpretation from St. Irenaeus of Lyons)

- Gold: royalty, kingship
- Frankincense, used in worship; divinity
- Myrrh, a burial ointment; humanity
  
- Moral interpretation from Gregory the Great

“...by another way” – See Pope St. Gregory the Great’s Anagogical reading of this.

v.14 – “He rose and took the child and their mother *by night*...”

The slaughter of the innocents

- Considered the first Christian martyrs (Chromatius)
- Celebrated on the liturgical calendar December 28th
- Psalm 8:2 “By the mouth of babes and infants you have founded a bulwark because of thy foes, to still the enemy and the avenger.”
- Herod- the result of a state that claims the right to decide the value of human life. Herod was pro-choice.

V. 18 – Ramah and Rachel

- From Jer 31:15
- Ramah was a city five miles north of Jerusalem
- It became a place of assembling and either killing or hauling away captives during the exile (Jer 40:1)
- Matthew sees Bethlehem as the new city of sorrow where many are killed and the young Jesus is sent into exile
- Burial place of Rachel – one tradition puts her tomb on the outskirts of Bethlehem (Gen 35:17-19), another locates it near Ramah in Benjamin’s tribal territory (1 Sam 10:2)

“V. 23 – “He shall be called a Nazarene.”

- No specific reference in scripture
- More likely a paraphrasing of several ideas:

- Obviously referring to the place of Jesus' home
- A play on the Hebre word *nester*, translated "branch" in Is 11:1 – the brach, or shoot growing from the stump of Jesse – hope for the Davidic kingdom
- *Nazir* was one devoted to God (see Judges 13:5, 7)
- Probably meant to bring to mind several or all of these meanings (See Jerome and Chromatius)

References to the passion:

- V. 2 – "King of the Jews" – the title hung on the cross (Mt. 27: 11, 29, 37)
- V. 3 – "assembling" – Gk *synagein* is used in the passion narrative to describe the assembling of Jesus' enemies against him (Mt 26:3, 57, 27, et. al.)
- V. 3 – "All the chief priests and scribe of the people" (Mt 27:25)
- V. 13 - "Destroy" – (27:20)
- V. 16 – "tricked" – implies ridicule. Same word used in passion story where Christ is mocked as king of the Jews (Mt. 27:29, 31, 41)

Jesus the New Moses:

- Wicked king
- Slaughter of infants
- Flight to/from Egypt
- After the death of the king, God commands a return
- Motif continues throughout Matthew – roots Jesus in line with, and surpassing the great covenant mediator of the OT.

Gospel in miniature

- Pattern of revelation; proclamation; decision for/against Christ
  - Resurrection; apostles preaching; persecution/conversion
  - Baptism of Christ; public ministry; seek his death/believe and follow
  - The star and the scriptures; the king of the Jews; Herod/Magi