

# OpenTheo

## Matthew 2:4 - 2:15



### Gospel of Matthew - Steve Gregg

In this study of Matthew chapter 2 verses 4-15, Steve Gregg explores the prophecy of the birthplace of the Messiah in the book of Micah, which was fulfilled by Jesus as a descendant of David. The wise men from the east who saw the phenomenon in the heavens were likely astrologers who interpreted what they saw to be significant. They brought valuable gifts to the infant Jesus and were divinely warned not to return to Herod, who sought to kill him. The escape to Egypt and return to Israel demonstrate Jesus' fulfillment of the Old Testament prophecies and his identity as the Messiah.

### Transcript

Today we're picking up our study in the Gospel of Matthew at chapter 2 and verse 4. And in the first three verses, we saw last time that a group of wise men from some eastern country, possibly Persia, had come to Jerusalem because they had seen a phenomenon. They called it a star, but it hardly seems as if it was an ordinary star, more like a supernatural phenomenon, which indicated to them that the Messiah, long awaited and long prophesied, had come, had been born, who would be the king of the Jews. And so they came to Jerusalem, the capital city of Israel, hoping to find him there.

But they found there a sitting king already, Herod, who is not a Jew himself, but certainly saw himself as the king of the Jews and did not appreciate the suggestion that another had been born, unbeknownst to him. And we know that Herod was a wicked man from history, a very bloodthirsty man, a violent man. And so he was troubled by the news, and so was all Jerusalem with him, knowing him very well, and knowing that he was capable of doing great acts of cruelty.

The rest of Jerusalem was no doubt holding their breath to see how Herod would react to this news from these visitors that there had been born someone else outside of Herod's household who was to be the king of the Jews. Well, they came and asked, and Herod acted as if he wanted to oblige them and help them out, and so he gathered, it says in verse 4, all the chief priests and the scribes of the people together, and he inquired of them where the Christ was to be born. Now, the Christ, of course, means the Messiah, Christ, Christos in the Greek simply is the Greek word for the Messiah.

So he asked them where the Messiah was to be born. So they said to him, In Bethlehem of Judea, for thus it is written by the prophet, But you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are not the least among the rulers of Judah, for out of you shall come a ruler who will be shepherd of my people Israel. Now, this quotation comes from the book of Micah, one of the minor prophets in the Old Testament.

It's actually a verse that's found at Micah chapter 5 and verse 2. One thing that's very interesting about this is that the rabbis or the chief priests and the other Jews who were expert in the scripture already knew that Bethlehem was to be the place that the Messiah would be born. This is one of probably 300 Old Testament scriptures that were fulfilled by Christ during his lifetime. I remember once being in a conversation with an atheist, and I mentioned to him the many prophecies that had been fulfilled by Christ.

He said, What prophecies? And he knew, of course, what I meant, but he meant to challenge me on this. And so I named some of the prophecies, including this one, that the Messiah would be born in Bethlehem, and so forth. And he said, Those aren't prophecies.

He says, Those are found in the Christian scriptures. They were added by the Christians afterwards in order that they would be recognized, that Jesus would be recognized as the Messiah, but he didn't really fulfill prior predictions about that. But this is simply not true.

The Jews knew before Jesus came that the Messiah was to come from Bethlehem. Many of the prophecies, in fact, all of the prophecies that Jesus fulfilled were existing in the Jewish scriptures, really hundreds of years before Jesus was born and before Christians were around. And it's not the Christians who have kept the Jewish scriptures alive.

It's the Jews themselves. And therefore, it is just one of those many cases where we can see that the Jews knew in advance, because their prophets had told them, that the Messiah would meet certain conditions. In this case, he'd be born in the city of Bethlehem.

And, in fact, Jesus did come and was born in that place. And about 299 other Old Testament scriptures were fulfilled by him in his lifetime as well. Now, Bethlehem was about six miles south of Jerusalem, and it was a city that had been David's birthplace.

Now, the Messiah was to be a descendant of David. But, of course, not all of the descendants of David were born in the same city David was. After all, David himself didn't live there.

After he grew up, he was born and raised in Bethlehem. But when he grew up, he became the king of Israel, and he moved his capital to Jerusalem, which was six miles away. And so, David's children were not born in Bethlehem, and therefore his descendants largely were not from there.

But the Messiah, according to Scripture, would not only be descended from David, but would also be born in the same city that David was born in, which is Bethlehem. And so, that's what the prophet predicted would happen. And so, these chief priests and other experts informed Herod that this is what the Bible predicted.

Then Herod, verse 7, when he had secretly called the wise men, determined from them at what time the star appeared. And he sent them to Bethlehem, and said, Go and search diligently for the young child, and when you have found him, bring back word to me that I may come and worship him also. Now, obviously, the wise men did not know Herod well.

They were foreigners. They didn't know his character, and they probably assumed that he was an observant Jew. After all, he was the king of the Jews.

That he would be concerned to worship the God of Israel and any Messiah that God would send that Herod himself would wish to worship. After all, David and many of the Jewish kings before certainly were of that heart, and for all they knew, Herod might be sincere in wanting to acknowledge the new king of the Jews. So, we're told that he inquired of them when the star appeared.

We are not told what their answer was. However, later on, this becomes significant. We'll wait until later to bring it up.

So, he says, Go and find the young child. When you have found him, bring back word to me so I can also go and worship him. Verse 9, When they heard the king, they departed, and behold, the star which they had seen in the east went before them, till it came and stood over where the young child was.

When they saw the star, they rejoiced with exceeding great joy. And when they had 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 gifts to him, gold, frankincense, and myrrh.

Now, it's interesting that when they left Herod's presence, it says the star that they had seen in the east appeared to them again, and they were very glad to see it. The fact that they were glad to see it suggests that it was something of a pleasant surprise that it appeared to them again. So, it cannot be that this star was some kind of an abiding astronomical phenomenon that was there permanently.

They had seen it in the east. That means when they lived in the east, in their home, probably, very possibly, someplace like Persia. When they were in the east, they had seen it.

And the impression is given that they haven't seen it since then, until now, that they saw it. They knew that that was somehow an omen of the birth of this king of the Jews, and

so they, using common sense, made a trip to Jerusalem. But apparently, they did not see the star while they were making their trip.

In other words, the star did not guide them to Jerusalem. They simply deduced that Jerusalem was the place to go. And then after they had talked to Herod, they saw the star again, and the star then led them to the right house.

As I said last time, this could hardly be a natural star, since the stars in the heavens do not guide us to individual houses. They're much too far up. It's interesting, too, because these men were presumably astrologers.

They were the Magi, and they were, as near as we can tell, of a class of astrologers and wise men from some eastern country. And the fact that they saw something in the heavens also suggests that they may have been astrologers, and that they made it their business to observe the skies and interpret the phenomena that they saw there. This fact has caused some people who favor the practice of astrology, although, by the way, the Bible does not speak well of astrology and basically forbids it, forbids that we would go to the stars for guidance.

Yet many people today, of course, do believe in astrology, and some of them would say, well, you see there, these wise men were astrologers, and they were led to Christ through astrology. Well, to a certain extent, they were led to Christ through astrology, but I would point out to you that they came to Jerusalem, and they had to still consult the Scriptures to find out where Jesus was. The star let them know that there was a Messiah to seek, but the Scriptures told them where to find Him.

The stars declare the glory of God. Those who behold the heavens can tell that there is a God. It says in Psalm 19 that the heavens declare the glory of God, and the firmament shows His handiwork, and night unto night utter speech, and day unto day it gives forth knowledge.

And so it is possible, of course, from someone observing the stars or observing nature in general, to know that there is a God, but to know who this God is and how to find Him, one must go to the revealed Scriptures. God has revealed Himself in the Scriptures, and although people could deduce that there is a God without Scripture, they could probably not find Him adequately, certainly not know Him well, without that which He especially revealed. So these wise men, by observing the sky and the stars, concluded that there was a Messiah to seek, but they, like everybody else, were dependent on the Scriptures to tell them where to really look.

And once they had the Scriptures' guidance, they did follow. The star appeared again, apparently, and led them. And there they came to see, it says, when they came into the house, they presented these gifts to Jesus.

Now, notice they came into a house. We know from Luke's Gospel that when Jesus was born, He was not born in a house. He was born in a stable with animals.

So by the time the wise men arrived, Jesus and His parents were not in a stable anymore. They were in a house. Now, they were in Bethlehem, still, the same town where the stable had been, but they apparently had found lodging.

And how long it had been since Jesus was born, we don't know exactly. There is some reason to believe that by the time the wise men arrived, Jesus may well have been nearly two years old. And the reason for that is because when Herod ordered the death of the infants in Bethlehem, he ordered that all the boys two years old and younger should be destroyed.

And it's in verse 16 of this chapter, Matthew 2, 16 says this. It says, from two years old and under, according to the time which He had determined from the wise men. Now, remember, He had asked them very carefully in verse 7 at what time the star had appeared.

And they told Him, although the answer is not recorded there. But based on what they told Him about the appearance of the star, He ordered all the young boys under two years old to be killed, which might suggest that the star had appeared nearly two years earlier and that Jesus had been born that much earlier. It is certainly not accurate to picture the wise men at the manger in the stable along with the shepherds.

We have the story of the shepherds coming to worship Jesus at His infancy in Luke chapter 2. And, of course, they did visit Him the very night that He was born, and He was in a manger in a stable. But Matthew does not record that visit. He records this other visit of the wise men, and it was not at the same time.

And it may have been well over a year or maybe nearly two years after the birth of Jesus. And Jesus was no longer in a manger. He and the family were in a house, as we read.

And they came and they brought gifts to Him. Now, these gifts included, in verse 11, gold, frankincense, and myrrh. Sometimes preachers have tried to identify symbolic meaning of the gold, the frankincense, and myrrh and tried to associate each of these with something about the character or the career of Jesus and make it a great mystical symbolic thing.

Perhaps this can be done, but I don't have any reason to believe that the wise men were thinking that way. I think they simply brought these things because these were valuable and regal sorts of gifts to give to a king. Now, this would, of course, immediately enrich Jesus and His parents, who were ordinarily poor.

We have reason to believe that Jesus was born to a poor couple, because in Luke's gospel, in chapter 2, when Mary and Joseph took Jesus to be dedicated in the temple,

they had to resort to the alternative sacrifice for the poor. Ordinarily, this dedication would require a lamb to be sacrificed, but if a family was too poor to use a lamb, they could use two doves or two pigeons instead. And we're told that in Luke chapter 2, that Mary and Joseph had to offer the two doves or the two pigeons.

And that suggests that they needed to avail themselves of the special provisions for the poor, and they were therefore apparently a poor family. Now, on this occasion, they were at least momentarily rich. They received gold and frankincense and myrrh, very expensive spices and so forth, and this made them have some money for a change.

Now, what did they do with this? Did they put this in an interest-bearing account for Jesus for when He'd grow up and go to college? I don't think they had any chance to do that. I think what they did was that was probably the money they lived on when they had to flee the country later in this same chapter, and they went and spent some time in Egypt. Whether Joseph was able to earn a living in Egypt during the time they were there, we don't know, but at least they had these resources that they may have lived on when they were spending that time in exile, which we will read about later in this chapter.

Then it says in verse 12, Now, up until this point, apparently the wise men were planning to do their homage to Jesus and then go back to Jerusalem and tell Herod where to find Him, because Herod had asked that. Herod had indicated an interest in worshiping Him too, but after the wise men had found Jesus, God communicated with them in a dream that this was not for them to do. They were not supposed to inform the whereabouts of the Messiah to Herod, and so they didn't.

They took an alternate route back to their homeland. They did not go through Jerusalem, and so Herod was not able to get the information out of them. Now, verse 13 says, Now, this prophecy, out of Egypt I called my son, is also from one of the minor prophets.

Just as the prophecy quoted back in verse 6 about the Messiah being born in Bethlehem came from one of the minor prophets, Micah, and that was chapter 5, verse 2 of Micah, this is a prophecy that came from Hosea, another of the minor prophets, and this is a quotation from Hosea 11.1. Now, there's something peculiar about the quoting of this prophecy from Hosea. You know, sometimes people say that when Jesus fulfilled prophecy, He fulfilled it literally. This is an argument that is given sometimes, that we should always understand prophecy literally, and we should never make it symbolic, or we should never spiritualize it.

And the argument goes, and I've heard it many times and read it many times, that of the 300 prophecies that Jesus fulfilled of the Old Testament, He fulfilled them all literally. And they say, therefore, we expect all the other prophecies to be fulfilled literally. But this can be misleading.

To say that prophecy was fulfilled literally is a bit ambiguous. The question is really whether the prophecy literally said the things that actually happened. Now, in the case of Micah's prophecy, the Messiah would be born in Bethlehem, that literally came to pass.

But look at this prophecy, Hosea 11.1. Now, Matthew applies this to the time that Jesus as an infant spent in Egypt, and says that since Jesus as an infant was in Egypt, and then, of course, later came out of Egypt, when He returned to Palestine, this was a fulfillment of Hosea's words, I've called my son out of Egypt. Now, the problem with seeing this as a literal fulfillment of something is that the passage in Hosea is not a prophecy at all. At least, it doesn't appear to be.

If you look at Hosea 11, it is actually a statement of history, rather than a prediction. God, if you take the whole passage, it says this, When Israel was young, I loved him, says God, and I called my son out of Egypt. And then it goes on to say how that God led them through the wilderness.

He's referring back to the Exodus. He's talking about Israel as His son. You may recall, if you've read the book of Exodus, that when Moses was sent to confront the Pharaoh, God told Moses to give Pharaoh this message, Israel is my firstborn, and if you will not let Israel go, I will kill your firstborn.

So, God was looking at the nation of Israel as if it was a single individual. Taken collectively, He was speaking of Israel as being His son, His child. And in Hosea, He uses that imagery, When Israel was young, I loved him, and I called my son out of Egypt.

He's referring not to something future. He's referring to something in the past. And anyone can satisfy himself that this is the case by simply looking up the passage in Hosea 11.1 and the context.

So, how does Matthew justify using this statement, which in Hosea is a historical statement, about Israel coming out of Egypt in the Exodus, and say that this is somehow fulfilled by Jesus, when He, as a baby, spent time in Egypt and then came back into the Holy Land from there? Well, some people would say, well, Matthew just missed it. He just didn't look at the context. He misunderstood the prophecy.

But I would say anyone who was familiar with this particular line that he quotes would probably be familiar with the whole sentence in the Old Testament that it came from. And familiarity with that sentence would have told Matthew, just like it would tell us, that that is not a statement primarily about the Messiah. Now, some people might cynically say, well, Matthew just didn't care about accuracy.

He just wanted to make it seem as if the Messiah fulfilled prophecy. And he might have hoped that his readers would not look up the passage, and they'd just assume that he is

quoting a prophecy about the Messiah. But, in fact, he's not.

But that is also unlikely, since Matthew, by quoting the Old Testament frequently to his audience, whom I believe were Jewish people and had access to the prophets, he could not hope that he could get away with something like this. In fact, by quoting the prophets, he was encouraging his readers to look at the Old Testament and to see the ways in which Jesus fulfilled it. And any of his readers who would look it up would find as quickly as we do that the prophecy he quotes doesn't even appear to be a prophecy at all, but a statement of history about the Jews.

So how does Matthew apply it to Jesus? Well, first of all, I don't believe that Matthew is mistaken. And I don't believe he was trying to fool anybody. We read in Luke's Gospel, in chapter 24 and verse 45, of the apostles.

It says that Jesus opened their understanding that they might understand the Scriptures. Now, of course, this refers to the Old Testament Scriptures, since when Jesus was doing this with his disciples, there were no New Testament Scriptures written. So the Scriptures refers to the Old Testament.

And we are told in Luke 24, verse 45, that Jesus opened his apostles' understanding that they might correctly understand the Old Testament Scriptures. Well, Hosea is an Old Testament Scripture. And this being so, I'm of the assumption that Matthew, one of the apostles, had the correct and divinely revealed understanding of this prophecy.

But I believe there was a method to the madness. I don't believe it was just arbitrary. I believe that what Matthew is saying is that the history of Israel, in its own way, prefigures the history of the Messiah himself.

That the Messiah was sort of the model Israelite. He was sort of the model man representing Israel. And that Israel's corporate or national history, in some ways, mimicked the history of the Messiah himself.

So that when the Scripture refers to Israel coming out of Egypt in its infancy as a nation, it has a parallel in the Messiah coming out of Egypt as an infant. And I believe that this was intentional. I don't think Matthew is trying to fool anyone.

I think that he reflects the view of the apostles that Jesus himself was a fulfillment of the type that was provided by Israel. That is, Israel was a type and a shadow of the Messiah in some respects. This being one of them.

That both, in their infancy, spent time in Egypt and were brought out of Egypt again by God. Well, we've run out of time for today's talk. And so we're going to come back to this tomorrow.

And we will continue our study through the Gospel of Matthew at that time. I hope you'll



be able to join us at that time. And we will look further at the story of Jesus as it unfolds.