

# OpenTheo

## Matthew 2:1 - 2:3



### Gospel of Matthew - Steve Gregg

In this discussion, Steve Gregg analyzes the second chapter of Matthew and the fulfillment of prophecy regarding the birth of Jesus. Gregg suggests that the expectations of the Jewish people regarding the arrival of their Messiah infected the Gentiles, leading to the ruling class of Gentile nations coming to worship Jesus, akin to the prophets. He further explains that the star that the wise men followed to Bethlehem could possibly have been an angelic being. Finally, Gregg notes that Herod, who was insecure on the throne and known for his murderous ways, was troubled by the news of Jesus' birth.

### Transcript

Today we'll be turning to the second chapter of Matthew and continuing our study of this book. In the first chapter, we did not cover very much ground. That is to say, the first chapter doesn't cover very much historical time.

It is largely dominated by the genealogy of Jesus, showing that at least his legal lineage through his adopted father, Joseph, was that of a royal lineage going back to David, which is important in terms of his fulfillment of prophecy that he must be a son of David. We read in Matthew, of course, that that is the case. His legal standing in society was that of a descendant of David.

By the way, his biological descent, I believe, also was from David. That I gather from Luke's genealogy in Luke chapter 3, which I take, not everyone agrees, but I take to be Mary's genealogy. Then, of course, at the end of chapter 1, we saw that the angel came to Joseph after Mary had been found to be pregnant.

Joseph was contemplating putting her away privately, but the angel came to him in a dream and told him that this child within her would be the Messiah, essentially, that Mary had not been with a man, but that this was a miraculous conception, and that God had brought it about, and that it was a fulfillment of prophecy, and he should go ahead and marry her to whom he was already betrothed. So, this we read in the ending of chapter 1. Now, in chapter 2, it says, Now, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, in the days of Herod the king, behold, wise men from the east came to Jerusalem,

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

And when he had gathered all the chief priests and scribes of the people together, he inquired of them where the Christ 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 shepherd my people Israel. Now, I'll stop reading there for a moment to make some comments.

The story does, of course, continue. But we are introduced initially to these men whom the traditional rendering in the Bible calls wise men. The Greek word here is magi, or magi.

And these are the men who came from the east, somewhere in the east. We don't know exactly where they came from. And they came because they had seen something in the sky, which they interpreted as a sign that the king of the Jews had been born.

You know, it's an interesting thing that the secular historians of that time, for instance, the Roman historian Tacitus and others, and Josephus, the Jewish historian, mentions this too, that about this time in history, there was a rumor that circulated throughout the world that there would arise a ruler or rulers in Judea who would eventually rule the world. It's an interesting rumor to contemplate. Even among the Romans, this rumor existed.

And that, of course, the Magi seemed to indicate that they were aware of that rumor. And they saw something occur in the heavens which informed them that this was it, this was the time, and that the Messiah must have been born. Now, we might contemplate for a moment the significance of this, that the whole world, that would be, of course, the whole Roman world, the whole civilized world of that region, was actually expecting there to come from Judah at that time a king who would rule the world.

Where would this expectation arise? Well, I don't know that the historians give us any clue of where the expectation arose, but it's very possible that it arose because of the Jews who were scattered throughout the world. And they were, of course, looking forward to this coming of the Messiah who would someday rule all nations, not only Israel. He would rule from Israel, according to their expectation, but he would rule the whole world of all the nations.

And probably because the Jews and their Messianic expectations had been scattered throughout the whole world, they informed the world in general of this expectation. That is my guess. But how do we explain the fact that they expected the Messiah to come at this particular time? Even the Jews who expected the Messiah might not be expected to

know that this would be the time he would come.

But no doubt the way that they came to anticipate this was by some of the hints and even some very direct statements in the Old Testament. For example, back in Genesis chapter 49, Jacob was blessing his children, his twelve sons. And these twelve sons gave rise to the twelve tribes of Israel.

And he prophesied over Judah. And he said, a scepter will not depart from Judah until Shiloh comes. Shiloh means him to whom it belongs.

And unto him shall the gathering of the people be, said Jacob. And this meant that there would be a scepter or a kingly rule that would reside in the tribe of Judah until the time that the Messiah would come. Well, as a matter of fact, the kings of Israel, after at least their first king Saul, all the kings of Judah had come from the tribe of Judah.

And there was a time, of course, when the northern ten tribes broke off and did not submit to that king. But they were eventually wiped out by the Assyrians. And the long-lasting Jewish state was always governed by a king of the tribe of Judah.

And so the scepter did not depart from Judah. But it did, in a very notable way, at a particular time, depart from Judah. And that was about forty years before Christ was born, when the Romans, having conquered that part of the world, established a king of the Jews who was not of Jewish stock.

And that was Herod. He was an Edomite. And the Edomites had descended from Esau.

And they had no great affection for the Jews, nor did the Jews have affection for them. And Herod was very much hated by the Jews. He was not Jewish.

And, worse of all, he was from a nation that was a great enemy of the Jews. And when Herod became the ruler, it is reported that some of the rabbis saw this as significant with reference to Jacob's prophecy. And they said, Woe unto us, because the scepter has departed from Judah, but Shiloh has not yet come.

This is a reference, of course, to Genesis 49.10, where this prophecy was that the scepter would not depart from Judah until Shiloh comes. And Shiloh was recognized to be the Messiah. So, with the rule of Israel passing from the Jewish kings to a Gentile king, many of the rabbis understood that this was the time when Shiloh was to come.

And, as a matter of fact, he did. He was born within that very generation. Herod, that Edomite king, was still alive when Jesus was born.

And he is the one who figures in this story that the Magi came and talked to. Now, there's another thing that may have caused the Jews, and therefore the Gentiles around them who knew of their expectation, to think that the Messiah would come at this

particular time. And that is a prophecy given in Daniel chapter 9, verses 24 through 27, sometimes called the prophecy of the 70 weeks.

I don't have time to go into all the details of this prophecy, but to make a long story short, an angel appeared to Daniel and said that from a certain starting point, there would be a certain number of years before the Messiah would come. He said 70 weeks, and these weeks would be not weeks as we think of them, but weeks of years. That would be periods of seven years.

So, there would be a whole period of 490 years involved in this prophecy. And the angel said that the passage of time from a decree to build and restore Jerusalem to the coming of Messiah, the prince, would be, and then this number of years was given. Well, the decree to rebuild and restore Jerusalem is a bit ambiguous because there were three such decrees after Daniel's time.

But the point is that no matter which one you measure from, if you measure forward 70 weeks or 490 years, you come to approximately the time. When Jesus came. And because of that, the Jews would have an expectation at that time that the Messiah was coming soon.

In fact, there was an old man in Jerusalem named Simeon, whom God had specifically told he would not die until the Messiah had come. And so people who knew that, of course, seeing this man get older, would have had very great expectations the Messiah would come soon because he would come before this man died. So, the Jews at this particular time had a tremendous expectation that the Messiah would come about that time.

And this expectation apparently infected those outside the Jewish race and many of the Gentiles expected it as well. These Magi, these wise men who came in Matthew chapter 2, were Gentiles. They were not Jewish men.

Now, Magi refers to a certain class of wise men, probably astrologers, that were known to have existed in certain Arabic and Persian lands. They were sort of a noble class of men, respected. They gave counsel to kings and so forth.

And so these were royal visitors of a certain sort from Gentile lands coming to worship Jesus at the time of his birth. It's probable that Matthew records this, whereas Luke does not, because Matthew is writing to Jewish people trying to point out to them that the Messiah is not just for them, but that even Gentiles would worship the Messiah. In fact, there are prophecies in the Old Testament that the kings of the Gentiles would come and offer gifts to the Messiah.

Psalms 72 is one of the places that you'll find that predicted, and also Isaiah 60. And so here we have an instance of men of the ruling class of Gentile nations coming to worship

Jesus, just as the prophets said they would. And they stand, I believe, as sort of a forerunner of Gentiles in greater numbers coming to worship Jesus after the rejection he experienced from his own countrymen.

And of course, to this day, the vast majority of those who come to Jesus and follow him are Gentiles. And these wise men were simply the first of what would eventually become quite a groundswell of Gentile conversion to the Jewish Messiah. Anyway, these men are simply said to have come from the east in Matthew 2 and verse 1, and they came to Jerusalem.

Now, of course, there are many lands east of Jerusalem, and we're not sure exactly which land they came from. If they were from Persia, which many scholars think is likely, then there's an interesting connection of these men to Daniel. Although, of course, Daniel had lived 600 years earlier than this, when Daniel had lived and died, he died in the Persian Empire.

He had been taken into captivity as a youth from Jerusalem. He'd gone to Babylon, and then when the Persians conquered Babylon, Daniel had served under the Persian kings, Darius and so forth, and no doubt he died in Persia. Now, not only did Daniel live in Persia, he also was highly respected among the wise men.

And it's very possible that Daniel's writings were kept by this class of wise men and read. And, of course, if that is true, they would have been aware of that prophecy of the 70 weeks that I mentioned earlier that we find in Daniel chapter 9. So, if these wise men were Persian wise men, which is entirely possible, then they may well have known that they should expect the Messiah to come about this time, because they would have been acquainted with Daniel's writings, who had lived and ministered and died among them some centuries earlier. And we can't know for sure if this is how they know or if this is where they came from.

Some believe that they may have been Arabic from some region just east of Israel. Even then, it's hard to know how they would have learned about this, but there was a general expectation, as I pointed out, that even the secular historians mentioned, that the Messiah would be coming about this time. So, they saw something in the sky.

They claim that they saw a star. And, I guess we could take their word for it, although it's hard to really believe that what they saw was a normal star. The reason being that we will find, as the story progresses, that this star led them through the streets of Bethlehem and stood over a particular house.

Now, stars that are way up there in the sky don't stand over some particular house down on earth and don't lead you to specific homes in a town. And, for that reason, this star, I believe, was a supernatural phenomenon. Many people have tried to associate it with some conjunction of planets that is known to have occurred approximately at the time

Jesus was born.

But, any such seeking of a natural phenomenon to associate with this star of the wise men, I think, is a mistake. Because, it's very clear that the phenomenon was not natural. It was a supernatural phenomenon.

It may be that we should think of it more as an angel that was radiant. Sometimes, in the Bible, angels are compared with stars. For example, the seven stars in the right hand of Christ in Revelation chapter 1 are said to be the seven angels.

And, it's possible that this was a shining angelic being that led them. It's possible that they were led by some other kind of supernatural manifestation, even as the children of Israel were led through the night by a pillar of fire. It may not be that this star was either of those two things.

But, in some sense, it must not be thought that it was a natural star or a natural astronomical phenomenon in heaven because of its particularness of leading them in Bethlehem to the particular house and the star standing over the house. So, whatever it was, they were calling a star. We are simply at a loss to know exactly what it was.

But, I don't think it's correct to try to identify it with some known conjunction of planets or some astronomical features that some people have associated with that particular time. And now, it says that they came to Jerusalem saying, Where is he that is born the king of the Jews? For we have seen his star in the east and have come to worship him. Now, notice they didn't say, We have seen a star.

They say, We have seen his star. Now, what star did they have in mind? Why do they refer to a particular star as his star? Well, once again, we can't be 100% sure because they don't say any more than what they say. But, we do know this, that, oh, many hundreds of years, about 1400 years before the time of Christ, Balaam had given a prophecy about the Messiah.

Now, Balaam was not a Jew either, any more than these wise men were. He was a Gentile. But, he was a Gentile soothsayer and prophet.

And, he gave a prophecy that relates to the coming of the Messiah, I believe. And, it's found in Numbers chapter 24 and verse 17. And, Balaam said, I see him, but not now.

I behold him, but not near. A star shall come out of Jacob, and a scepter shall rise out of Israel, and batter the brow of Moab, and destroy the sons of the tumult. Now, this statement, a star shall come out of Jacob, which Balaam says, I see it, but it's not now.

It's not near. It's far off. And, indeed, the coming of Christ was almost, well, it was a millennium and a half away from Balaam's time.

But, he sees a star and a scepter rising out of Israel. And, it's possible that these wise men were also aware of this utterance of Balaam. This would especially be true if they were Arabs, because Balaam lived in a region that would be an Arab region today.

And, it's possible that his prophecies had been preserved by the wise men of that region. In any case, this phenomenon that led the wise men caused them to conclude that the time had come when this Messiah from Judah was coming. And, they figured that they might as well make a trip out there to Jerusalem, the capital of Israel, and see this great predicted one.

Now, Jesus, of course, was not born in Jerusalem. But, since he was to be born king of the Jews, the assumption of the wise men was that he would be born of the royal family. Now, the royal family, in that particular case, were not even Jewish.

It was Herod's family. And, it was Herod who was in the palace of the king in Jerusalem. Jesus was born, of course, in Bethlehem, and that was about six miles away from Jerusalem.

But, they didn't know that yet. And so, they came to Jerusalem asking around, where is he who is born king of the Jews? Apparently, they didn't stop at Herod's house first. They must have been asking along the way, because it got all of Jerusalem stirred up.

Now, traditionally, of course, with all the manger scenes we see at Christmastime, we are encouraged to think of there being three wise men. However, the Bible nowhere says that there were three. And, it's probable that the number three has arisen from the fact that the Bible says they brought three gifts.

And yet, the three gifts does not necessarily tell us the number of the wise men. It's very unlikely that men from so far away, bearing valuable gifts, gold, frankincense, and myrrh, would travel across all that waste desert without a much larger entourage, because of thieves and bandits. They would not wish to be vulnerable to being robbed.

And, being important people in their own country, they probably would not just travel alone. There may have been dozens of these wise men. And, if there were not a great number of the wise men themselves, they may have been traveling with an entourage of bodyguards and so forth, for all we know.

There may have been hundreds of camels, or at least scores, coming through the streets of Jerusalem. It would be very much of an attention-getting thing. And, we're told that Herod and all of Jerusalem was stirred up because of their arrival.

Now, it says in verse 3, When Herod the king heard these things, he was troubled, and all Jerusalem with him. Now, why would... we can understand why this might trouble Herod. Because, Herod was the king.

And, he was not aware of any successors to himself that had been born, certainly not in his household. There was no newborn baby in his household that was going to take his throne. And so, when these men say, we've seen a supernatural phenomenon.

There has been born a king of the Jews. We've come to worship him. Herod saw this, of course, as an intruder to his domain.

And yet, he took it quite seriously. Seriously enough to consult the rabbis and see what the scriptures said about when this king would be born. He took it seriously, but he certainly was not willing to submit to this king.

He wanted to destroy him, as we later find. And, it was because of this rivalry that Herod felt between himself and this new king of the Jews, that Herod was greatly troubled by the report. But, why was Jerusalem troubled? It says, Herod was troubled and all Jerusalem with him.

Well, secular history has told us a lot about Herod. Herod was a very jealous and paranoid ruler. He killed at least two of his own sons and one of his wives because he thought they were plotting to take his throne.

Maybe they were, maybe they weren't. But, the point is, he was more willing to kill them than to face the possibility of losing his throne. He was very insecure about his throne and he was a murderous man.

We later read in the Gospel of Matthew here in chapter 2, we won't get to it today, but that he ordered the slaughter of all the infant sons in Bethlehem under two years old. And, while we don't have a secular record of Herod doing this, it's not at all unlike what we know him to have been. He was a murderous, bloodthirsty, jealous man and he had no qualms about killing innocent people if necessary.

In fact, we're told from historians, this is not in the Bible, but from secular history, that when Herod was himself dying, he knew that no one would mourn his death. And so, he ordered his servants to arrest a thousand of the most noble and well-loved citizens of Jerusalem. And, on the occasion of Herod's death, he said that he wanted those citizens to be killed also, so that there'd be mourning in Jerusalem on the occasion of his death.

Well, as a matter of fact, his order was never carried out because even his servants didn't love him enough to obey him. He was a hated man. But, the interesting thing is the mentality of the man that we see from these historical stories about him.

It certainly makes it clear that he was just the kind of man that the Bible describes him as. And, it also explains why his being troubled by the appearance of the wise men and their report that the king of the Jews had been born, caused also all Jerusalem to be troubled. They probably figured, uh-oh, this is going to lead to a bloodbath.



Herod's jealous and they knew very well what he was capable of doing. So, this is why, I think, in verse 3 we read that not only was Herod troubled, but all Jerusalem was troubled with him. We next have him turning to the priests and the biblical scholars to determine where the Messiah might be born because this was predicted in Scripture.

However, at this point, we can't go into those verses. We've run out of time already for today's study. And so, next time, we will come back and we will look at the following verses in Matthew chapter 2 and continue our study in the life of Christ and learn more about the details of Herod's conflict with Jesus.

Of course, Jesus won, but it was quite a bloody confrontation, as we shall see.