

Today we'll be talking about the events that followed on the heels of the birth of Jesus Christ. By way of background, in the last few classes we have covered the story leading up to the birth of Jesus Christ. We talked about the genealogies in Matthew and Luke. We talked about conditions that had to be right in that part of the world—the *Pax Romana*—for the appearance of the Messiah and for the message of the gospel of the Kingdom of God to go out. We talked about the appearance of the angel Gabriel to Zechariah, telling this elderly priest that he and his wife Elizabeth would have a son whom they were to name John, and John the Baptist would be the one who prepared the way for the coming of the Lord.

Then we talked about Gabriel's appearance to the young woman Mariam, or Mary, told her that she would supernaturally conceive and give birth to the Messiah. We talked about her visit to Elizabeth. And then we talked about Joseph, who was engaged to Mary, and how an angel appeared to him in a dream and told her that her child had been divinely conceived and that he should go ahead with plans to marry Mary. We talked about the timing of the conception and pregnancies of Elizabeth and Mary and how Jesus was most likely born on the Feast of Trumpets or the first day of the Feast of Tabernacles and showed how He wasn't born on December 25.

Then we talked about the specifics of Christ's birth and how the traditional view of that has nearly everything wrong. We close by talking about some of the lessons we can learn from the lives of individuals involved as well as how God chose to do things at that time. In our last class we talked about Mary and Joseph bringing Jesus to the temple when he was 40 days old for the offering for the firstborn and went into the background of those laws, and we discussed the prophetic messages of Simeon and Anna, who were allowed to see the Messiah in person that day at the temple.

Today we pick up the story in **Matthew 2:1** with the visit of the wise men and Herod's slaughter of the infant boys in Bethlehem.

Matthew 2:1 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, 2 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."

The Magi or wise men, as Daniel had been in Babylon, were normally the wise men of science and advisors to kings. They were generally knowledgeable in matters of astronomy, calendars and medicine. "From the East" could've been from the area of Babylon or other lands to which the Israelites and Jews had been exiled centuries before, so it is possible these wise men were actually Jewish or descended from the Israelites. We just don't know for sure.

I'd like to comment on this word "worship" in verse 2, because it's used a lot in the Gospels and can give a wrong impression if we don't understand its real meaning. To us, we only direct our worship to God as a divine being. We bow to Him, we pray to Him, we sing praises to Him as part of our worship to Him as a divine being. That's what we think of when we see and use the word "worship."

But that's not what the word translated "worship" that we see in the Gospels means. It means literally "to kiss the hand." It basically means that in that culture, when you came into the presence of a king or ruler or nobility, you would kneel before him (or her) and bow your head as a way of showing respect to someone of superior status. You would bow your head as though

you were going to kiss person's hand. You've probably heard of people kissing the ring of the Pope—this is probably a continuation of that custom.

So when you see the word “worship” in the Gospels, it's not talking about worshipping someone as a divine being, but bowing down to someone of superior rank. A number of times in the Gospels we'll read about people “worshipping” Jesus, but it doesn't mean they were literally worshipping Him as God. It just means they were bowing or kneeling before Him because they recognized Him as someone of superior status. And we see this here with the wise men. They weren't coming to worship Him as God, but had come to pay homage to the one born to be King of the Jews as it says here. So it's helpful to keep the meaning of this word in mind as we go through the Gospels lest we get the wrong impression.

3 When Herod the king heard this, he was troubled, and all Jerusalem with him.

Why did this news disturb Herod? We know from sources such as Josephus about Herod's paranoia about being overthrown. But there's another factor at work here, and that's that the biggest threat to Herod and the eastern flank of the Roman Empire at this time was the Parthian Empire. **Map of Parthian empire**

It was just off to the east of Judea, and when the wise men came to Herod, they were likely coming from somewhere in the Parthian Empire. It covered basically the entire area of what is today Iraq and Iran and in earlier times was the Babylonian Empire and before that the Assyrian Empire. It also is the area into which the 10 tribes of Israel and the two tribes of the kingdom of Judah had been exiled.

The Parthians and the Romans had fought each other in the decades leading up to this time. In 53 B.C. the Parthians had defeated a Roman army under general Crassus when they killed him and 20,000 Roman soldiers. The Parthians even drove the Romans out of the eastern Mediterranean region in 40-39 B.C., and Herod himself, with a lot of help from the Romans, had helped drive out the Parthians in 37 B.C. At this point in the story the Roman Empire, of which Herod was a part, was at something of an uneasy truce with the Parthian Empire.

So put yourself in Herod's shoes. He's getting on up in years now, about 70 years old. He has killed many of his rivals or people whom he considered threats, including his wife Mariamne, three of his sons, his mother-in-law, his brother-in-law, and Mariamne's grandfather. Those are just the notable people he killed—there's no telling how many others he had killed who were never written down.

And now suddenly a large caravan of pretty impressive wise men shows up from the east, from Parthia, an empire he had personally fought against with the Romans several decades earlier. Why do I say this was a caravan? Because that's the way you traveled in those days to protect yourself from bandits. You traveled in a group of from several dozen to several hundred people, including a number of armed men. And especially so if you were carrying, as these wise men were, some pretty valuable gifts, including gold.

So a caravan of men from Parthia shows up in Jerusalem and they start asking around where the newborn King of the Jews is. And they didn't come to Herod first. Herod heard about it from others. And as we'll see in a minute, he had to send secretly for the wise men. Why secretly? Again, because he's paranoid and he wants to control the situation as much as possible.

The news that a new king of the Jews had been born, and that a bunch of men from Parthia were looking for this new king, had to be very threatening to Herod. That's why it says in verse 3 that Herod was “troubled.” So you can bet he was disturbed and upset. And if Herod was disturbed and upset, the whole of Jerusalem was going to be disturbed and upset, because if Herod got into one of his moods of paranoia, literally no one was safe. Again, he had already killed many

people to protect his throne.

There's another historical factor to plug into this as well. As we see a number of times in the Gospels, there was an air of expectation in Judea about a coming Messiah who would appear soon. It's very interesting that even some of the Roman historians of that period wrote about these expectations.

For example, the Roman historian Suetonius wrote: "There had spread *all over the Orient* an old and established belief, that it was fated *at that time* for men coming from Judea to rule the world. This prediction... the Jews took to themselves; accordingly they revolted" (*Lives of the Caesars—Vespasian*, book IV:5).

Tacitus, another Roman historian, adds, "There was a firm persuasion... that *at this very time, the East* was to grow powerful, and *rulers coming from Judea* were to acquire a universal empire" (Tacitus: *Histories*, 5:13).

And the famous Jewish historian Josephus also notes: "About that time one from their country should become *governor of the habitable earth*" (*Wars of the Jews*, 6:5:4).

So with this going on in the background, it's no wonder that Herod is getting very nervous and paranoid. It reminds me of the linen from Shakespeare's *Henry the Fourth*, "Uneasy lies the head that wears a crown"—because if you're wearing the crown in this world, there are always people who want to take that crown from your head—and probably over your dead body.

So back to the story with Herod after he hears of these men who are in Jerusalem asking about a newborn King of the Jews:

4 And when he [Herod] had gathered all the chief priests and scribes of the people together, he inquired of them where the Christ was to be born.

Herod obviously knew of at least some of the traditions and the prophecies relating to the Messiah. Notice here what Herod asks the priests and scribes—he asks them where the Messiah was to be born. So Herod knows that the "King of the Jews" the wise men are asking about is none other than the Messiah. And why does he ask the priests and scribes where the Messiah will be born? What are his intentions?

As we'll see in a few verses, Herod's intentions are *to kill* the Messiah. Think about that. Here is a man so obsessed with his power and position that he literally and cold-bloodedly intends *to kill the Messiah*. It's not like he doesn't know who this is. It's not like it's some other usurper for the throne. Herod is aware of the messianic expectations of the people. He's aware of at least some of the prophecies of the Messiah. But he's going to simply thumb his nose at God and those prophecies and cold-bloodedly *murder* the Messiah. Period. So now we see how his plan unfolds.

5 So they [the chief priests and scribes] said to him [of where the Messiah would be born], "In Bethlehem of Judea, for thus it is written by the prophet:

6 '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.'"

This is quoting from Micah 5:2:

Micah 5:2 But you, Bethlehem Ephrathah, though you are little among the thousands of Judah, yet out of you shall come forth to Me the One to be Ruler in Israel, Whose goings forth are from of old, from everlasting.

7 Then Herod, when he had secretly called the wise men, determined from them what time the star appeared.

This is interesting, because apparently the wise men are the only ones who can see the star. Herod is right there in Jerusalem only five or six miles from Bethlehem, but he and those in Jerusalem haven't noticed it. So apparently they can't see it. And also this star sometimes moves and sometimes stays still, which is not like an actual star or planet. So what is this star? We know that the Bible uses stars as a symbol for angels, so apparently this is an angel in some form guiding the wise men to where they need to go.

8 And he sent them to Bethlehem and said, "Go and search carefully for the young Child, and when you have found Him, bring back word to me, that I may come and worship Him also."

So Herod inquired of them when they had seen the star and told them to let him know where the young Messiah was so he could also come to worship him. Of course, Herod had no intentions of worshipping Him, but rather wanted *to kill Him*, and he wanted to know the exact location in Bethlehem.

Notice that now Herod referred to Jesus not as a *baby*, but as "the young Child." He realized how long their travels would have taken the wise men—possibly from as far away as Parthia or the region around Babylon, where the Israelites and Jews had been exiled centuries before. Herod knew from when the star had appeared that he was not seeking a newborn baby, but a boy by now considerably older, perhaps up to two years old.

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.

Again, here is a star that moves and stands over a specific house in Bethlehem. This clearly isn't describing a literal star or planet or comet or planetary conjunction or some of the other explanations that have been offered for this. The most straightforward explanation is that this is simply an angel visible only to the wise men that is guiding them on their journey. It looks like a star to them, and that's why it's called that.

10 When they saw the star, they rejoiced with exceedingly great joy.

11 And when they had come into the house, they saw the young Child with Mary His mother, and fell down and worshiped Him.

The typical nativity scene completely falls apart at this point. When the wise men come to visit, there is no mention of a manger. Instead Jesus was, as stated, in a house. And Jesus was no longer an infant, Now He is a "young child." The wise men obviously visited Jesus long after the shepherds had come and gone—perhaps a year or more later.

And when they had opened their treasures, they presented gifts to Him: gold, frankincense, and myrrh.

Why these three particular gifts? Their symbolism is striking when we understand it.

Why gold? *Gold* has long been recognized as a gift for royalty—in this case the chosen King of the Jews and ultimately the "King of Kings and Lord of Lords" who will rule over the entire earth. Jesus was given gold because He was born to be a King.

Why frankincense? *Frankincense* was an incense intimately connected with the priesthood and temple sacrifices.

Exodus 30:34 And the LORD said to Moses: "Take sweet spices, stacte and onycha and galbanum, and pure frankincense with these sweet spices; there shall be equal amounts of each.

35 "You shall make of these an incense, a compound according to the art of the perfumer, salted, pure, and holy . . .

37 "But as for the incense which you shall make, you shall not make any for yourselves, according to its composition. It shall be to you holy for the LORD.

The gift of frankincense foreshadowed the fact that Jesus Christ would serve as our High Priest.

Why myrrh? What was myrrh used for? Myrrh was well known as a perfume. But because it was a perfume, *Myrrh* had a highly sobering symbolism. When a person died, this perfuming agent was wrapped with the body to help cover up the stench of death. Jesus' own body would be wrapped in linen with myrrh and aloes.

John 19:39-40 **And Nicodemus, who at first came to Jesus by night, also came, bringing a mixture of myrrh and aloes, about a hundred pounds.**

40 **Then they took the body of Jesus, and bound it in strips of linen with the spices, as the custom of the Jews is to bury.**

How many wise men were there? People assume three because there were three gifts, but Matthew doesn't say. As I noted earlier, there was probably a caravan of people on this trip.

12 **Then, being divinely warned in a dream that they should not return to Herod, they departed for their own country another way.**

Since the wise men couldn't read Herod's mind and his treacherous intentions, God intervened, as the account says, "Then, being *divinely warned in a dream* that they should not return to Herod, they departed for their own country another way." Otherwise Herod might well have killed them in his rage and paranoia.

13 **Now when they had departed, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream, saying, "Arise, take the young Child and His mother, flee to Egypt, and stay there until I bring you word; for Herod will seek the young Child to destroy Him."**

14 **When he arose, he took the young Child and His mother by night and departed for Egypt,**

Notice that they left *by night*—they disappeared and didn't want anyone to know which way they'd gone. So they likely took the road down to the coast and right along the Mediterranean Sea into Egypt.

15 **and was there until the death of Herod, that it might be fulfilled which was spoken by the Lord through the prophet, saying, "Out of Egypt I called My Son."**

This is a quote from **Hosea 11:1—**

When Israel was a child, I loved him, and out of Egypt I called My son.

Here Matthew essentially personifies Jesus as the entire nation of Israel because He is both their King and Savior and Redeemer.

16 **Then Herod, when he saw that he was deceived by the wise men, was exceedingly angry; and he sent forth and put to death all the male children who were in Bethlehem and in all its districts, from two years old and under, according to the time which he had determined from the wise men.**

Herod, covering all of his bases in protecting his throne, ordered the slaughter of those two years old and under. Bethlehem was probably about the size of Nazareth, with a few hundred people, so there were likely around 15 to 20 baby boys killed in this event. Some people say Matthew probably made up this story because it isn't mentioned anywhere else in history. But we have to remember that Herod killed so many people that this just wasn't that big a news event in that day. The reality is that this kind of thing wasn't all that unusual for other kings also, not just Herod. And we do know that this was very much in keeping with Herod's evil character, so there's no reason to doubt what Matthew wrote.

17 **Then was fulfilled what was spoken by Jeremiah the prophet, saying:**

18 **"A voice was heard in Ramah, lamentation, weeping, and great mourning, Rachel weeping for her children, refusing to be comforted, because they are no more."**

(Jeremiah 31:15)

What's this referring to? What does Rachel have to do with the story here? If you remember the story from back in Genesis, Rachel died in childbirth, and where was she buried?

Genesis 35:16 Then they journeyed from Bethel. And when there was but a little distance to go to Ephrath, Rachel labored in childbirth, and she had hard labor.

17 Now it came to pass, when she was in hard labor, that the midwife said to her, "Do not fear; you will have this son also."

18 And so it was, as her soul was departing (for she died), that she called his name Ben-Oni; but his father called him Benjamin.

19 So Rachel died and was buried on the way to Ephrath (that is, Bethlehem).

Rachel was buried beside the road between Jerusalem and Bethlehem just north of Bethlehem. You can go there and see her tomb today. Here's what it looked like back in the late 1800s. It's much different today than it was then, and this is much different from what it looked like 2,000 years ago, but it's there.

And this reference to Rachel is because she was viewed as one of the mothers of the country, like Sarah and Rebecca. And being buried just outside of Bethlehem, in this prophecy she is figuratively weeping for her children who were murdered by this Edomite king Herod. It's a very poetic and touching prophecy.

So Herod had these children—probably 15 to 20, based on the estimated population of Bethlehem at the time—brutally murdered because he wanted to eliminate any contenders for his throne. Sadly, this was very much in character for Herod. He had killed, among others, three of his own sons, his favorite wife, his brother-in-law, his mother-in-law and his wife's grandfather. He had total disregard for anyone other than himself. He was so brutal that no other historian even recorded this—it was just one of many brutal acts by this brutal man who did far worse on a number of occasions. But what Matthew records is very much in keeping with what other historians wrote about Herod.

But the important fact to keep in mind is who was really behind this. And for that we turn to **Revelation 12:3**:

Revelation 12:3 And another sign appeared in heaven: behold, a great, fiery red dragon having seven heads and ten horns, and seven diadems on his heads.

4 His tail drew a third of the stars of heaven and threw them to the earth. And the dragon stood before the woman who was ready to give birth, to devour her Child as soon as it was born.

5 She bore a male Child who was to rule all nations with a rod of iron. And her Child was caught up to God and His throne.

So Satan's plot was foiled. This was actually the third time he had tried and failed.

His first was with Adam and Eve, leading them into sin so they would die—hopefully before they would have offspring from which the Messiah would come.

The second was in Esther's time, when Satan tried to influence Haman into exterminating the Jews. But that backfired.

And this is the third time. He failed at killing Jesus when He was an infant, but Satan did succeed in having Him killed later. But we know how that turned out—Jesus rose from the grave to become the firstfruits and the firstborn of many brethren.

Now back to the story in Matthew 2:19—

19 But when Herod was dead,

According to Josephus, Herod died a horrible death. From the symptoms, he might have been dying from venereal disease. He smelled so bad in his last days that no one could stand to be in the room with him for more than a few minutes at a time. I don't want to gross you out, so I won't go into more details.

As he was dying, someone commented that no one would mourn for him when he was gone. When he heard that, he ordered that several hundred honorable and respected men from the area be rounded up and locked in the stadium in Jericho, with orders that they be killed when he died—and that way there would be mourning and sorrow in the land at Herod's passing. Fortunately those orders weren't carried out, but this does show the twisted mind and character of this man. So he died at his palace in Jericho and was taken to his fortress palace at the Herodium near Bethlehem, where he was buried. His tomb was found only a few years ago, and his elaborate stone coffin had been broken to pieces—obviously by people who didn't care much for Herod after he died.

Continuing the story in verse 19—

when Herod was dead, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared in a dream to Joseph in Egypt,

20 saying, "Arise, take the young Child and His mother, and go to the land of Israel, for those who sought the young Child's life are dead."

21 Then he arose, took the young Child and His mother, and came into the land of Israel.

I might just mention here that it may well have been the wise men's gift of the gold and spices that enabled them to support themselves for the months or maybe a year or more they were in Egypt. So God was taking care of them and protecting and providing for them during this time. It may have also helped Joseph buy a home and property and start his business after they returned from Egypt.

22 But when he heard that Archelaus was reigning over Judea instead of his father Herod, he was afraid to go there. And being warned by God in a dream, he turned aside into the region of Galilee.

After Herod died his kingdom was divided up among his sons, one of whom was Archelaus, mentioned here. Apparently he was much like his father, because as it says here, Joseph was afraid to return to Judea. Apparently he wanted to settle in his family homelands around Bethlehem, but not with a ruler like Archelaus nearby. So instead he took Mary and their young son Jesus and went back north to Galilee, about 100 miles north of Jerusalem.

23 And he came and dwelt in a city called Nazareth, that it might be fulfilled which was spoken by the prophets, "He shall be called a Nazarene."

One of the study questions I asked was, where do we find the prophecy that Jesus would be called a Nazarene? Did anyone find that? I didn't either. It's not found anywhere in the Bible. So what's going on? There are several possibilities here.

First, notice how this is worded—Matthew says this was *spoken* by the prophets, not *written*. So one easy explanation is that this may have been a prophecy that was spoken, but never written down in any of the books of the Bible.

Another possibility is that this was part of a book that was never included as part of the canon of the Bible. The Bible itself refers to and quotes from several ancient books that have been lost to history. For example, Jude 14 quotes a prophecy from Enoch, from a book that's not in the Bible. Joshua and 2 Samuel quote from something called the Book of Jasher, and we have no idea what that is. There are also writings called "the chronicles of the kings of Israel" and "the chronicles of the kings of Judah," which we don't have today. There is also "the Book of Shemaiah the prophet and of Iddo the Seer" mentioned in 2 Chronicles, and several others.

Another possibility is that this reference to Jesus being a Nazarene is meant as a generic reference that he would be despised and rejected, as we see in **Isaiah 53:3—**
He is despised and rejected by men, a Man of sorrows and acquainted with grief. And we hid, as it were, our faces from Him; He was despised, and we did not esteem Him.

We see this reflected even by one of the men Jesus would call as a disciple, Nathaniel, in **John 1:45—Philip found Nathanael and said to him, “We have found Him of whom Moses in the law, and also the prophets, wrote--Jesus of Nazareth, the son of Joseph.”**

46 And Nathanael said to him, “Can anything good come out of Nazareth?”

So I would say it could be any one of these three explanations. I tend to lean toward the second one because there is at least one writer from the third century A.D. who quotes from a book he was shown at that time, and it has this exact quote in it. But that book has been lost to history since it wasn't part of the Bible, and we know nothing more about it. So Matthew must have known about it in the first century and this other writer knew about it in the third century, but the book has since been lost.

Any questions? Class is dismissed.