

INFANCY OF JESUS (2:1–23)

The second section of the prologue moves forward about two years, narrating the visit of the wise men and telling of the continued protection Jesus receives as he remains unharmed from the first antagonist, Herod (2:13–23). Joseph remains the primary actor of the story, as he is guided by God to flee to Egypt, eventually returning when the thread on Jesus' life has passed. This section concludes with Joseph and his family settling in Nazareth.

Visit of Wise Men (2:1–12)

This passage narrates events surrounding the early life of Jesus. The characters in this story are the magi, Herod, all of Jerusalem, and the religious leaders. The setting of Bethlehem as the birthplace of Jesus is first mentioned here, in fulfillment of the Scriptures. Jerusalem is the other setting. The passage thus sets up a contrast between King Jesus in Bethlehem and King Herod in Jerusalem. This theme of Jerusalem rejecting the messianic king will continue in the latter half of the Gospel (15:1; 16:21; 20:18; 23:37; 24:1–44). The magi as faithful gentiles continues a theme first begun with the mention of gentile women in the genealogy.

Wise Men Visit Herod (2:1–6)

This paragraph introduces the characters for the passage: Jesus in Bethlehem, the mysterious wise men from the east, and Herod in Jerusalem. The wise men have followed a star and have come to worship the one born as king of the Jews. Herod and all of Jerusalem are troubled by the words of the wise men, and Herod asks the religious leaders about where the Christ will be born. This leads the religious leaders, who later in the Gospel will be antagonists, to quote from the prophet Micah concerning the birth of the Messiah.

2:1 The circumstances surrounding this story situate the time of the story as after the birth of Jesus and while Herod was ruling as king. The characters of the wise men are introduced with the attention-getter “behold,” indicating the surprising nature of these gentiles coming to worship Jesus. Their search for Jesus begins in Jerusalem.

2:2 This verse contains the only speech from the wise men. The description they give of Jesus immediately contrasts him with Herod. Jesus is the King of the Jews, and he has been born to the role. The wise men also indicate that their knowledge comes from a rising star, and their intention is to worship this new king. 🗨️

2:3–4 Herod now reacts to the message of the wise men. An additional corporate character is introduced at this point, “all of Jerusalem.” This corporate character is aligned with Herod in their troubled response to this news of the birth of the Christ. Corporate characters will appear elsewhere in the Gospel, called “the crowds” (used fifty times) or “all the people” (27:25). Herod then takes action, gathering the chief priests and scribes to inquire where the Christ is to be born. The verb here is the same as was used throughout the genealogy (1:2–16), in 1:20, 🗨️ and in 2:1.

2:5–6 The religious leaders respond to Herod’s question. They indicate to him that Bethlehem is the place of the Messiah’s birth, citing Mic 5:2 as the oracle indicating the birthplace of the Messiah. The formula quotation in this verse comes from the mouths of the religious leaders and follows the same pattern as in 1:22. Micah is not identified but just called “the prophet.” In the quotation the Christ is called a ruler, 🗨️ and he will shepherd the people. The theme of shepherding will continue elsewhere in the Gospel (9:36; 25:32; 26:31).

The Wise Men Worship Jesus (2:7–12)

This paragraph describes Herod’s continuing response to the news about the birth of the Christ. In the previous paragraph he has determined the location of the child, and here he determines the time and begins his plan to destroy the child. The wise men receive the answer to their initial question and are sent by Herod to Bethlehem, with instructions to report back to Herod. The star once again guides the wise men, and they come to Jesus. After offering worship and gifts to the child, they are warned in a dream and return home without reporting to Herod.

2:7 Herod now acts in secret, presumably hidden from the religious leaders, to determine the precise timing of the star’s appearance. This continues the ominous tone around Herod’s actions that began in 2:3 and will culminate in 2:16.

2:8 Herod sends the wise men to Bethlehem, commanding them to inquire carefully and report back to him. Given the ominous tone that has already surrounded Herod in this passage, his declaration that he too will come and worship Jesus is duplicitous.

2:9 The wise men set out in response to Herod's instructions. The attention-getter "behold" introduces the star into the story. The star had been previously mentioned by the wise men (2:2) and in Herod's inquiry (2:7), but has not been active in the narrative until now. The star is personified with actions of leading and standing to identify the child. An alternative explanation to the personified language is that the evangelist conceives the star as an angelic being (Dan 8:10; Rev 1:20; 9:1; 12:4). It is clear that the wise men are receiving divine guidance here and at the end of the paragraph.

2:10 The wise men greatly rejoice in response to the star's actions, presumably because it confirmed that Bethlehem was the correct location, but possibly also because it indicated divine guidance of their search.

2:11 The wise men enter the house and find Jesus and his mother. They worship Jesus and offer extravagant gifts to him, possibly echoing Isa 60:6. The worship of Jesus will occur again through the Gospel (8:2; 14:33; 28:9, 17). A subtle change in word order places the child ahead of Mary his mother to signify his superiority (2:13, 14), and despite the importance of Joseph in the prologue, he is absent from this passage.

2:12 The wise men are warned in a dream not to follow the directives given by Herod in 2:8. Joseph received a message in a dream from an angel (1:20) and will receive one again (2:13). An angel is not specified in this dream, but it is certainly portrayed as divine guidance. The wise men exit the narrative, taking an alternative route to the east that does not take them to Jerusalem.