

iii. *The visit of the Magi (2:1–12)*

This story, peculiar to Matthew, underlines several themes in Matthew's presentation of Jesus the Messiah. It again makes explicit reference to the detailed fulfilment of Scripture, in his place of birth (vv. 5–6), as well as alluding to another Messianic passage (Num. 24:17). It presents Jesus as the true 'king of the Jews' (v. 2) in contrast with the unworthy king Herod. It begins to draw a parallel between Moses and Jesus which will be further developed in the rest of the chapter (see pp. 90–91). And it shows Jesus as the Messiah of all nations, opposed by the leader of the Jewish nation but recognized as the fulfilment of the hopes of the Gentiles; this too is seen in the light of Old Testament expectation (see on v. 11). The whole episode recalls the story in 1 Kings 10:1–13 of the visit, homage and gifts of a foreign dignitary to the son of David, king of the Jews, a theme which will be taken up more explicitly in 12:42.¹²

Objections to the historicity of this story have been made mainly on two grounds. 1. It is regarded (like the rest of 1:18–2:23) as an artificial construction around chosen Old Testament texts. But while several Old Testament passages are apparently in mind, only one is explicitly cited, and that in what appears to be an insertion into the narrative (vv. 5b–6 could be removed without breaking the flow of the narrative), suggesting that it was fitted into an already existing story rather than the story was derived from it. 2. The account is said to bear all the marks of pious legend. But in fact, with the exception of the moving star in v. 9, there is nothing historically improbable in the account (see the detailed comments below), and the fact of a comparable visit by eastern Magi to Nero in AD 66 (Dio Cassius 63.7; Suetonius, *Nero* 13) vouches for the probability of this story rather than otherwise. It may perhaps be added that a church which soon found itself in serious conflict with astrology is not likely to have invented a story which appears to favour it.

1. Jesus was born before the death of Herod the Great, which is probably to be dated in AD 4 BC; the exact date of Jesus' birth is unknown.¹³ Various indications in this chapter suggest that the visit of the Magi took place some time after the birth of Jesus: he is now

¹² See further, J. E. Bruns, *CBQ* 23 (1961), pp. 51–54.

¹³ See, however, E. L. Martin, *The Birth of Christ Recalculated!* (1978) for an attempt to date Herod's death in 1 BC, and Jesus' birth in the late summer of 2 BC.

a ‘child’ (vv. 9, 11), not a ‘babe’ (Luke 2:12, 16, though ‘child’ is used in Luke 2:27 of Jesus forty days after his birth); v. 7 suggests that the appearance of the star, and therefore the birth, was some time ago; and Herod’s murder of all children under two (v. 16) would hardly be necessary if the birth was known to be very recent. The wise men are, more correctly, ‘Magi’, originally the name of a Persian priestly caste, but later used widely for magicians and astrologers (cf. Acts 13:6), a numerous class in most countries in Western Asia at the time (see further, Brown, pp. 167–168). Astrology had been developed into a sophisticated science especially in Babylonia, and there is evidence for its influence also in Palestine (see AB, p. 14). From what part of *the East* these Magi came can only be guessed; their gifts (v. 11) are most likely of Arabian origin, but would be available to and used by the Magi of Babylonia, and this is perhaps their most likely place of origin. Their reference to ‘the king of the Jews’, and their need to enquire about the birthplace of the Messiah, imply that they were Gentiles, though with a limited knowledge of Judaism (which was well established in Babylonia). For astrological interest in ‘the Westland’ (Palestine and Phoenicia) see ICC, p. 11.

2. There are several ancient accounts, pagan and Jewish, of stars heralding the birth of great men (see Brown, pp. 170–171). But probably Matthew had particularly in mind Balaam’s prophecy of the rising of a star out of Jacob (Num. 24:17), which was understood to refer to the coming deliverer.¹⁴ The Magi saw the star ‘at its rising’ (this is almost certainly the correct translation of *en tē anatolē*, which RSV renders *in the East* here and in v. 9 [see BAGD, p. 62a]; the noun *anatolē*, ‘rising’, provides a verbal allusion to Num. 24:17).

Attempts to identify the ‘star’ as a regular astronomical phenomenon have generally focused on three possibilities: 1. A planetary conjunction (of Saturn and Jupiter) in \approx 7 BC.¹⁵ 2. A comet, usually Halley’s, which unfortunately appeared too early, in \approx 12/11 BC.

¹⁴ Brown (pp. 193–196) argues that much of Matthew’s story is intended to echo the story of Balaam, not just his prophecy of the star. For Messianic interpretations of Num. 24:17 see Gundry, UOT, pp. 128–129; and cf. the ‘Messianic’ guerrilla leader Simon Ben-Kosiba, who adopted the title Bar-Kokhba, ‘son of a star’. Testament of Levi 18:3 predicts the appearance of the Messiah’s star in heaven.

¹⁵ So E. Stauffer, *Jesus and his Story* (1960), pp. 36–38; R. A. Rosenberg, *Biblica* 53 (1972), pp.

3. A nova (a star which, owing to an explosion, appears temporarily with extraordinary brightness).¹⁶ But no known astronomical phenomena account for the movement of the star as described in v. 9,¹⁷ and this indicates that what Matthew describes is guidance by a miraculous occurrence ✎, even if the initial interest of the Magi was aroused by a nova (or a planetary conjunction—or both!); see further, [Finegan](#), pp. 238–248.

The verb *worship* (*proskyneō*) need mean no more than to pay homage to a human dignitary ✎, but Matthew frequently uses it in contexts where Jesus' more-than-human status is recognized (e.g. [14:33](#); [28:9, 17](#)), and the same implication may be present here. For the title *king of the Jews* see above, p. 48, and on [27:11](#) below.

3–4. Herod's concern is understandable: as an Edomite (cf. [Mal. 1:4](#)) and a Roman appointee, he was vulnerable to the claims of a king of the true Davidic dynasty ✎. His later years were plagued by the fear of rivals.¹⁸ The phrase *chief priests and scribes* suggests an *ad hoc* gathering, not a formal meeting of the Sanhedrin, with which Herod was on bad terms, and which would also include lay elders. The concern of *all Jerusalem*, while it could well be based on unhappy experience of what Herod might be driven to by fear of a rival, probably also points forward to Jerusalem's later rejection of the true 'king of the Jews' (e.g. [23:37](#), and see below, on [28:7](#)).

5–6. The answer to Herod's question was well known; cf. [John 7:41–42](#). Matthew introduces here his second formula-quotation (see pp. 42–43; the absence of the phrase 'that it might be fulfilled' is due to the insertion of the quotation into the Jewish leaders' answer rather than into a narrative of the birth in Bethlehem). The text cited differs considerably from the Hebrew and other known versions of [Micah 5:2](#). The ancient name of Bethlehem, *Ephrathah*, is replaced by a currently recognizable term, *in the land of Judah* (differentiating it from Bethlehem in Galilee, [Josh. 19:15](#), but more significantly

¹⁶ Thus in the *Quarterly Journal of the Royal Astronomical Society* 18 (1977), pp. 443–449 three astronomers identified it as a nova which Chinese astronomers observed for 70 days in 5/4 BC (the same phenomenon had already been noticed by F. Münter, *Der Stern der Weisen* [1827], p. 29, and by others since: see [Finegan](#), pp. 246–248).

¹⁷ Though E. L. Martin's theory mentioned above includes an attempt to account for this in terms of the movement and 'standing still' of Jupiter.

¹⁸ See my discussion in *NovT* 21 (1979), pp. 114–116.

emphasizing Jesus' origin from the royal tribe). Micah's statement of Bethlehem's insignificance is reversed by the addition of *by no means*, and the 'thousands' (or clans) of Judah become its *rulers*. The following description of the one who *shall come* is a paraphrase of the rest of [Micah 5:2](#), with an allusion to the shepherd theme in v. 4 (*poimainō*, *govern* in RSV, means 'to shepherd'), but its actual words are drawn from [2 Samuel 5:2](#), the description of David's role as shepherd of Israel. Not all these changes involve much difference in Hebrew ('are little to be' could become *are by no means least* by the substitution of *l'hyyt* for *lhywt*, and *rulers* is a legitimate translation of the same Hebrew consonants as for 'thousands' or 'clans', *lpy*), but taken together they show clearly that Matthew is quoting freely, in such a way as to point out the application of the text.

His addition of *for* after *rulers of Judah* makes it clear that he regards Jesus' birth in Bethlehem as conferring on it an importance in contrast with its insignificance in Micah's day, hence the change to *by no means least*. (This reversal of fortunes was of course the point of Micah's reference to Bethlehem's insignificance; Matthew has merely made it explicit.) And the introduction of words from [2 Samuel 5:2](#) makes clearer the status of Jesus as son of David, born in the city of David, to rule like David over the people of God.

7–8. It is sometimes alleged that the historical Herod was too cunning and ruthless a man to depend on the co-operation of these foreigners, and that he would have sent his troops with them. But he had no reason to doubt that they would return with the information he needed, and the sight of soldiers with them would have jeopardized their chances of finding the child. His hypocritical motive for desiring the information would not perhaps have deceived his subjects, but might be expected to work with foreigners.

9–10. *Went before* (*proēgen*) could mean that it 'led them on' without itself moving, but the words *came to rest* mean literally 'came and stood', and can mean only that the star itself moved to guide the Magi. It is not said to indicate the precise house, but the general location *where the child was*. How it did so can only be left to the imagination, and the search for astronomical parallels to a divine communication is unlikely to be profitable (see on v. 2). To the Magi it brought not critical embarrassment but *great joy!*

11. For *the child*, see on v. 1, and for *worshipped*, v. 2. The homage of these learned Gentiles is intended to indicate the fulfilment of such passages as [Psalm 72:10ff.](#); [Isaiah](#)

[60:1ff.](#) (these passages probably account for the later Christian tradition that these Magi were 'kings'), and two of the gifts are specifically mentioned in [Psalm 72:15](#) (gold); [Isaiah 60:6](#) (gold and frankincense ✎). They are gifts fit for a king, as is also myrrh ([Ps. 45:8](#); [Song 3:6](#)), and they remind the reader of the homage of the Queen of Sheba to the son of David, with her gifts of spices and gold ([1 Kgs 10:2](#) ✎). The use of *myrrh* in the crucifixion ([Mark 15:23](#)) and burial ([John 19:39](#)) of Jesus has led to the tradition that it symbolizes his suffering, but in the Old Testament it is rather a symbol of joy and festivity ✎ (see references above, and [Prov. 7:17](#); [Song 5:5](#)).

12. For the *dream*, see on [1:20](#). Revelation by dreams was a regular feature in the culture to which these Magi belonged. [God's use of their astrological and cultural background to communicate with them does not imply his endorsement of astrology, but indicates his care in meeting individuals where they are.](#) ✎