

The Prophecy of Bethlehem
Matthew 2:1-12
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- I. The Person of the Christ (1:1-4:11)
 - A. The Incarnation of the Christ (1:1-2:23)
 - 1. The Genealogy of the Christ (1:1-17)
 - 2. The Birth of Christ (1:18-25)
 - 3. The Prophecy of Bethlehem (2:1-12)

Matthew 1:1-17 details to whom Jesus was born, Matthew 1:18-25 details how Jesus would be born and Matthew 2:1-12 details where Jesus would be born.

The plan of God (2:1-2)

The account of the events following the birth of Jesus begins with information about what only God could have brought about. No human could have devised these events to fulfill the prophecy of the Old Testament.

- 1. The birth in Bethlehem

As we will see in Matthew 2:5-6, the prophecy of the Messiah born in Bethlehem was revealed in Micah 5:2. The statement in 2:1 of Jesus' birth in Bethlehem could not be accomplished unilaterally by any plan of man. We may have a desire to have a child in a certain place but such events are beyond our control.

Furthermore, Luke's account in Luke 2:1-7 describes the reason why Mary was in Bethlehem, to register for the census according to the decree of Augustus. Therefore, Joseph and Mary did not seek to have their first child born in Bethlehem. It was the result of the timing that began with an order of the Roman Emperor Augustus. God ordained Joseph's ancestry from David and thus he traveled to Bethlehem. Even the timing of when this travel would occur was determined by the speed of the long and laborious process of taking the census as such tasks took years to finish.

God worked through Gentiles to fulfill the prophecy of Christ's birth in Bethlehem. This is one of many fulfilled prophecies that Matthew will highlight in his gospel.

2. The birth in the days of Herod

The timing of Jesus' birth was another piece of God's sovereign plan according to Galatians 4:4-5: "But when the fullness of the time came, God sent forth His Son, born of a woman, born under the Law, so that He might redeem those who were under the Law, that we might receive the adoption as sons."

God chose the right time for the birth of Christ in order to fulfill the the prophecy of Daniel 9:24-27 that describes 483 years from the decree to rebuild Jerusalem (March 4, 444 BC) to the time of the atoning for iniquity (the triumphal entry into Jerusalem on March 30, 33AD, leading to the crucifixion). See *Chronological Aspects of the Life of Christ* by Harold Hoehner for much greater detail. The timing of Christ's birth fulfilled Daniel 9.

3. The role of the wise men

The wise men, or magi depending upon the translation, were astrological experts. Along the lines of astronomers today, they studied the movement of planets and stars that could be observed without telescopic equipment. These men were not identified as either kings or as three, a tradition that grew over the early centuries (likely due to the three gifts (2:11)).

The wise men traveled with the knowledge of several things: (1) they knew to come to Jerusalem, (2) they knew there would be a birth of the King of the Jews, (3) they knew the birth had occurred, not would occur in the future, (4) they knew to follow a star to find him, (5) they knew he was worthy to be worshiped. How did they know of these things?

There is some debate regarding who the wise men were and where they were from. Most likely, they were from Babylon, which was a center for astrological study for a long time. Daniel was taken into captivity to Babylon and rose in stature to be over the wise men of Babylon (Daniel 2:48). His prophecies may have been known by these men, explaining how they would arrive with such knowledge.

Rick Balogh has done much work on this star being a close alignment of Jupiter and Venus that from Jerusalem would have led these wise men to the town of Bethlehem. They may have been expecting this star and the birth of the King of the Jews from Daniel. This alignment of Jupiter and Venus would have begun their journey to Jerusalem on August 13, 3BC.

The response of the chief priests (2:3-6)

Herod heard of the arrival of these wise men and investigated because they came looking for the birth of the King of the Jews. Not only could this be a threat to his rule, but he was also well aware of the desire for the Jews to have their own rule and not be under the Romans who had supported Herod's reign. While his father was an Edomite, Herod was raised Jewish, was familiar with the Jewish religion and was able to understand the prophecy of Micah 5:2 when told.

Not only was Herod troubled by the news of such a birth but the city of Jerusalem was also. The citizens would be concerned that the news from the wise men might make Herod act in cruel ways against them (cf. Matthew 2:16).

The significance of the inclusion of Herod's counsel with all the chief priests was that this would end up as Jesus' opposition in Matthew's gospel. Here they appear as unbiased informants of biblical prophecy.

We learn about the nature of biblical prophecy from those who will be enemies of Christ. They speak from Micah 5:2, which many of them as Sadducees had not held as authoritative. The scribal experts in the Law would have supported Micah as prophetic. Also, they support a literal fulfillment of Old Testament prophecies with a literal person being born in an actual town called Bethlehem. Many modern Jewish experts will argue the Messiah will not be a literal individual and the prophecies will be fulfilled by the nation of Israel as a collective.

The quotation by Matthew of Micah 5:2 is interesting.

Matthew 2:6	Micah 5:2
'And you, Bethlehem, land of Judah, Are by no means least among the leaders of Judah; For out of you shall come forth a Ruler Who will shepherd My people Israel.'"	But as for you, Bethlehem Ephrathah, Too little to be among the clans of Judah, From you One will go forth for Me to be ruler in Israel. His goings forth are from long ago, From the days of eternity."

The first change is Matthew converts Ephrathah to "land of Judah." Throughout the Old Testament, Ephrathah was a reference to the people who were descendants of Judah. While there was a Bethlehem in Galilee, Matthew identifies Bethlehem as in the land of Judah to emphasize that Jesus was a descendant of Judah as foretold in the Old Testament.

The most significant difference in Matthew's reference to Micah 5:2 is the phrase "who will shepherd My people Israel." This phrase occurs after the word "ruler" and appears to expand upon this role. The phrase is not found in Micah but is taken from 2 Samuel 5:2: "Then all the tribes of Israel came to David at Hebron and said, "Behold, we are your bone and your flesh. Previously, when Saul was king over us, you were the one who led Israel out and in. And the Lord said to you, 'You will shepherd My people Israel, and you will be a ruler over Israel.' "

Why include 2 Samuel 5:2 into Micah 5:2? First, the chief priests would have seen the stark contrast between the prophesied Messiah whose character as a shepherd would rule over Israel with care and Herod's cruel oppressive rule over Israel. These religious leaders were making a point with their inclusion of 2 Samuel 5:2. Secondly, this connects this birth to the rule of David over Israel, a point that Matthew makes throughout his Gospel by referring to Jesus as the "son of David." The Messiah's rule over Israel is a benevolent rule.

The awareness of the Micah 5:2 did not lead the chief priests to the worship of Christ. The ability of these religious leaders to know of this prophecy and not pursue why Herod is asking them and seek out who has been born in Bethlehem is striking. Quite the contrary, it was the Gentiles who were seeking out the Messiah and who were the first ones who came to worship Jesus. This irony will continue throughout this Gospel.

The response of Herod (2:7-8)

Herod's motives become increasingly clear as he meets with the wise men in secret. Herod sought information from the chief priests and now he seeks information from the wise men without the religious leaders being aware of it. Herod is working his own plan to preserve his rule and views the priests as a threat.

Herod's interest in the timing of when the star appeared would help him to determine the age of the child they were seeking. His plan to find Jesus brought him to use the wise men to find the child for him. Herod cannot easily take this task upon himself without giving the Jews an increased desire for an alternative ruler to himself. Unlike the ruler the Jews were seeking, Herod was not "born the king of the Jews" (Matthew 2:2) and his position had been gained largely through his brutality.

Herod deceitfully sends the wise men to locate the child under the auspices of his intent to worship Him. He succeeds in deceiving them as they are willing to do his bidding. Herod's response to the information about the birth of the child was not worship or apathy but rather was fear. His interest was to protect his own interests.

The response of the wise men (2:9-12)

The wise men left Herod for Bethlehem and saw a star that would guide them to the child. Most assume that this is that same star as described in Matthew 2:2, however, it is impossible for this to be a singular occurrence of the same star for several reasons:

- The travel time for the wise men to see the star in their homeland and follow it to Jerusalem would lead us to conclude that this is a different star.
- The wise men describe the first star in the past tense in Matthew 2:2.
- Herod did not see this star himself (2:7).

Rick Balogh's study of the Christmas Star notes that there was a second alignment of Jupiter and Venus on June 17, 2BC. Just as the first alignment of these two planets would have created a bright light in August of 3BC which led the wise men to Jerusalem, this second alignment of the planets would have led them from Herod's place to Bethlehem.

The time between these occurrences would have given them the time to travel and allow for the birth of Christ. Also, it would fit with the time between the conception of Jesus in the womb but before he was forty days old when He would be brought to Jerusalem to purification according to the Law (Luke 2:22, cf. Leviticus 12:2-5). Jesus would depart from Jerusalem for Joseph and Mary's home in Nazareth after this purification was complete (Luke 2:39).

The wise men are described as "rejoicing exceedingly with great joy" when they saw this second bright light just like the first one in the heavens (2:10). They would have been exceedingly joyful because the same alignment of Jupiter and Venus occurred as they saw when they were in the east. This bright light led them until they arrived in Bethlehem when it would set in the horizon when they arrived at the house with the child. Also, the shepherds of Luke 2:15-20 were not silent about what they had heard which may have helped the wise men find the exact house.

As the wise men were led to the house, they worshiped Jesus. This worship is typically used for worship of a divine being and further establishes the Person of Christ as they fell down before Him. They see Him as more than only a king for they traveled so far for this moment. Note that they worship Jesus, not Mary or through Mary.

As in many cultures, it was customary gifts to be presented when visiting superiors (cf. Genesis 43:11). The wise men acknowledge Jesus as worthy of worship through their choice of gifts. That they opened their treasures meant that they opened the containers that housed the gifts.

Gold had always been a precious metal and may have financed their trip to Egypt (2:14). Frankincense was a fragrance derived from the resin of a tree bark and had some medicinal uses also. Myrrh was likewise a perfume and spice from the sap of an Arabian tree. It was used for burial also. These gifts were of significant value, showing the wealth and perspective of these wise men.

Many commentators see certain significance in these gifts. For example, gold is viewed as representative of the royalty of Christ, frankincense representative of His humanity or divinity and myrrh representative of His death. More likely is that this alludes to the words from the Old Testament speaking of wealth being brought to the Messiah of Israel from Gentile nations:

- Isaiah 60:5: “The wealth of the nations will come to you”
- Isaiah 60:11: “So that men may bring to you the wealth of the nations with their kings led in procession”
- Isaiah 61:6: “You will eat the wealth of nations”

In context, these verses from Isaiah will find their ultimate fulfillment in the second coming of Christ.

The Lord supernaturally told the wise men to not return to Herod so he would not be able to locate Jesus. This is the first of many interventions in the life of Christ on earth to delay His death until the proper time.

Conclusion

There are many contrasts in this passage. The contrasting attitudes about Jesus are seen between the adoration of the Gentile wise men, the apathy of the chief priests and the apprehension of Herod. Those who had less revelation were more interested in Jesus than those with the most revelation. The distance traveled by the wise men contrasts with the location of Bethlehem, only a few miles from the capital of Judea. Those who were most interested also had a much greater distance to cover. The act of giving by the wise men contrasts with the attitude of protecting power by Herod, which would be followed by the religious leaders later in the Gospel.