

# Matthew 2:1-2

<https://thebiblesays.com/commentary/matt/matt-2/matthew-21-2/>

*Matthew's narrative of Jesus, the Messiah, continues with the arrival in Jerusalem of magi from the east. Having seen "His" star in the east, they have travelled from far to worship the young King of the Jews.*

There is no apparent parallel account of this event in the Gospels

In chapter 1, Matthew stressed Jesus's Jewish heritage, royal lineage, Messianic qualifications, and his Divine nature by focusing on Jesus's kingly ancestors and miraculous conception. He begins chapter 2 by sharing another key detail of Christ's birth, namely that *Jesus was born in Bethlehem*. The city of *Bethlehem* was a small town situated a few miles to the east of Jerusalem, in *Judea*. *Judea* was the southern kingdom that split away from the northern kingdom of Israel. *Bethlehem* means, "House of Bread." This has symbolic meaning. In John 6, Jesus tells the multitudes who are seeking him, that "I AM the Bread of Life." At the Last Supper, after Jesus distributes the bread among His disciples, He declares that it symbolizes His body broken for them.

Matthew merely states the fact that *Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea*, while Luke 2 shares the political reasons for Jesus's birth there. Joseph was of the house of David and David was from *Bethlehem*. Luke tells his readers that an Imperial Census was issued by Caesar Augustus, requiring everyone within the Roman Empire to register from their family's place of origin and be taxed. Matthew tells us *Jesus was born in the days of Herod the king*. Herod was a king appointed by Rome, and was a vassal of Rome.

Israel became a Roman province two generations earlier in 63 BC. (Our modern western calendar begins at the birth of Jesus.) At that time, the Roman general Pompey led Rome's war against Mithridates VI and Tigranes the Great, the respective kings of Pontus (Northeastern Asia Minor) and Armenia (modern day Syria spanning to the Caspian Sea.) While Pompey subdued these Roman kingdoms, the kingdom of Judea experienced its own political conflict. At that time, Judea was independent, having escaped the yoke of servitude to the Greek Seleucid kingdom about a hundred years prior. A dispute took place in Judea among two brothers, Hyrcanus and Aristobulus, as to who should rule the Judean Kingdom.

Hyrcanus, the older brother, had the support of the Pharisees, who were one political party descended from the Macabees. The Macabees had defended Judea from Greek rulers intent on stamping out the Jewish religion. The younger brother, Aristobulus had the support of the Sadducees, the other primary party descending from the Macabees. Both the Pharisees and Sadducees were seen as leaders and defenders of the faith. Each party appealed to the Roman general Pompey for support, effectively authorizing him to decide who should rule in Judea. Pompey chose Rome. Thus Israel lost its self-rule due to the political rivalry between the Pharisees and Sadducees. This rivalry plays a key role in Matthew's narrative.

The weaker of the two brothers, Hyrcanus, was allowed the privilege of being a puppet ruler of Roman Judea. But Hyrcanus's reign was short-lived. His shrewd advisor, Antipater the Idumean, proved himself to be a more profitable leader for Rome. Antipater was from Idumea (Edom, a kingdom just east of Judah, with the capital city of Petra, now part of Jordan). He converted to Judaism. As a member of Hyrcanus's court, Antipater demonstrated that he was far more effective at raising taxes for Rome than his king. Rome recognized these talents and installed him in place of the incompetent Hyrcanus. Antipater's son Herod was the king in charge when Jesus was born in *Bethlehem*. Herod was even more ruthless and cunning than his father. He appeased Rome while not tolerating any challenge to his power. He even had his own sons murdered when he thought they posed a threat to his rule.

Herod is often referred to as "Herod the Great (Builder)" because he authorized the construction of luxurious palaces in the desert fortress of Masada, as well as the Herodium, a massive fortress in sight of *Bethlehem*, where Herod was buried. Herod founded new cities for Rome, and underwrote a massive expansion of the Temple in Jerusalem. He funded these enterprises through heavy taxation. Herod was also an extremely savvy politician. During Rome's civil war between Octavian (later Caesar Augustus) and Mark Antony, Herod sided with the Egypt-based Antony. But after Octavian defeated Antony, Herod deftly landed on his feet and kept his position by the good grace of his former enemy.

Sometime after Jesus was born (likely between one and two years) *magi from the east arrived in Jerusalem* to celebrate his birth, and to *worship Him*. These magi were wealthy astrologers from the east—most likely Babylon, Persia, or Arabia. Matthew does not tell us much about them. He does not even tell us that there were "three" of them. We often assume that there were three because they gave Jesus three gifts. In addition to their eastern origins, we know that the magi studied and interpreted the stars and that they knew about the Jews.

The *magi from the east* had come to *Jerusalem* because they *saw His star in the east*. We do not know much about this star; whether it was natural or supernatural. What we do know is that God placed His story in the stars and these magi saw it, understood it, and acted on their understanding.

Psalms 19:1-2 says,

"The heavens are telling of the glory of God;  
And their expanse is declaring the work of His hands.  
Day to day pours forth speech,  
And night to night reveals knowledge."

God spoke to these righteous magi in a language they understood. From studying this star the magi were able to decipher at least three things: King, Jews, and birth. The magi specifically stated that this was *His star*. However much they were able to see, it gave them confidence to travel a great distance to celebrate this King's birth and *worship Him*. Through his account of the magi, Matthew again reiterates one of his central claims that Jesus is King of the Jews, as foretold not only by prophecy written in the Bible, but also prophecy written in the stars.

Upon their arrival, and to everyone's astonishment the magi asked, "*Where is He who has been born King of the Jews? For we saw His star in the east and have come to worship Him.*" The fact that the *magi* stated a desire to *worship* this new king indicates that they understood this king was no ordinary king, but of divine nature. They did not appear to express any interest in worshipping the sitting king, King Herod.

### **Biblical Text**

**2:1-2 Now after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea in the days of Herod the king, magi from the east arrived in Jerusalem, saying, "Where is He who has been born King of the Jews? For we saw His star in the east and have come to worship Him."**