Lesson One

The Birth of Jesus the Messiah

Focal Text
Matthew 1:18—2:15, 19-23

Background
Matthew 1—2

Main Idea
The circumstances of Jesus’ birth show that he is the Messiah and thus worthy to be followed.

Question to Explore
How do the circumstances of Jesus’ birth show him worth following as his disciple?

Quick Read
Wise people still make Jesus their King.

Commentary
My favorite Christmas ornament depicts Santa Claus bowing at the crib of the Christ. As we enter the Christmas season, you have the significant privilege of leading your class members to join him.

We will all be deluged in December with opportunities to become distracted from the reason for the season. Centuries before there were Christmas trees and cards, tinsel and toys and traditions, there was a baby in Bethlehem. Remembering who he was and why he came is vital to experiencing the transforming joy he brought.
The central function of Matthew’s nativity stories was to persuade his readers that Jesus is the “Messiah.” Who was this person? Why did his coming matter so much? How does he relate to our problems and challenges today?

Waiting for Messiah

All their religious observances and legalistic zeal could not change the fact that the Jews of Matthew’s day lived in an occupied country. They had exchanged Babylonian rulers for Persians, then Greeks for Romans. Roman soldiers standing at every significant street corner were constant reminders that the Jews were subjects of the Empire. Jesus’ admonishment to carry a soldier’s pack not just one mile but two (Matthew 5:41) was born from the real-life frustration of living under the heel of Rome.

How was it possible that the nation chosen by God among all the peoples on earth could have come to such subjugation? How could a nation with no military and no independent resources throw off their yoke of oppression? The answer lay in a single word: Messiah.

God’s promise had been clear:

The L ORD had said to Abram, “Leave your country, your people and your father’s household and go to the land I will show you. I will make you into a great nation and I will bless you; I will make your name great, and you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and whoever curses you I will curse; and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you” (Genesis 12:1-3).

Israel was to have a global purpose and achieve global and eternal significance.

This global dominance of the Jewish people was soon tied to one who would rule Israel and the world: “The scepter will not depart from Judah, nor the ruler’s staff from between his feet, until he comes to whom it belongs and the obedience of the nations is his” (Gen. 49:10). This ruler would “crush the foreheads of Moab, the skulls of all the sons of Sheth,” and all the other enemies of Israel (Numbers 24:17).

He would be a prophet like Moses (Deuteronomy 18:15). As a ruler even greater than David, “he will be clothed with majesty and will sit and rule on his throne” (Zechariah 6:13). In that glorious day, “ten men from all languages and nations will take firm hold of one Jew by the hem of his robe and say, ‘Let us go with you, because we have heard that God is with you’“ (Zech. 8:23).

Some saw this great redeemer as the Lord himself, others as the nation Israel. But many saw this figure as an individual, the anointed (Messiah in the Hebrew, Mesiha in the Aramaic, Christos or Christ in the Greek).
Some believed that the Messiah would function primarily as a prophet. Malachi had quoted God: “See, I will send my messenger, who will prepare the way before me. Then suddenly the Lord you are seeking will come to his temple; the messenger of the covenant, whom you desire, will come” (Malachi 3:1). The Old Testament ends with this prediction: “See, I will send you the prophet Elijah before that great and dreadful day of the LORD comes. He will turn the hearts of the fathers to their children, and the hearts of the children to their fathers; or else I will come and strike the land with a curse” (Mal. 4:5).

In this light, it was natural for some to wonder whether John the Baptist was the Messiah: “The people were waiting expectantly and were all wondering in their hearts if John might possibly be the Christ” (Luke 3:15). Their hopes were running so high that John had to state clearly, “I am not the Christ” (John 1:20).

Likewise, the Samaritans were expecting the Messiah to come as a prophet. The woman at the well expressed the conventional wisdom of their culture: “I know that Messiah is coming. When he comes, he will explain everything to us” (John 4:25). Jesus’ rabbinic ministry caused Andrew and John to associate him with the Messiah (John 1:41). But most of the nation was not seeking a prophet to be their Messiah and liberator.

Some in the period following Malachi thought the Messiah would be a priest. A book called Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs, while not on a par with Scripture, gained a wide following. It predicted that the Messiah would come as a priest from the tribe of Levi. However, Genesis 49:10 convinced most that the Messiah would be from the tribe of Judah and not a priest.

Others expected a miracle-working Messiah. Jesus’ supernatural powers gained the attention of vast numbers, so that “many in the crowd put their faith in him. They said, ‘When the Christ comes, will he do more miraculous signs than this man?’” (John 7:31).

But most expected their Messiah to be a military conqueror, a warrior who would destroy Rome and lead their nation into global dominance. God had promised David, “Your house and your kingdom will endure forever before me; your throne will be established forever” (2 Samuel 7:16). The Scriptures later promised the restoration of David’s line as the ruler of the nation:

- “Once for all, I have sworn by my holiness—and I will not lie to David—that his line will continue forever and his throne endure before me like the sun; it will be established forever like the moon, the faithful witness in the sky” (Psalm 89:35-37).
- “Of the increase of his government and peace there will be no end. He will reign on David’s throne and over his kingdom, establishing and upholding it with
justice and righteousness from that time on and forever. The zeal of the Lord Almighty will accomplish this” (Isaiah 9:7).

- This ruler would “come up from the stump of Jesse” (Isa. 11:1), a reference to the Davidic line.
- Jeremiah heard the Lord say, “The days are coming when I will raise up to David a righteous Branch, a King who will reign wisely and do what is just and right in the land. In his days Judah will be saved and Israel will live in safety. This is the name by which he will be called: The LORD Our Righteousness” (Jeremiah 23:5-6).

The inter-testamental literature, books written after Malachi but not accorded the status of Scripture by the Jewish people, also claimed the promise that David’s line would lead to a future ruler of the nation:

- “David, because he was merciful, inherited the throne of the kingdom forever” (1 Maccabees 2:57, RSV).
- There would be a “Messiah whom the Most High has kept until the end of days, who will arise from the posterity of David” (4 Ezra 12:32, RSV).

This prediction from 1 Enoch gives us a sense of the heightened expectations placed on the coming military Messiah:

And thus the Lord commanded the kings and the mighty and the exalted, and those who dwell on the earth, and said: Open your eyes and lift up your horns if ye are able to recognize the Elect One. And the Lord of Spirits seated him on the throne of His glory, and the spirit of righteousness was poured out upon him, and the word of his mouth slays all the sinners, and all the unrighteous are destroyed from before his face. And there shall stand up in that day all the kings and the mighty, and the exalted and those who hold the earth, and they shall see and recognize How he sits on the throne of his glory, and righteousness is judged before him, and no lying word is spoken before him. Then shall pain come upon them as on a woman in travail, [and she has pain in bringing forth] When her child enters the mouth of the womb, and she has pain in bringing forth. And one portion of them shall look on the other, and they shall be terrified, and they shall be downcast of countenance, and pain shall seize them, when they see that Son of Man Sitting on the throne of his glory. And the kings and the mighty and all who possess the earth shall bless and glorify and extol him who rules over all, who was hidden. For from the beginning the Son of Man was hidden, and the Most High preserved him in the presence of His might, and revealed him to the elect. And the congregation of the elect and holy shall be sown, and all the elect shall stand before him on that day. And all the kings and the mighty and the exalted and those who rule the earth shall fall down before him on their faces, and worship and set their hope upon that Son of Man, and petition him and supplicate for
mercy at his hands. Nevertheless that Lord of Spirits will so press them that they shall hastily go forth from His presence, and their faces shall be filled with shame, and the darkness grow deeper on their faces. And He will deliver them to the angels for punishment, to execute vengeance on them because they have oppressed His children and His elect (1 Enoch 62.3-11).

As David had been their military hero, the one who defeated the Philistines and established their nation in peace and security, so the Messiah coming from his line would be a military conqueror.

Of course, these expectations were unfulfilled by a would-be Messiah who died on a Roman cross (“Anyone who is hung on a tree is under God’s curse,” Deut. 21:23; see Galatians 3:13). But the Messiah as military conqueror was not God’s plan for his Son’s first advent on earth. Jesus was “the Lamb that was slain from the creation of the world” (Revelation 13:8). The Father had always planned for his Son to die on the cross to pay for our sins.

The Suffering Servant passages in Isaiah made clear this purpose for the Messiah (see Isa. 42:1-9; 49:1-9; 50:4-11; 52:13—53:12). While the Jewish people have usually applied these statements to the nation of Israel and her sufferings through the centuries, the New Testament consistently applies these predictions to Jesus (see Matt. 8:17; 12:18-21; 26:67; John 12:41).

When Jesus returns at his Second Coming, he most assuredly will come as the long-awaited military Messiah, “KING OF KINGS AND LORD OF LORD” (Rev. 19:16). On that day “every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father” (Philippians 2:10-11).

It was the job of Jesus’ first followers to explain his first coming to the world, so people would be prepared for his second coming. This is why Matthew wrote his Gospel, and why he began with infancy narratives that demonstrate Jesus’ right to the title of Messiah. That responsibility falls to you and me today.

**Jesus was sent to the Jews (1:18-25)**

Our text is so significant that we could easily spend a month in its study. Rather than explore each important word in its grammatical and historical context, as I typically attempt to do, this week I will offer cultural exposition in hopes of clarifying the background and meaning of the narrative.

Matthew’s Gospel begins with his famous genealogy (Matt. 1:1-17), proving that Jesus was descended from both Abraham and King David. While Jesus’ enemies sought other
means to discredit his ministry, they never suggested that he was unqualified by ancestry to be Messiah. In this way Matthew accomplished his first goal in demonstrating the Messianic credentials of his Lord.

Now Matthew moved to his second goal: showing how the circumstances of Jesus’ birth further reinforced his Messianic claims. Our study begins: “This is how the birth of Jesus Christ came about: His mother Mary was pledged to be married to Joseph, but before they came together, she was found to be with child through the Holy Spirit. Because Joseph her husband was a righteous man and did not want to expose her to public disgrace, he had in mind to divorce her quietly” (1:18-19).

**Joseph’s dilemma**
Engagement in Mary’s culture was a year-long process, during which she was pledged to Joseph as though she was his wife. At the end of the year the two would become formally married and consummate their union. Marriage could be arranged at birth, but the girl was typically consulted before her engagement became official. She was likely a young adolescent at this time, perhaps thirteen or fourteen years of age. Her fiancé was probably much older, perhaps thirty or so.\(^3\)

Joseph was a resident of Galilee, and a “righteous” man (1:19). Taken together, these facts mean that he was probably descended from Jewish missionaries who had moved from Judea a century earlier to evangelize this Gentile region. Joseph was a carpenter (thus Jesus was called the “carpenter’s son,” 13:55). He worked with wood to mend roofs, repair gates, and make ox-yokes and ploughs, kitchen tools and beds, furniture and even houses and ships. He worked with metal as well. Joseph taught his son this trade, so that Jesus was called a “carpenter” himself (Mark 6:3).

Since Joseph and Mary were pledged to be married, any sexual activity with another person would have been considered adultery. When Mary was “found to be with child,” this must have been the greatest blow of Joseph’s life. For many years he had kept himself for her, waiting for her to grow to the age of marriage. Now to learn that she has been with another man was devastating in the extreme. He did not yet know that her child was conceived “through the Holy Spirit,” and would never have guessed such a miracle. Who would?

As Joseph was a “righteous” man, one who kept the Law in every dimension of his life, Joseph could not marry an adulteress without becoming complicit in her sin. He had two options. One: he could “expose her to public disgrace,” calling the town elders together and accusing his fiancée of adultery. If she was convicted, she could be stoned to death (Leviticus 20:10). In this way his public reputation would be preserved.

Two: he could “divorce her quietly.” He could bring two witnesses, go to her family’s home and declare himself divorced from her, pay the fine to the priest, and be done. He
would give her a certificate of divorce (see Matt. 5:31), and their engagement would be broken. In kindness, Joseph chose the second option.

As a result, Mary would have had no home or family. Since she was pregnant, she could no longer claim her father’s protection. She would have been a single mother raising a child in a very hostile world. Joseph’s role was vital as the husband of Mary and adoptive father of Jesus.

**Joseph’s obedience**

The narrative continues: “But after he had considered this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, ‘Joseph son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary home as your wife, because what is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins’” (1:20-21).

Dreams were a common way for angels to speak to people in the Bible. An angel appeared in this way to Jacob (Gen. 31:11), Daniel (Daniel 4:13), and Zechariah (Zech. 4:1). He would speak to Joseph in this way again later (Matt. 2:13, 19). He called him “son of David,” the only time a person other than Jesus is given this title in the New Testament.

Now Matthew made his point: “All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had said through the prophet: ‘The virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel’—which means, ‘God with us’” (1:22-23). Since Matthew wrote to show the Jews that Jesus was their Messiah, he quoted many Old Testament prophecies, more than any other New Testament writer, and always made clear their fulfillment in Jesus. Here he quoted Isaiah 7:14 (using the Septuagint, the Greek translation of the Hebrew Old Testament), a prediction made seven centuries before it was fulfilled by Jesus’ virgin birth.

You may be aware of the controversy surrounding Matthew’s use of Isaiah 7:14. In the Hebrew original, the prophet had predicted that a young woman would be with child and bear a son. The Hebrew word is *almah*, translated “young maiden” elsewhere (see Gen. 24:43; Proverbs 30:19).

Isaiah could have used the more common word *betulah*, which always means virgin. But in the context of Isaiah 7, it is clear that the prophecy refers to a naturally-born baby who would be only a young boy when the kings then threatening Israel would be defeated. If Isaiah had meant that a physical virgin birth would occur seven centuries before Christ, two such virgin births would have occurred in history.

The Hebrew word leaves the sexual status of the young woman in question. But the Septuagint (the Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible) rendered the word by *parthenos,*
the typical word for a virgin. This is the word used in Matthew 1:23, so that Matthew did not misuse the Isaiah passage in any way. The Hebrew almah does not preclude the possibility of virginity, pointing only to the young age of the woman in question. Thus translations such as the New Revised Standard Version that translate “young woman” in Isaiah 7:14 are not denying the virgin birth, but giving the literal meaning of the Hebrew word.

All that said, the translation of Isaiah 7:14 is not crucial to the doctrine of the virgin birth. Mary made clear her sexual status (Luke 1:34), and Joseph knew that the child was not his (Matt. 1:18-19). He had no sexual relations with her until the child was born (1:25).

As a result, “When Joseph woke up, he did what the angel of the Lord had commanded him and took Mary home as his wife. But he had no union with her until she gave birth to a son. And he gave him the name Jesus” (1:24-25).

Joseph obeyed the angel at considerable risk to himself. When he married a pregnant woman, society would assume that the child was his and that the couple had been promiscuous. In agreeing to provide parental protection for this child, he was obligating himself to a dangerous and difficult life. How dangerous, he would soon discover.

Joseph was obedient in three ways. He “took Mary home as his wife,” completing their engagement and giving her the protection of his home and name. He “had no union with her until she gave birth to a son,” so that there would be no question that the child was not his. And he “gave him the name Jesus” rather than a family name, to reveal to the world the purpose of the Son of God.

“Jesus” is the Greek form of the Hebrew Joshua or Yeshua, from the root meaning to save. He is our Savior, the one who saves us from the penalty of our sins. Our failures have separated us from our holy God, and the payment for sin is death (Romans 6:23). Jesus’ death in our place paid this debt so we could be given eternal life.

Joseph is the silent man of Christmas. He never speaks a word in all the Gospels. But his life and faith were so surrendered to God that Jesus could refer to his Father by the title he first used for his father: “Abba,” Daddy (Mark 14:36).

**He was sent to the Gentiles (2:1-12)**

Now Matthew introduces Gentiles into his narrative. In so doing, he showed his readers another of Jesus’ Messianic credentials. The prophets had predicted that when Messiah came, Gentiles would worship the God of Israel:
In the last days
the mountain of the LORD’s temple will be established
as chief among the mountains;
it will be raised above the hills,
and all nations will stream to it.

Many peoples will come and say

“Come, let us go up to the mountain of the LORD,
to the house of the God of Jacob.
He will teach us his ways,
so that we may walk in his paths.”
The law will go out from Zion,
the word of the LORD from Jerusalem.
He will judge between the nations
and will settle disputes for many peoples.
They will beat their swords into plowshares
and their spears into pruning hooks.
Nation will not take up sword against nation,
nor will they train for war anymore (Isaiah 2:2-4; see 60:1-6).

Historians date the death of King Herod at 4 BC. Prior to that time, “after Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea, during the time of King Herod, Magi from the east came to Jerusalem and asked, ‘Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews? We saw his star in the east and have come to worship him’” (Matt. 2:1-2).

Who were the Magi?
The “Magi” or Wise Men are one of the most intriguing and mysterious elements in the narratives of Jesus’ childhood. Nearly everything in our traditions about them is wrong. We usually put three Wise Men in our manger scenes, since they brought three kinds of gifts. But they usually traveled in groups of twelve or more for safety.

We have given them strange names as well. By the sixth century they were named Bithisarea, Melchior, and Gathaspa. The Syrians called them Larvandad, Hormisdas, and Gushnasaph. Tradition has amended their names and given them descriptions: Balthasar, sixty years of age, an African with a newly-grown, stubbly beard; Melchior, forty years old, an Asian with a long, flowing beard; and Caspar, age twenty, a white, clean-shaven man. But all of this is legend, none of it fact.

Matthew records that the Magi came “from the east” (Matt. 2:1). They lived in Persia (Iran today). Second-century Christian art in the Roman catacombs depicts them in Persian garments. In fact, the reason invading Persians spared the Church of the Nativity
in AD 614 was that they saw a golden mosaic over its doorway that depicted the Magi in Persian headdress and clothing.

Ironically, theirs was that part of the world to which the Jewish people had been exiled for seventy years during their Babylonian Captivity (a fact important to the story, as we will see shortly). As Gentiles, they could never have attended a Jewish worship service. In addition, they practiced magic and astrology, two skills forbidden by the Old Testament: “The nations you will dispossess listen to those who practice sorcery or divination. But as for you, the LORD your God has not permitted you to do so” (Deut. 18:14). Their belief in two gods is also forbidden by the First Commandment: “You shall have no other gods before me” (Exod. 20:3).

In no sense would the Magi have been welcome in the Jewish temple or synagogue. They could never have attended a public worship of Yahweh God. But by God’s grace, they were the first foreigners invited to worship the Christ. By his continued grace, they were not the last.

The Magi were the most learned people of their society, scholars in philosophy, medicine, and science. Herodotus (born 460 BC), the ancient Greek historian, records that after Cyrus the Great and the Persians defeated the Babylonians (539 BC), their religion held sway in Persia. However, Cyrus’s son Cambyses severely repressed their movement. They revolted and set up Gaumata, their chief, as King of Persia under the name of Smerdis. He was beheaded along with his brother Patizeithes, and Darius became king (521 BC). The Persians dedicated a national holiday to this event, called Magophonia (Histories 3.63, 73, 79).

Their religious influence continued throughout the Achaemenian dynasty of Cyrus in Persia, and flourished under Parthian dominion (beginning 247 BC) into the time of Christ. Strabo (born 63 or 64 BC) says that the Magian priests formed one of the two councils of the Parthian empire.

They were wealthy, of such independent means that they could leave their homes and families for a journey lasting more than two years, and could afford the finest gifts for the Child when they found him.

Above all, they were religious men. Unfortunately, their name gives us the wrong impression of their religious activity. The Greek word magoi often means magician in the Bible (see Acts 8:9; 13:6, 8; Dan. 1:20; 2:2, 10, 27; 4:4; 5:7, 11, 15). But they were far more than this. They were leaders among the people of faith in ancient Persia, much like the Levites of ancient Israel. In fact, no sacrifice could be made unless one of them was present.
Their supreme god was Ahura Mazda (sometimes called Auramazda), or *All-Wise Lord*. He was believed to be a pure spirit, known for wisdom, truth, goodness, majesty, and power. They saw him as the creator of all good creatures, but not of evil or evil beings. He was their supreme lawgiver, rewarding good and punishing evil. To them, he dwells in eternal light. In fact, they believed light to be a manifestation of his presence (explaining why they would identify a star with a divine king).

Opposing Ahura Mazda was Anro Mainyus, the evil spirit. He was viewed as the creator of all evil, both moral and physical, to be destroyed at the end of time. Good spirits, corresponding to our angels, were thought to hover around Ahura Mazda. Of these, Mithra was the most important. A sun-deity in origin, he was thought to be the Spirit of Light and Truth, and was their favorite *spirit*. He was linked so closely with Ahura Mazda as to sometimes seem almost his equal. Atars, the Genius of Fire, was also crucial to them. And so we can see how they might believe that a star, made of fire and giving light, could be trusted to lead them safely to the One they sought to worship.

For Persians, worship was an essential duty in venerating their creator. No animal sacrifices were made, but gifts were brought as offerings. If they had been Jews, they would have brought animals to sacrifice to God; in their religion, gifts were their appropriate offerings.

The religion of the Magi mandated the highest ethical standards. Goodness was required in thought and action, as a means of serving Ahura Mazda and refusing Anro Mainyus. All heresy, untruthfulness, and immorality were specifically rejected. They believed they would be judged on their merits after death. The just would pass into heaven, the abode of Ahura and his blessed angels. The wicked would fall into hell. At the end of time, a last prophet or savior would come. He would bring the resurrection of the dead, the general judgment of the entire world, the burning of the existing universe, and the eternal destruction of the evil spirits.

*Why did they come to Jesus?*

The Magi combined these expectations of a coming Savior with the Messianic traditions they learned from the exiled Jews, and considered the King of the Jews to be the very Savior they were expecting. And so we understand their gifts of gold (for a king), frankincense (for a priest), and myrrh (for a sacrificial Savior).

The ten northern tribes of Israel had been deported by Assyria in 722 B.C.; the southern kingdom of Judah was exiled to Babylon for seventy years beginning around 600 B.C. In their oppression, the Hebrews especially elevated their expectations of a Messiah who would liberate them. So their teachings regarding a coming Messiah would be known to the Persians, and would especially interest the Magi.
What did they learn from Jewish Scripture and tradition about a coming Savior? The Wise Men could know that he would be born of a woman’s seed (Gen. 3:15), of a young virgin (Isa. 7:14), and be descended from Abraham (Gen. 22:18), Isaac (Gen. 21:12), and Jacob (Num. 24:17). He would be part of the tribe of Judah (Gen. 49:10), thus surviving the Assyrian assimilation of the northern tribes. He would come from the line of Jesse (Isa. 11:1) and house of King David (Jer. 23:5). And so they would naturally call him “king of the Jews” (Matt. 2:2) and bring him gifts (Psalm 72:10).

They understood that a “king of the Jews” was coming; that he was for all peoples, not just the Hebrew nation; and that he deserved their worship and willing service. And so they were waiting for their Savior to consummate history. They believed that light and fire would show the way to him. They understood their sacrificial journey and lavish gifts to be means of obedience to their god, Ahura Mazda, and means of securing their own places in heaven.

And so they set out on the journey that would change their history, and ours.

For centuries, Magi in the East had watched the stars as windows into the future, believing they would announce the birth of those who were destined for greatness. During the time of Jesus, it was widely believed that a universal ruler would come from Judea.

The Roman historian Suetonius (AD 69-122) recorded, “There had spread all over the Orient an old and established belief, that it was fated at that time for men coming from Judaea to rule the world” (Vespasian 4). Tacitus (AD 56-120), the greatest of ancient Roman historians, made nearly the same reference: “there was a firm persuasion, that in the ancient records of their priests was contained a prediction of how at this very time the East was to grow powerful, and rulers, coming from Judaea, were to acquire universal empire” (The History 5.13).

This advent of a special star would announce to the Magi that the long-awaited King of the Jews had come. The star they saw on that magical night rose en anatole, “in the east.” This was the Magi’s technical term for when an object rises at sunset and is visible all night. The phrase does not mean that they were led to the east, but that they saw the star in that direction.

In fact, they did not follow the star to Jerusalem at all, despite our legends. The Magi saw “his star” and then journeyed to the capital of his country to find him. Only then did the star make its second appearance: “the star they had seen in the east went ahead of them until it stopped over the place where the child was” (Matt. 2:9). To this point, the star of Christmas could have been a natural phenomenon. But nothing in the skies had ever pointed travelers to a specific house. And that’s precisely what the star did for the Wise Men on that miraculous night.
Who was Herod?
Naturally, the Magi went to the present ruler of the country to find the newborn king. However, “When King Herod heard this he was disturbed, and all Jerusalem with him” (Matt. 2:3). Why?

Herod captured Jerusalem in 37 B.C. and made himself into Herod the Great. In many ways he was. He rebuilt the Jewish temple, making it far grander even than Solomon’s first temple had been. He constructed fortifications that still stand today. He built Caesarea by the Sea, naming it for Caesar (Octavian, or Augustus). He constructed a magnificent palace for himself at Jerusalem.

But Herod’s paranoid fear of any potential threat to his power led him to execute his wife and most of his family. When the Magi informed him that a new “King of the Jews” had been born, his paranoia grew to insanity. His subsequent slaughter of the Bethlehem infants (Matthew 2) was completely in keeping with his character. He died on April 1, 4 BC., leaving a political structure in shambles.

When the Magi came to him, Herod found himself in a difficult position. If he allowed this news to spread, the new king could gain popularity. If he ignored the situation, it might escalate into a threat to his power. He chose a third option: “When he had called together all the people’s chief priests and teachers of the law, he asked them where the Christ was to be born” (Matt. 2:4). They replied, “In Bethlehem in Judea, for this is what the prophet has written:

But you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah,  
are by no means least among the rulers of Judah;  
for out of you will come a ruler  
who will be the shepherd of my people Israel (2:5, quoting Micah 5:2).

Now what was Herod to do? If he went to Bethlehem himself, he would only call attention to the new king, and might be seen as honoring his authority. His solution was ingenious and manipulative: “Then Herod called the Magi secretly and found out from them the exact time the star had appeared” (Matt. 2:7). In this way he would know the age of his rival to the throne.

Then “he sent them to Bethlehem and said, ‘Go and make a careful search for the child. As soon as you find him, report to me, so that I too may go and worship him’” (2:8). He sent the Magi secretly to Bethlehem so news of the new king would not spread. He commissioned them to bring back news to him so he could end this threat to his throne.
How did the Magi worship the King?
Of course, the Magi were oblivious to such palace intrigue:

After they had heard the king, they went on their way, and the star they had seen in the east went ahead of them until it stopped over the place where the child was. When they saw the star, they were overjoyed. On coming to the house, they saw the child with his mother Mary, and they bowed down and worshiped him. Then they opened their treasures and presented him with gifts of gold and of incense and of myrrh. And having been warned in a dream not to go back to Herod, they returned to their country by another route (Matt. 2: 9-12).

It had been two years since the Magi first saw the Star of Bethlehem. We know this because Herod, after realizing that he had been outwitted by them, he “gave orders to kill all the boys in Bethlehem and its vicinity who were two years old and under, in accordance with the time he had learned from the Magi” (2:16). He had earlier called the Magi and discovered “the exact time the star had appeared” (2:7). Perhaps he was being thorough in ordering that all the boys from two years of age be killed. More likely, this was the length of time that had elapsed since the Magi had seen the star.

The Magi would not have spent the entire two years in travel. On witnessing the star, they likely spent considerable time studying its appearance and significance. They gathered expensive gifts that were not readily available to them. They traveled with a large group for safety in consideration of the valuable treasures they brought. And so they journeyed more than 900 miles to find the King of the Jews.

Travel during the winter months was harder than in summer, and tribal warfare could lengthen a journey significantly. The Magi spent life-changing time with the Holy Family on their arrival in Bethlehem. And some time elapsed before Herod realized the Wise Men would not return to Jerusalem. In all, they invested years of their lives and considerable resources in their pilgrimage. And when they arrived, their gifts completed their story and made it ours as well.

Picture it: Magi from the East, riding on camels, in flowing robes, with all the wealth and grandeur of their culture. They wound their way through narrow stone and mud streets to a “house” (Matt. 2:11; not the “manger” of Luke 2:16, further indicating that they arrived some time after Jesus’ birth) in a tiny village, bowing before a two-year-old peasant boy. And they made him their Lord.

The Wise Men gave him gold, making him their king. This was the gift of royalty, the costliest present they could offer. Magi, the subjects of the Persian king, gave their highest loyalty to a small boy. Although they were men of wealth and prestige, they surrendered their lives and goods to a carpenter’s son.
The Magi gave the Christ child their frankincense as well. This was a fragrant gum burned as incense by priests. It was made of small white beads which were ground into powder and gave off an odor like balsam wood when burned. Priests used it to cover the scents of their sacrifices. It was a gift for a priest, for no other person would have use for it. Even though they were the priests of their culture, they made this child their priest.

In the ancient world, a priest was thought of as a bridge-builder, one who brought humankind to God and God to humankind. The Wise Men had served this function in their veneration of Ahura Mazda and the worship they led for others. Now they found a greater priest, one who could build a bridge between them and God. In giving him their frankincense, they gave him their faith.

And they presented the child with myrrh. This was an orange-colored resin from small thorn trees. It was expensive, used for perfumes (see Esther 2:12; Psalm 45:8), anointing oil, embalming, and medicine. It made its first appearance in the Bible with the Ishmaelites who purchased Joseph from his brothers: “Their camels were loaded with spices, balm and myrrh, and they were on their way to take them down to Egypt (Gen. 37:25). Jacob directed his sons to bring myrrh among their gifts to the Egyptian authorities in seeking their favor (Gen. 43:11).

Ironically, myrrh was offered to the Child again some thirty years later on his cross: “Then they offered him wine mixed with myrrh, but he did not take it” (Mark 15:23). He refused its narcotic effect so that he might have all his senses to the end. Its most significant purpose was for the embalming of a body. After Jesus’ death, “Nicodemus brought a mixture of myrrh and aloes, about seventy-five pounds” (John 19:39). He unknowingly fulfilled the Magi’s prediction that the Christ would be a sacrificial Savior.

The Magi would soon prove their obedience to their new king by obeying the dream that sent them home by another way (Matt. 2:12). The Wise Men risked their lives to transport gold from Persia. Now they would risk their lives again to serve the King they honored. Had Herod found them, he would have executed them for treason. They gave their total allegiance to this boy they crowned their King and Lord.

And so the Wise Men brought to Jesus the three gifts that most signified his true nature and mission: to be our king, our priest before God, and our Savior. In his death he saved us from our sins as “the Lamb that was slain from the creation of the world” (Rev. 13:8). He is now our “high priest who sat down at the right hand of the throne of the Majesty in heaven” (Hebrews 8:1). And when he returns to our planet, he will wear on his robe and on his thigh his name, “KING OF KINGS AND LORD OF LORDS” (Rev. 19:16).

No greater single Christology can be found in all of Scripture than the gifts of the Magi to the Christ child. Now we are invited to join their worship. We may not have myrrh to give him, but we can still make him our Savior. We can ask him to forgive our sins and
failures, and turn our lives over to him. We can invite him to save our souls and make us God’s children. And he will answer our prayer and save us for all time.

We may not have frankincense to give him, but we can still make him our Priest. We can pray to him and through him to our Father. We can spend this day in his presence, communing with his Spirit, listening to his voice. We can practice the presence of God with Jesus as our Priest and intercessor.

We may not have gold to offer him, but we can still crown him our King. We can read and obey his word. We can live by his will. We can surrender our lives, ambitions, and future to his purpose today.

**He is greater than Herod (2:13-23)**

Even though the Magi did not disclose Jesus’ location to Herod, Jesus was still in grave danger. Given the close proximity of Bethlehem and Jerusalem, it would not take long for Herod to realize that the Magi were not going to return. He could quickly send soldiers to find Jesus.

So, that night, “when they had gone, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream. ‘Get up,’ he said, ‘take the child and his mother and escape to Egypt. Stay there until I tell you, for Herod is going to search for the child to kill him’” (Matt. 2:13).

This was a great sacrifice for Joseph—leaving his homeland, his extended family, and the business he had established in Bethlehem. Egypt was a logical location for their exodus, however. A large Jewish population had fled there during the time of the Babylonian captivity, five centuries earlier. While the country was under Roman rule, it was outside Herod’s jurisdiction. The Romans treated their provinces as independent, with little extradition from one to another.

So Joseph “got up, took the child and his mother during the night and left for Egypt, where he stayed until the death of Herod. And so was fulfilled what the Lord had said through the prophet: ‘Out of Egypt I called my son’” (2:14-15).

In this way Jesus reversed the Old Testament Exodus, returning to the land that had sheltered and then enslaved his earliest ancestors. This fulfilled the prophecy of Hosea 11:1, “Out of Egypt I called my son.” As God called Israel out of Egypt fifteen centuries earlier, so he would call his Son from there back to his people.

Now comes the tragic conclusion to Herod’s part of the nativity narrative (Matt. 2:16-18):

> When Herod realized that he had been outwitted by the Magi, he was furious, and he gave orders to kill all the boys in Bethlehem and its vicinity who were two
years old and under, in accordance with the time he had learned from the Magi. Then what was said through the prophet Jeremiah was fulfilled:

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

Herod was “furious”—the Greek means that he was furious beyond words. He did not know the exact location of the threat to his throne, but he knew the village. He took no chances. As the Magi had seen the star some two years earlier, Herod executed all the baby boys from that age and under. Historians estimate that as many as twenty or thirty families would have been devastated by this horrific tragedy.

Matthew found precedent for this tragedy in the time of Jeremiah (see Jer. 31:15). Ramah was a town through which the Jews passed on their exile to Babylon. Rachel was the grandmother of Ephraim and Manasseh, and by extension the children of Israel so devastated by the Babylonians.

Our study ends with Jesus’ return to Israel:

After Herod died, an angel of the Lord appeared in a dream to Joseph in Egypt and said, “Get up, take the child and his mother and go to the land of Israel, for those who were trying to take the child’s life are dead.” So he got up, took the child and his mother and went to the land of Israel. But when he heard that Archelaus was reigning in Judea in place of his father Herod, he was afraid to go there. Having been warned in a dream, he withdrew to the district of Galilee, and he went and lived in a town called Nazareth. So was fulfilled what was said through the prophets: “He will be called a Nazarene” (Matt. 2:19-23).

Herod the Great, the most powerful ruler at that point in Jewish history, was no match for the infant Son of God. After Herod’s death, his son Archelaus took control of the southern region of Judea. Archelaus was so cruel a despot that he was deposed after ten years, the region given to procurators (governors) by Rome.

So Joseph returned to Galilee, his original homeland, and settled in Nazareth. Joseph’s decision fulfilled “what was said through the prophets”—note the plural. There is no single Old Testament statement, “He will be called a Nazarene,” and so Matthew did not mean that Jesus’ hometown was a linguistic fulfillment of Scripture. Rather, to be a “Nazarene” was a despised thing in the first century (see John 1:45-46), and David (Psalm 22:6) and Isaiah (Isa. 53:3) had predicted that the Messiah would be despised and rejected.
(Some linguists offer a second explanation. Isaiah 11:1 predicted that from Jesse’s roots “a Branch will bear fruit.” “Branch” is the Hebrew "neser", which may be the source of “Nazarene.”)

**Conclusion**

This week’s commentary has discussed far more material than could be included in a single Bible study, in hopes that these resources will help you as you focus on those elements of the text that are especially relevant to your class. As you relate Matthew’s narrative to their lives, you might encourage them to emulate Joseph’s obedience. Without his submission, the story would have turned out very differently.

And you might suggest that they emulate the Magi’s sacrifice as well. These Gentile scholar/priests gave up much to make a Jewish infant their King.

What will it cost you to follow their examples this week?

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3 The Catholic tradition teaches the “perpetual virginity of Mary,” believing that she and Joseph never consummated their marriage. Some who hold this view believe that Joseph was an elderly man at the time of his engagement to Mary, and that he functioned more as her protector than her husband. This approach is one explanation for the fact that he disappears from the Gospels after Jesus reached twelve years of age.
