



# International Bible Lessons Commentary

Uniform Sunday School Lessons Series

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## Matthew 2:1-12 New Revised Standard Version December 24, 2017

The [International Bible Lesson](#) (*Uniform Sunday School Lessons Series*) for **Sunday, December 24, 2017**, is from **Matthew 2:1-12**. **Questions for Discussion and Thinking Further** follow the verse-by-verse *International Bible Lesson Commentary*. **Study Hints for Discussion and Thinking Further** will help with class preparation and in conducting class discussion: these hints are available on the [International Bible Lessons Commentary](#) website along with the *International Bible Lesson* that you may want to read to your class as part of your Bible study. You can discuss each week's commentary and lesson at the [International Bible Lesson Forum](#).

**(Matthew 2:1) In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem,**

The name Jesus means Savior; the name the angel told Joseph to name Mary's Son, because "He will save His people from their sins." He was conceived by the Holy Spirit; therefore, He was to be called Immanuel (which means "God with us": see Matthew 1:18-25). Jesus was born in Bethlehem, which was called the City of David, because King David was born there. Micah the prophet foretold that the Messiah would be born in Bethlehem: "But you, Bethlehem Ephrathah, though you are small among the clans of Judah, out of you will come for me one who will be ruler over Israel, whose origins are from of old, from ancient times" (Micah 5:2). Judea was what was left of the southern kingdom of Judah (which included the tribe of Benjamin) after some of the Jews returned from exile in Babylon to Jerusalem and rebuilt the city and temple. Jerusalem had been controlled by the Jebusites until King David conquered the city and moved his capital from Hebron to Jerusalem. At the time of Jesus' birth, Judea was under Roman occupation, but the Romans had appointed King Herod (Herod the Great) to maintain their rule and had given him the honorific title of king. He was not a Jew but an Idumean (an Edomite). He was a cruel king, who even killed members of his family, but he expanded the second temple in Jerusalem. Magi were wise men, philosophers, astrologers, or counselors. Opinions differ: these wise men could have been Gentiles from Persia or Arabia or they could have been Jews from Persia, descendants of Daniel and other Jewish wise men and counselors who did not return to Jerusalem after the

exile. Because they seem to have known some of the Old Testament and seem to have known to expect the coming of the Messiah “the king of the Jews,” I lean toward the fact they were Jewish wise men. If not, they were the first Gentiles to bow down before Jesus, who came to save from their sins both Jews and Gentiles who believed in Him.

**(Matthew 2:2) asking, “Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews? For we observed his star at its rising, and have come to pay him homage.”**

The wise men used the title for the Messiah (The Anointed One), “King of the Jews;” the same title Pilate used when he placed the placard on the cross when he ordered the execution of Jesus. The wise men may have known the prophecy about the star and the coming of the Messiah, because the prophecy came from the Book of Numbers, a book of the law which, as Jews, they probably had in Persia: “I see him, but not now; I behold him, but not near. A star will come out of Jacob; a scepter will rise out of Israel. He will crush the foreheads of Moab, the skulls of all the people of Sheth” (Numbers 24:17). The prophecy foretold the Messiah as a conquering king, so it is no wonder King Herod was disturbed as well as Jerusalem. In my opinion, the star was a miraculous star that would appear and disappear, similar to the pillar of fire that gave light and led the Hebrews in the wilderness (see Exodus 13:21-22). The star disappeared for a time until after the wise men saw King Herod; otherwise, they might have told him to just follow the star, which would have endangered Jesus needlessly. The wise men did not come to worship King Herod and did not worship him; they came to worship the Messiah.

**(Matthew 2:3) When Herod heard this, he was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him;**

When Jesus came the first time as the Messiah, He did not fulfill the Jewish expectation of a conquering hero who would restore their control over the Kingdom of David. Such a conquering hero would threaten the dynasty of King Herod, so he was disturbed. When Jesus came the first time, He conquered the devil and all kinds of afflictions and diseases. Conquering sin, death, and the devil were far more important with lasting consequences for everyone in the world than merely returning the Jews to rule over Judea. When Jesus comes again, He will conquer all His enemies and make all things right in heaven and on earth once again.

**(Matthew 2:4) and calling together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Messiah was to be born.**

As an Idumean, King Herod did not know all the prophecies of the Hebrew scriptures, so he turned to the Jewish leaders for information on where the Messiah was to be born.

**(Matthew 2:5) They told him, “In Bethlehem of Judea; for so it has been written by the prophet:**

The Jewish leaders gave accurate information to King Herod and the wise men because they went directly to the Scriptures. The Magi probably did not have access to the prophet Micah or the later prophets. The chief priests and scribes knew enough from the Scriptures to know that they should want to worship the Messiah too if He had just been born as the Magi revealed, but they did not seek to do so. If the Messiah had been born, He would grow up and threaten their power, their wealth, and their financial and political beneficial collaboration with the Romans and King Herod. These leaders were just as disturbed as King Herod, because they did not truly worship the true God they professed to serve.

**(Matthew 2:6) ‘And you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for from you shall come a ruler who is to shepherd my people Israel.’”**

Matthew reported the prophet’s words as the Jewish leaders gave them to the Magi; not exactly as we find them in Micah. Matthew was accurate regarding the historical situation and what was said by the Jewish leaders to Herod. God expected the kings and leaders of Israel to “shepherd my people;” something King Herod did not do, but something King David did do (but not perfectly), and something the Messiah would do when He came. When the tribes of Israel went to David in Hebron, they said to him: “In the past, while Saul was king over us, you were the one who led Israel on their military campaigns. And the LORD said to you, ‘You will shepherd my people Israel, and you will become their ruler’” (2 Samuel 5:2; see also 1 Chronicles 11:2; 1 Chronicles 17:6; 1 Chronicles 21:17). Jesus called himself the good shepherd: “I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep” (John 10:11). The Book of Hebrews called Jesus the great shepherd: “Now may the God of peace, who through the blood of the eternal covenant brought back from the dead our Lord Jesus, that great Shepherd of the sheep” (Hebrews 13:20).

**(Matthew 2:7) Then Herod secretly called for the wise men and learned from them the exact time when the star had appeared.**

Perhaps King Herod did not want the Jewish leaders to warn the wise men about his evil nature when he secretly inquired of them about the timing of the birth of the Messiah. The wise men would have travelled between 500 and 800 miles to see the Messiah, so based on their travelling time it would be important to Herod to know the time of Jesus' birth because he wanted to find Him and kill Him. He was determined to defeat the plans and purposes of God through the Messiah by deceiving the Magi.

**(Matthew 2:8) Then he sent them to Bethlehem, saying, “Go and search diligently for the child; and when you have found him, bring me word so that I may also go and pay him homage.”**

King Herod cloaked his deception in religious or pious words. He wanted the wise men to tell him where the child lived so he could kill him, not worship him. They only knew He was someplace in Bethlehem.

**(Matthew 2:9) When they had heard the king, they set out; and there, ahead of them, went the star that they had seen at its rising, until it stopped over the place where the child was.**

After Herod tried to mislead them, the star again appeared before them to lead them. The star led them to the exact location where Jesus was now living in a house (to Bethlehem or to a town or even Jerusalem where the Lord might have told them to go for their safety). Therefore, we know they were not with the shepherds at the manger the night Jesus was born. The star might have been an angel visitation that the wise men did not recognize as an angel or who was hidden from them in the bright light of the star. I do not believe this star was in a special constellation (an alinement of stars and/or planets), but God may have used a special constellation to first draw the attention of the wise men to the birth of the Messiah and then use the star to lead them as a group specifically and secretly to protect Jesus.

**(Matthew 2:10) When they saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy.**

They probably left King Herod very discouraged for the little help they had received from him and the Jewish leaders. They were strangers in Judea, so where in or near Bethlehem or Jerusalem would they be able to find the Messiah without help? No wonder they were overjoyed when they saw the star once again, a star that may have been visible only to them through their spiritual vision to protect the baby Jesus and His

family. Any spies Herod may have sent to follow them would have been misled as they followed the star, especially if they were the only ones who could see it.

**(Matthew 2:11) On entering the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother; and they knelt down and paid him homage. Then, opening their treasure chests, they offered him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh.**

Since Joseph needed to financially support Mary and the baby Jesus, we should not be surprised at his absence. As a carpenter, he could find work as God enabled him in Bethlehem or Jerusalem or nearby. We would expect the wise men to bow down before a king, especially before the Messiah that they had so eagerly sought and joyfully found, and Matthew wanted to emphasize that these wise men also worshiped Jesus, as all wise people do. The gifts of frankincense and myrrh were from Persia or Arabia and they would have been highly valued anywhere, but especially in Judea and even in Egypt where the young family was to travel. Myrrh was an ingredient in the anointing oil and frankincense was an ingredient in the incense used in worship at the temple (see Exodus 30:22-38). After Jesus died on the cross, Nicodemus intended to use myrrh to anoint Jesus' body for burial (John 19:39).

**(Matthew 2:12) And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road.**

God spoke to and warned Joseph through an angel of the Lord in dreams, similar to the way the Lord guided Joseph in the Book of Genesis when he became second only to Pharaoh in Egypt (see Matthew 1:20 and Matthew 2:12). When Matthew wrote that they "returned to their country by another route," he summarized how Jesus left Bethlehem and Jerusalem and arrived in Nazareth in Galilee, for the angel of the Lord told Moses to flee to Egypt (Matthew 2:13). After King Herod died, Joseph was told in a dream to go to Galilee, in fulfillment of prophecy: "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, that he would be called a Nazarene" (Matthew 2:22-23)

## Questions for Discussion and Thinking Further

1. What does the name Jesus mean and what name was Jesus to be called? How did He get this name and why was He to be called by the other name too? See Matthew 1:18-25.
2. What are Magi and from where did they come? Do you think they were Jews or Gentiles?
3. Describe some features of the star and its purpose and appearances.
4. Who did King Herod and the Magi consult to find where the Messiah was to be born? Why were they given accurate information?
5. Where did the Magi find Jesus?

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