

CHAPTER TWO

Section 3

THE VISIT OF THE WISEMEN

TEXT: 2:1-12

1. Now when Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judaea in the days of Herod the king, behold, Wisemen from the east came to Jerusalem, saying,
2. Where is he that is born King of the Jews? for we saw his star in the east, and are come to worship him.
3. And when Herod the king heard it, he was troubled, and all Jerusalem with him.
4. And gathered together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Christ should be born.
5. And they said unto him, In Bethlehem of Judaea: for thus it is written through the prophet,
6. And thou Bethlehem, land of Judah, Art in no wise least among the princes of Judah: For out of thee shall come forth a governor, Who shall be shepherd of my people Israel.
7. Then Herod privily called the Wise-men, and learned of them exactly what time the star appeared.
8. And he sent them to Bethlehem, and said, Go and search out exactly concerning the young child; and when ye have found *him*, bring me word, that I also may come and worship him.
9. And they, having heard the king, went their way; and lo, the star which they saw in the east, went before them, till it came and stood over where the young child was.
10. And when they saw the star, they rejoiced with exceeding great joy.
11. And they came into the house and saw the young child with Mary his mother; and they fell down and worshipped him; and opening their treasures they offered unto him gifts, gold and frankincense and myrrh.
12. And being warned of *God* in a dream that they should not return to Herod, they departed into their own country another way.

THOUGHT QUESTIONS

- a. What interest would these Wise-men have in a Jewish king worthy of worship?

- b. Why did not Herod know where the Christ should be born?
- c. Why did the star point out a house instead of a manger?
- d. Why should the Wise-men give such gifts and reverence to an apparently quite ordinary baby?
- e. What are the important lessons to be learned from this story?
- f. What do you think was Herod's real intent behind the question as to the time of the appearing of the star?
- g. Why do you think Herod would send the Wise-men to seek the Babe, when he might have better sent an armed force?
- h. Why did the wisemen "rejoice greatly" upon seeing the star?
- i. Do you think that the scribes and chief priests could have known that Jesus had been born?

PARAPHRASE

After the birth of Jesus at Bethlehem in Judea during the reign of Herod, there arrived some astrologers from the East, asking as they came to Jerusalem, "Where is the child born to be King of the Jews? For we observed His star in the East and are come to pay Him homage."

Now when King Herod heard of this he was greatly perturbed, and so, too, was all Jerusalem. So he called a meeting of all the chief priests and men of letters of the people and put before them the question, "Where is the Christ to be born?"

"At Bethlehem of Judea," was their answer, "for it stands written by the prophet Micah (5:1-3), 'And you, O Bethlehem, land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for from you shall come a ruler who will shepherd Israel my people.'"

Herod next called the astrologers to meet him in private, to ascertain from them the date of the star's appearance. And, sending them to Bethlehem, he commanded, "Go and make careful inquiries about the child. Whenever you have found Him, tell me, so that I myself may go and offer Him homage also."

The astrologers, when they heard what the king had to say, went their way. And the star, which they had seen in the East, went in front of them as they travelled, until at last it came and stood immediately above the place where the little Child lay. At the sight of the star they were filled with indescribable joy.

Entering into the house, they saw the little Child with Mary His mother, and falling on their knees they bowed to the ground in homage to Him. Then they unpacked their treasures and offered gifts to Him: gold, frankincense and myrrh.

But afterwards, having been warned of God in a dream not to return to Herod, they set out for their own country by another route.

SUMMARY

Some time after Jesus' birth, oriental sages appeared in Jerusalem asking news about Him. Frightened and suspicious, Herod sought information on the Messiah's appearance. Indicating to the sages Bethlehem as the site, Herod sent them to make his inquiry, facilitating his own plans. Instead, they found the Babe and returned home another way.

NOTES

I. THE SEARCHING SAGES

2:1 Now when Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea.

With these words Matthew locates the birth of Jesus, whereas he had not located the preceding events (the betrothal of Mary and Joseph, the annunciation to Joseph and their marriage, 1:18-25). The phrase "until she had borne a son" (1:25) is not to be construed as locating that entire series of events at Bethlehem, connecting them with "Jesus was born in Bethlehem," (2:1) for probably all that is implied in those events occurred at Nazareth (Cf. Lk. 1:26-39, 56; 2:4-6). Though the English would give the thought that "when Jesus was born . . . wise-men came from the East," yet Matthew's Greek does not link the two ideas. The Greek construction expressing Jesus' birth is a genitive absolute (a genitive participle grammatically unrelated to the sentence with which it is connected and which merely provides additional facts). It is better rendered: Jesus having been born in Bethlehem . . . behold, magi were proceeding to Jerusalem." Thus it is clear that the visit of the wise-men did not take place immediately after the birth of Jesus, a fact which harmonizes with other known facts mentioned in the narrative.

How much time had elapsed between the birth of Jesus and the visit of the magi, which ends in the flight of Joseph and Mary with Jesus into Egypt, must be learned from Luke (2:21-24; Lev. 12:2-8). Hence, at least the forty days of purification, the presentation of Jesus in the temple at Jerusalem, and a supposed return to Bethlehem, were past. Add to this the last forty days of Herod's life spent at Jericho in almost total physical incapacity, whereas the magi had found him at Jerusalem. Jesus must have been born at least eighty days before.

In the days of Herod the king. With these words Matthew both dates this chapter and introduces a character in the short but dramatic part which he will play in the life of Jesus. The "days of Herod the king," as the effective, continuous ruler of Judea, began in 37 B.C. when he obtained the crown of Judea as a satellite-king under the imperial overlordship of Rome. They ended in the spring of 4 B.C. after a rule characterized by a struggle for supremacy, by brilliant and progressive administration, by magnificent building programs and splendid improvements of existing structures, and by domestic chaos. He has been well called "a Jewish Nero" because of his personal character of jealousy for his power and a maniacal suspicion and because he bathed his own house and kingdom in blood. As he entered the scene for his brief part, he is fully in character: crafty, of an uncontrollable rage, superstitious, ruthless and bloody. Josephus called him "Herod the Great."

The Herodian line of kings, being Idumean, was only nominally Jewish due to an enforced circumcision of the Edomites (Idumeans), a "conversion by force of arms" about 125 B.C. Alexander Jannaeus, the Maccabean conqueror, appointed an Idumean, Antipater I, as governor of Idumaea. This latter's grandson, Herod the Great, quickly won Roman favor and rapid promotions. However, through his emulation of the habits and philosophy of the Gentiles, his introduction of heathen sports and temples within his realm, his robbing his own people that he might give rich gifts to curry Roman favor, and his flagrant domestic immorality, he also won the well-deserved hatred of the Jews.

Matthew's brief notice of Herod's reign affixes the date for the birth of Jesus at least four years earlier than the date usually assigned, since Herod died in 4 B.C. This mistake of four years was made by Dionysius the Small, an abbot in Rome about 526, who apparently ignored the date of Herod's death and the relation of Christ's birth to it. The four-year miscalculation could possibly be greater as the time is not known from the birth of Jesus until the death of Herod (Mt. 2:1, 15). It may be that God has deliberately left the month and day and especially the year of our Lord's birth hidden among the other unremembered facts of history in order that we might give attention and obedience to the Lord Himself rather than that we should be lost in the unessential elements of His life.

Behold, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem. These mysterious visitors entering the Jewish capital city with their even

more curious questions must have raised many questions: Who are they? Whence have they come? What do they want? Various answers as to their identity and country of origin have been offered, due to the appearance in history of several types of oriental philosopher-priests. The term *Magi* refers to a Persian, or also a Babylonian, wise man and priest, who was expert in astrology, interpretation of dreams and various other secret arts. (cf. Dan. 2:10, 27, 48; 4:6-9; 5:7, 11, 12) *Magi* could be used in a good sense, as in the case of Daniel, (cf. Dan. 2) or in an evil sense, as in the case of Simon (Ac. 8:9) or Elymas Barjesus (Ac. 13:6, 8). At best, these magi were skilled in philosophy, medicine and natural science and probably were the possessors of what real learning existed in their period; at worst, many imposters among them were little more than fortune-tellers, sorcerers, magicians and charlatans.

From the East probably refers to the countries just east of the Euphrates River: Babylonia, Persia or Chaldea, whence many wise-men of the so-called magi priest class arose. *The East* would be the Mesopotamian valley, as viewed from Palestine and so regarded by the ancients (Gen. 29:1, 4; Num. 22:5; 23:7). The suggestion that Arabia was their home, based upon the gifts they brought, which are supposed to be Arabian in origin, is not necessary, as Arabia was neither east geographically but south, and the gifts could have been purchased by trading with Arabia.

2:2 As they were coming into Jerusalem, they were probably thinking that their question was an obvious one, which surely by that time possessed a well-known answer: **"Where is he that has been born king of the Jews?"** To this city they had come to pay Him homage, not because they imagined that He must be born in the Jewish capital but because they would naturally expect there to obtain authentic information where He might be found. Had they known the true state of affairs in the capital, especially the heart of Herod its king, perhaps they might not have asked such a politically dangerous question.

We saw his star when it rose and came to worship him. This declaration of the magi may be thought to emphasize one particular aspect of the studies of these priest-scholars: i.e. as astrologers scanning the heavens, they observed some extraordinary astronomical phenomenon and concluded from their astrological tables that a king of the Jews should be born about this time in the land of the Jews. Such a conclusion, at best, is highly doubtful, because of the extraordinarily

arbitrary guesswork that created those astrological charts in the diabolical attempt to divine the future. It is hardly likely that God, who had condemned the attempts to discern the future through study of natural phenomenon (Dt. 18:9-14; II Kgs. 17:16, 17; 23:5; Isa. 44:25; 47:13; Jer. 10:2; Ac. 7:41-43), would stamp His approval upon such pseudo-knowledge as was contained in the astrological systems. It is also a dubious conclusion that any such astrological calculation could actually lead to the true determination that a king should be born in Judea, an event which, by its nature, was unique, different from all other births. Certainly true is the conclusion that it was not astrology that led these wise-men to the Christ, but OT prophecy (Micah 5:2) coupled with the moving of the star to Bethlehem. Direct, divine revelation, given to the magi while yet in their own country to explain the meaning of the star, must not be ruled out. (See below on v. 12)

His star. The "star" described by Matthew has the following character:

1. It was seen from the East when it arose (v. 2) and then again in the west as it led the magi to the house of Joseph in Bethlehem (v. 9).
2. It was going before the wise-men; i.e. south from Jerusalem to Bethlehem (v. 9), and therefore it did not continue the westward movement of normal stars.
3. It came to rest over the place where the child was (v. 9), thus apparently distinguishing it from all other houses in Bethlehem.

Obviously, these characteristics mark this sidereal appearance as something other than natural phenomenon. Unless the language adopted to describe the "star" be taken in some other way than its literal import, conjunctions of stars, comets, and the like may be rejected as the naturalistic explanation of what the magi beheld. Astronomically speaking, the narrative has been purposely left too incomplete for any simple or naturalistic conclusion to be drawn from it. One short verse could have answered all our questions but that verse was not given. The "star," whatever its physical property may have been, was of no further importance than to serve as guide to the wise-men until they found the home of Joseph where they might find the Messiah, and having found Him, they had no further need of its direction. Having accepted the extraordinary character of the Evan-

gelists' narrations as sober history containing supernatural elements, we see no serious objection to considering the "star" as a miraculous phenomenon provided by God for the specific purpose of guiding the magi. If ordinary means are not sufficient, God is able to employ the extraordinary. This consideration is fully in harmony with the supernatural appearance to Joseph (Mt. 1:20, 21), with the angel's messages to Zechariah (Lk. 1:8-20), with the appearance to Mary (Lk. 1:26-38) or with that to the shepherds (Lk. 2:8-15). Even as the children of Israel were led supernaturally by God by means of a pillar of cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night from Egypt to the promised land, similarly are the wise-men led by the miraculous star from the East to the Promised One.

How the magi came to know that the special "star" was of particular significance regarding the birth of "the king of the Jews," and that His station above them required their homage and made Him worthy of their gifts is not told. Nor is it possible to relate the magi's knowledge to the national messianic hopes of the Jews scattered throughout the East (Ac. 2:9), for there is no OT passage that clearly predicts the appearance of a star as the signal of the birth of the Messiah. To Balaam's prophecy (Num. 24:17) appeal is made to provide just such a passage, but is it credible that the magi could have so understood the passage to refer to the "star" they were beholding or that they understood the passage as directing them to undertake such a journey as they did to pay homage to the king of the Jews? Besides, if they were familiar with the OT prophecies, why did they not know that the Christ should be born in Bethlehem? Even though the magi themselves might have possessed a copy of the OT scriptures for personal study, no "star" prophecy can therein be found.

Regarding the so-called "world-wide expectation of a Jewish Messiah," Edersheim (*Life*, I, 203) comments:

There is no historical evidence that at the time of Christ there was among the nations any widespread expectancy of the Advent of a Messiah in Palestine. Where the knowledge of such a hope existed, it must have been entirely derived from Jewish sources. The allusions to it by *Tacitus* (Hist. v. 13; 75-125 A.D.) and *Suetonius* (Vesp. 4; 70-123 A.D.) are evidently derived from Josephus, and admittedly refer to the Flavian dynasty, and to a period seventy years or more after the Advent of Christ . . .

Since the wise-men "were warned in a dream not to return to Herod," by direct revelation from God, is it inconceivable that their concept of the meaning of the star and their undertaking this westward journey should have been directed in the same manner?

We have come to worship him. If we knew more of the mind of the magi, we might be better able to appreciate what they intended to offer the infant King of the Jews. The Greek word for "worship" is defined by Arndt-Gingrich (723) as meaning:

proskumeo; used to designate the custom of prostrating oneself before a person and kissing his feet, the hem of his garment, the ground, etc.; the Persians did this in the presence of their deified king, and the Greeks before a divinity or something holy; (*fall down and*) *worship, do obeisance to, prostrate oneself before, do reverence to, welcome respectfully, . . .* This reverence or worship is paid:

1. to human beings who, however, are to be recognized by this act as belonging to a supernatural realm: to a king; a slave to his master, see Mt. 18:26; Ac. 10:25, 26; Rev. 3:9.
2. To God; also used of the various divinities:
 - a. of the God worshipped by monotheists (Christians, Jews, Samaritans) . . .
 - b. of the idol-worship of polytheism (see Ac. 7:43) . . .
3. To the devil and Satanic beings (see Mt. 4:9; Lk. 4:7; Rev. 9:20; 13:4, 12, 15; 16:2; 19:20; 20:4;
4. to angels; Rev. 22:8, 9
5. to Jesus, who is revered and worshipped as Messianic King and Divine Helper: Mt. 2:2, 8, 11; 8:2; 9:18; 14:33; 20:20; Jn. 9:38. The demons ask a favor of Him, Mk. 5:6. Mock worship on the part of soldiers, Mk. 15:19. The Risen Lord is especially the object of worship: Mt. 28:9, 17 . . .

The inquiry of the wise-men indicates their expectation that the birth of the King should have been a matter of common knowledge at least by the time they arrived at Jerusalem. What a surprise it must have been for them to find those who lived at the very center of this great event to be ignorant of it. Ignorance and unbelief are

still familiar faces among those by whom Jesus ought to be best known. The question of the wise-men may not be at all naive or politically dangerous from their view, since they came seeking what they considered to be a Babe known to all.

II. THE CRAFTY KING

2:3 **When Herod the king heard this, he was troubled.**

The wicked, suspicious heart of Herod would undoubtedly have caused him to place informers everywhere in Jerusalem. Matthew does not say whether the magi came directly to the official head of the nation with their question. He does declare that "they were coming, asking" (literally: imperfect indicative and a present participle). So probably their query outran them to the old king. God could have told them to go to Bethlehem to find the Child, but this would have left Jerusalem without announcement. Their inquiry served to stir up the whole city with the exciting news that a king had just been born in Judea. The sensational question of the magi, because it agitated Herod's suspicious nature, now became a matter of life and death to all. Thus, when Herod heard this unwelcome question, he was visibly shaken **and all Jerusalem with him.** The source of their fears differed:

1. The fear of Herod was kindled by a stubborn fact that had dogged him throughout his intrigue-filled, bloody rise to power: he was neither king nor a Jew. He ruled under the control of Rome and had won the title of "king" from his true masters. By birth he was Edomite and thus was a usurper to the throne of David. He had spent his whole life seizing and holding this throne. Now, after stifling the Maccabean princes by murder and after sacrificing the wife of his love and the children of his loins, he trembles to hear that dreaded question, "Where is he that is born the king of the Jews?" Herod instantly understood well enough that that king could only be the promised Messiah of the Jews. Such an unanticipated question coming from such an unexpected source shocked Herod deeply enough to believe the wise-men and to realize that all his previous precautions would have been in vain if he could not, by some swift stroke, slay that Child and thus secure to himself and his posterity his coveted throne.

2. The fear of the Jerusalemites cannot have been the same which animated Herod. Jerusalem knew Herod, and she shivered as she awaited Herod's inevitable reaction: the violent measures which the bloody old despot might take in quelling any rival movement. *And all Jerusalem with him* must not be construed to say that the city was devoted to her king and feared that her interests would suffer with his. Naturally, Herod had his sycophants, his political supporters, the Herodians, and those among the Jerusalemites who were dedicated to his secular philosophy. But even these latter would not be able to hide themselves from the searching beam of Herod's unreasoning suspicion. Among those who openly opposed Herod were the powerful Pharisees. As Josephus says:

"These are those that are called the sect of the Pharisees, who were in a capacity of greatly opposing kings. A cunning sect they were, and soon elevated to a pitch of open fighting and doing mischief. Accordingly, when all the people of the Jews gave assurance of their good will to Caesar, and to the king's government, these very men did not swear, being above six thousand; and when the king imposed a fine upon them, Pheroras' wife paid their fine for them. In order to requite which kindness of hers, since they were believed to have the foreknowledge of things to come by divine inspiration, they foretold how God had decreed that Herod's government should cease, and his posterity should be deprived of it; but that the kingdom should come to her and Pheroras, and to their children." (*Antiquities* XVII, 2, 4)

Although the Pharisees were basically wrong in their prediction and it may be supposed that Herod considered their "prophecy" as arising from wishful thinking rather than divine inspiration, yet when the influential Pharisees announced the finish of Herod's kingdom and the magi asked concerning the birth of the (new) Jewish king, Herod could not but tremble. But his fear did not block immediate, cunning decisions.

III. THE INFORMED BUT INDIFFERENT

2:4 **And assembling all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Christ was to be born.** Though there be one "high" priest whose unique function it

was to enter the Most Holy Place once a year (Lev. 8, 9, 21) and who was particularly set apart to his office, yet there were other chiefs of the twenty-four courses into which David had divided the priests (I Chron. 24:1-19). In the time of Herod, the high priests were set up and deposed for political reasons at Herod's pleasure. The Romans did the same, changing the personnel so frequently that the position became almost an annual appointment. (Cf. Jn. 11:49; Ac. 23:1-5) Though many changes were thus made, the high priest was always chosen from certain priestly families. Thus, the plural *chief priests* probably refers to this group of deposed high priests who retained their title although not their position, or to the family of chief priests in general. The *scribes* were the learned rabbis, the professional students of the Law and experts in its exposition and renowned in teaching it. Herod's move to call together these authorities of Israel is at once marked by his usual cunning, for apparently Herod does not commit himself on the subject. Rather, to all appearances, his pretence to be devout in his attitude toward Old Testament prophecies could also serve to enhance his image. He simply placed before these scholars the question of the Messiah's birthplace. Doubtless he did so in the absence of the magi (cf. v. 7), for it would not have served his murderous designs to permit these eastern sages to compare notes with the scholars of Judaism if indeed the Messiah had been born. Observe how he who, under ordinary circumstances, would have nothing but contempt for the divine message, now becomes anxious to know its predictions so that he might render them harmless by secret measures of his own. What irony: Herod trusted the Bible's message enough to act upon it by sending the wise-men to Bethlehem according to the prophecy, but he totally ignored the all-knowing God who gave the prophecy and who would be fully capable of thwarting Herod's scheme!

The wise-men had asked for one "born king of the Jews." Herod laid before the council the demand for "the Christ." The kind of Christ expected by the Jews was a worldly "king of the Jews" who would have indeed been a true rival to Herod.

2:5 They told him, In Bethlehem of Judea; for so it is written by the prophet . . . Herod may have already known this, as it was generally known (Jn. 7:40-52), but he required an official, authoritative declaration from the highest authority available. To Herod's demand, they could return only one answer and quote the Scripture which so declared it, Micah 5:2. This prediction of Micah was generally accepted and universally understood to point out the Messiah's

birthplace. The prompt, unequivocal answer, given by these highest authorities in Judaism, indicate three clear facts:

1. That the expected Messiah is an individual, not the Jewish nation itself;
2. That the Messiah's birth must occur at Bethlehem and nowhere else;
3. That those who reject Jesus as Messiah must reject that natural interpretation by those Jewish scholars, must re-interpret Micah, or must reject the possibility of predictive prophecy altogether.

2:6 Matthew reproduces here the prophetic utterance of Micah exactly as such quotations were popularly made at that time and with the same freedom in quoting that we use today. The fact that there are verbal differences between Matthew's reproduction of Micah 5:2 and the OT original should be no cause for alarm. If it be remembered that Hebrew was practically a dead language, at least so far as the common people were concerned, and that a translation into the popular dialect was necessitated, then it will not be surprising to hear one of the Sanhedrin or even Matthew himself give neither a literal version nor a complete paraphrase, but rather something between them which would be an interpretative translation. Ederheim (*Life*, I, 206) demonstrated the universally practiced method of so rendering the Scriptures for a popular audience.

How aptly Micah's prophecy refers to the birthplace of Christ Jesus! He pictures the future Ruler of Israel whose goings forth reach back into eternity, as springing from the insignificant Bethlehem whence had arisen David. It was well known that the Messiah should be "the Son of David" and should come from Bethlehem (Mt. 22:41-45; Jn. 7:41, 42). Not only the name of the birthplace of the Messiah is given in advance, but also the description of the condition of the Jewish nation in general and the family of David in particular. The birth of the Christ in the almost insignificant country town of David, instead of in Jerusalem, the great city of David, presupposes that the family of David would have lost the throne and fallen into poverty and obscurity. To a people who gloried in false greatness, these words must have been a stumbling-block. (Cf. the context of Micah's message.)

The famous teachers of the Law who answered Herod's question were no fools. They would not have been duped by Herod's outwardly devout attitude, nor could they have rationally supposed that

his demand concerning the birthplace of the Christ have other than sinister motives. Nor would they have been ignorant of the magi's dramatic entrance into Jerusalem. It could be safely assumed that they had basically the same information as Herod. What kept them from making their own independent investigation of these marvelous circumstances: the sudden appearance of magi seeking "him who is born king of the Jews," led by a "star," the abrupt interest of Herod in messianic prophecy. And had they not perhaps seen the strange "star" also? Yet, they were not sufficiently aroused to initiate their own private inquiry. It is impossible to know just how much these Jewish rulers had seen of the strange events, and thus to ascertain their guilt in not "turning aside to see this thing which is come to pass." (cf. Ex. 3:3, 4) Nevertheless, they have their representatives in every age, who, faced with greater light guiding them to more exciting truth, yawn and refuse to investigate and apply the will of God to their lives. Unfortunately, their great learning did not profit them, since they missed the joy surrounding the Messiah's birth.

2:7 Then Herod summoned the wise-men secretly. The less publicity that should be given the magi, the better it would be for Herod's plan. This may have been the first time that the magi actually stood before Herod. **He ascertained from them what time the star appeared.** To all appearances, Herod's interest now is merely curiosity as if prompted by innocent motives. He had learned the location of the birthplace of the Messiah and would be able to trade that knowledge with the wise-men in exchange for their knowledge of the time of the birth. Herod assumes that the time of the rising of the star coincided with either the Christ's conception or His birth, and thus he is better able to judge with what age king he must now deal. It cannot be known what answer the magi gave, for "two years old and under" (v. 16) may be an ample margin decided by Herod.

2:8 He sent them to Bethlehem, saying, Go and search diligently for the child, and when you have found him bring me word, that I too may come and worship him. These hypocritical words, not intended for the ears of any who knew Herod, would deceive these strangers who would now suppose the same religious interests motivated the king as animated them. The plot was simple; it could not fail. The innocent dupes now become Herod's tools. But why did he not have the wise-men followed instead of trusting them to

bring back word to him after they had found the Child? Matthew is not writing a murder mystery; hence, he does not tell every detail. But who could say that Herod did not send along spies after them? If so, his attempt must have failed, as the story shows. Of course, the seeming naiveté in Herod's scheme may be merely the folly of a mad king failing in his closing years.

2:9, 10 **When they had heard the king they went their way** the six-mile journey south from Jerusalem to Bethlehem. On the *star*, see on verse 2. The miraculous "star," immediately observable, coupled with the confident, supernatural prediction of the prophet Micah, worked together to produce the multiplied comfort in the hearts of the magi: **they rejoiced with exceeding great joy.** Their search had not been in vain. Though their goal had not yet been realized, they were able to rejoice in the likely prospect of its soon realization. Why they should rejoice upon their seeing the "star" is not clear: had it been invisible during their conversation with Herod due to clouds or daylight? Had it appeared once when they were yet in their homeland, causing them to undertake their journey to Jerusalem and disappearing until this moment? At least, **it came and stood over the place where was the young child.** It thus enabled them, without enquiries which could arouse the unwanted curiosity of the Bethlehemites, to find Jesus. If the magi entered Bethlehem by night, this too contributed to the privacy of their coming and, consequently, to the future safety of Jesus.

2:11 By this time, Joseph had been able to secure a suitable dwelling and move the little family from the feeding-place of the animals into a house. (Lk. 2:7) The immense crowd, that had come to Bethlehem to enroll themselves, had finished their business and returned home. The magi entered the simple quarters, provided by the carpenter, to find the object of their search: *the young child* (not a newly born baby). The marvel here described lies in the reaction of the magi: **they fell down and worshipped him!** Every worldly circumstance that usually declares the power and position of the world's great was absent. This Babe was born, not in the palaces of the capital of the empire, but in the stable of a dusty country village. Few even knew that He had been born. Here was a rented house, a lowly heritage, some simple baby clothes. But the star and the prophecy had directed them to THIS Babe and through the eyes of faith the wise-men were able to see the King in that small Child.

On *worship*, see 2:1. In the typical oriental manner, they *fell down* before Him, indicating in such gestures that they have found in Him the King they sought. Whether they *worshipped Him* as divine or merely revered Him as a Jewish prince somehow destined for greatness is not known since we are not told the extent of God's revelation to them. Their homage offered to Jesus under such circumstances is certainly a memorial to their honesty: they brought and gave the best: *gold, frankincense* (a resin used in making incense), *and myrrh* (also a resin used as one ingredient in incense, but also used as an anesthetic when mingled with wine; also used in embalming). Gold would be a natural gift, but why the others? What was this Child to do with them? Perhaps the magi had other reasons, but if their gifts are religiously inspired, they are the more readily intelligible. If these wise-men see before them a Divine King, then incense is quite appropriate. Their worship and gifts indicate forethought. What a condemnation of half-hearted worshippers who are content to give Jesus the left-over scraps of their lives! Refusing to give Him their best, they degrade themselves and bring dishonor to their King.

2:12 Again God breaks into history to give warning by a *dream* (see on 1:20). The reappearance of the "star" to guide the magi to Bethlehem and this dream both suggest that the intervening events occurred at night. Is there any over-riding reason why they should not have all occurred the same night? Even if the magi left the next morning, the whereabouts of Jesus is yet unimportant even if known. The shepherds had excited the entire village several weeks before (Lk. 2:17, 18, 20); hence, Bethlehem knew something of Jesus, but until the coming of Herod's murderers, this information did not closely touch its citizens.

How simply are the plans of the scheming Herod thwarted. The magi, arising from sleep, take the road northeast from Bethlehem to Jericho, thus avoiding the return to Jerusalem. By the time Herod realized that the magi were not to return to him, they were beyond his vindictive grasp, east of the Jordan **returning to their own country**. Thus, they disappear from Matthew's pages as suddenly and mysteriously as they entered. But by them, God has identified the Child as the universal Messianic King, not only as the hope of His ancient people, the Hebrews, but also the anticipated joy of those "afar off."

FACT QUESTIONS

1. When and why did Joseph take Mary to Bethlehem, thus providing such a background for the birth of Jesus?
2. How does Matthew date the birth of Jesus?
3. Did this visit of the magi take place immediately after the birth of Jesus? How do you know?
4. Who is "Herod the king"? Tell all you know about his reign, his character, etc.
5. Who were the "wise-men"? Whence did they come?
6. How did they know about the birth of Jesus?
7. Why did they come?
8. Answer the following objection to the account of the magi as represented in the biblical narrative: "If the magi were rightly guided by astrological calculations, and if their conception of the relation between the movements of heavenly bodies and earthly events actually led them in this case to the Christ, then God's stamp of approval is put upon a harmful pseudo-science. The magi and those who came into contact with them upon their return to the East would be confirmed in their superstition, and such confirmation of what is false is unworthy of the God of truth."
9. What was the "star" they saw? Is there any astronomical confirmation of such a "star"? List all the characteristics of the "star" as implied in the account of Matthew.
10. Is it possible to explain Matthew's description of the "star" and its movements as a figurative representation of some purely natural astronomical phenomenon? Or, in other words, is it necessary to interpret Matthew's account of the "star" literally in order to be true to his intent, granted that the objective phenomenon be regarded as having reality? On what basis do you answer thus?
11. How could the magi have known the meaning of the phenomenon?
12. Why was Herod so greatly troubled about this one "born king of the Jews"?
13. What reason had the inhabitants of Jerusalem to fear such news of a new king of the Jews?
14. To whom did Herod go for information and what did he ask?
15. The wise-men had asked about "the king of the Jews." So why did Herod ask the peculiar question he did?

16. To what prophecy did they turn in order to answer Herod?
17. What does their ready answer indicate about the meaning of the prophecy?
18. If there should be only one "high priest" (Ex. 28, 29; Lev. 4:3, 16; 21; Num. 20:28; 35:25; Ac. 22:30—23:5), how can Matthew speak of a group of "chief priests"? Who are these "chief priests"?
19. Who are the "scribes"?
20. How would you answer these attacks on the historical probability of this entire narrative:
 - a. "Would Herod have excited messianic hopes by calling such a meeting of the chief priests and scribes to ask where the Messiah was to be born? These very hopes ran counter to his every design and he could hardly have hoped to gain his purpose by arousing them."
 - b. "Would the wise-men have been so naive to ask so politically dangerous a question in such a public way under the very eyes of so suspicious a king as Herod?"
 - c. "After the scribes had pointed to Bethlehem, why would Herod have used secrecy in calling the magi to him? What possible purpose could such secrecy now serve?"
 - d. "Would Herod actually have thought the magi so naive as to suppose that he really wanted to worship a rival claimant to his throne?"
 - e. "It would have been more true to Herod's well-known character had he simply sent spies after the magi so that upon their finding the Child they could have killed him."
21. Standing in Jerusalem, how would you give directions to the wise-men to get to Bethlehem?
22. To whom did the magi offer their gifts and worship: to "the child with Mary his mother," or to the child alone?
23. In what usual ways were the various gifts brought by the magi used? Is there any significance in this when they are considered as offered to Jesus?
24. How did the wise-men know not to return to Herod as they had promised? What does this indicate about the source of their knowledge concerning the "king of the Jews" whom they came seeking?