

9. The Visit of the Magi: Symbolism, Old Testament Connections, and Matthew's Message

Video: How To Read the Bible: Ancient Jewish Meditation Literature

Read: Matthew, Chapter 2, verses 1-12.

The story of the Magi in Matthew 2:1–12 is one of the most theologically rich passages in the Gospel. It is far more than a charming Christmas narrative—it carries profound Old Testament connections, historical depth, and theological significance. Matthew uses the Magi to emphasize Jesus' universal kingship, highlight fulfillment of prophecy, and contrast the different responses to his birth.

1. Who Were the Magi?

- The term “**magi**” (μάγοι) refers to **wise men, astrologers, priests or scholars** from the East—likely Persia or Babylon.
- They were not kings but were often associated with royal courts as advisors.
- So how did we come to interpret them as “kings”? In the 6th century, Christian tradition turned them into kings, likely influenced by Psalm 72:10-11 which mentions kings bringing tribute.
- Their expertise in **astronomy and dream interpretation** aligns with figures like Daniel, who was placed among the magi in Babylon (Daniel 2:48).
- The Magi's journey from the East echoes the **gentile nations coming to acknowledge Israel's God**, a recurring Old Testament theme.

How Many Magi Were There?

- The Bible **does not** say there were **three Magi**—only that they brought **three gifts**.
- Early traditions suggest **anywhere from 2 to 12**.
- The **Eastern Church** often depicted **12 Magi**, while the **Western Church** settled on three (Caspar, Melchior, and Balthazar).

2. Symbolism in Their Journey

- **Following the Star:**
 - The **star** is a divine sign, reminiscent of the "star of Jacob" prophecy in **Numbers 24:17**: *"A star shall advance from Jacob, and a scepter shall rise from Israel."*
 - This suggests that **Jesus is the fulfillment of messianic prophecy** and is the true King of Israel.
 - God communicates to the Magi through their own means of wisdom (astronomy), showing that divine revelation is not limited to the Jewish people.
- **Coming to Jerusalem First:**
 - The Magi assume that the “**king of the Jews**” would be born in Jerusalem, the city of David, which highlights the irony:
 - The **Gentiles** seek the Messiah, while the **Jewish leaders** remain indifferent or hostile.

3. Old Testament Connections & Prophecies Fulfilled

- **Micah 5:2** - The prophecy quoted by the chief priests and scribes:
"And you, Bethlehem, land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; since from you shall come a ruler who is to shepherd my people Israel."

- Bethlehem was the city of **David**, reinforcing Jesus' identity as the **Messianic King** in David's line.
- **Isaiah 60:1–6** - The Nations Bringing Gifts:
 - Isaiah prophesied that **nations would come to the light of Israel** and bring gifts of **gold and frankincense**:
“Caravans of camels shall fill you, dromedaries from Midian and Ephah; All from Sheba shall come bearing gold and frankincense, and proclaiming the praises of the Lord.”
 - The Magi's gifts fulfill this prophecy and signal that Jesus is the **light to the nations**.
- **Psalm 72:10-11** – Kings of the Earth Worshipping the Messiah:
“May the kings of Tarshish and the islands bring tribute, the kings of Sheba and Seba offer gifts. May all kings bow before him, all nations serve him.”
 - This is why tradition later **associated the Magi with kings**, even though they were likely not royalty.

4. The Meaning of the Three Gifts

Each gift has deep **symbolic meaning** related to Jesus' identity:

1. **Gold** – A gift for **kingship**
 - Jesus is the true **King of Kings**, in contrast to Herod, who feels threatened by his rule.
2. **Frankincense** – A gift for **divinity and priesthood**
 - Frankincense was used in Temple worship (Exodus 30:34) and signifies **Jesus' role as our High Priest**, offering himself as a sacrifice.
3. **Myrrh** – A gift for **suffering and death**
 - Myrrh was used for **anointing the dead** (John 19:39). It foreshadows Jesus' crucifixion and burial.
 - It connects to **Isaiah 53**, where the Suffering Servant will die for his people.

How Much Would These Gifts Be Worth? - The exact value is unknown, but estimates suggest:

Gold: Worth thousands of dollars in today's currency.

Frankincense & Myrrh: In ancient times, they were as valuable as gold due to their rarity and high demand.

Total Value Estimate: Equivalent to hundreds of thousands of dollars today—a king's ransom for a poor family like Mary & Joseph.

What Was the Practical Use of These Gifts?

Gold → **Financial Security**

- Could have **funded their escape to Egypt (Matt. 2:13-15)** when fleeing Herod.

Frankincense → **Used in Worship & Medicine**

- Used in **Jewish Temple sacrifices (Exodus 30:34-36)**.
- **Medicinal use:** Anti-inflammatory, antiseptic, and perfume.

Myrrh → **Used in Burial & Pain Relief**

- **Jesus was anointed with myrrh at his burial** (John 19:39).
- Used as a **painkiller** (Mark 15:23)—but Jesus **refused it on the cross**.

5. “They Departed by Another Way” – A Spiritual Lesson

- The Magi's journey is not just **physical** but **spiritual**.
 - Encountering Christ **changes them**; they do not return to Herod but take a **new path**.
 - This can symbolize how **true worship of Christ leads to transformation**.

6. Why Does Matthew Include This Story?

- Matthew is writing to a **Jewish-Christian audience**, but he makes it clear from the beginning that **Jesus is for all nations**.
- He wants his readers to see that:
 - Jesus is **the true King and Messiah**, fulfilling Jewish prophecy.
 - The **Gentiles recognize him**, while many Jews (like Herod and the leaders) reject him.
 - **God's plan has always included the nations**—Jesus is the fulfillment of that promise.
 - The **Chief Priests and Scribes** provide correct information about the Messiah but do nothing. This **indifference** foreshadows how they will later reject Jesus

7. "They Departed by Another Way" – A Spiritual Journey Matthew 2:12:

"Having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they departed for their country by another way."

This isn't just **geographical**—it's **spiritual**.

- They came as **seekers of truth**.
- They left as **worshippers transformed by Christ**.
- Encountering Jesus **changes your path**—literally and figuratively.

Discussion Question: There are many layers of symbolism in this passage. Which ones resonated most with you?

Herod's Political Landscape - Why He Was So Threatened

Who Was Herod the Great?

Herod ruled **Judea as a client king under Rome** from 37–4 BC. His reign was marked by **brilliant construction projects** but also **ruthless oppression** and **political paranoia**.

Key Political Issues at the Time of Jesus' Birth:

Herod's Legitimacy Crisis: "King of the Jews"

- Herod **wasn't ethnically Jewish**—he was **Idumean (Edomite)**, meaning his ancestors were historical **enemies of Israel** (descendants of Esau, not Jacob).
- The Jews never fully accepted him as a **legitimate king**, because:
 - He wasn't **from the line of David** (which the true Messiah had to be).
 - He wasn't appointed by **God or a Jewish prophet** but by **the Roman Senate**.
- Herod **feared a true Jewish king** (the Messiah) would **arise and overthrow him**.

Rome's Role: Why Herod Needed to Stay in Power

- Rome **installed Herod as a "puppet king"** to keep **Judea under control**.
- He was a **Roman ally** but had to **balance loyalty to Rome and keeping the Jews in line**.
- If he couldn't keep order, **Rome might replace him**.

Herod's Extreme Paranoia

- Herod **executed his wife, Mariamne, her mother, and three of his sons** because he **suspected them of plotting against him**.
- **Caesar Augustus (the Roman Emperor) famously said:**
 - *"It is better to be Herod's pig than his son."*
 - A dark joke—since Jews **didn't eat pigs**, they were safer than Herod's own family.

What Specific Jewish Revolts Made a "New King" So Dangerous?

Several **Jewish rebellions** before Jesus' birth **made Rome extremely wary** of any messianic claims:

The Maccabean Revolt (167–160 BC)

- The **Jewish Hasmoneans (Maccabees)** revolted against Greek rule and briefly **restored an independent Jewish kingdom**.
- Rome later **took over Judea** (63 BC), and **many Jews still wanted another rebellion** to restore independence.

The Revolts of 40–37 BC (Before Herod Took Power)

- Jewish nationalist groups **fought against Roman control** before Herod was installed as king.
- Rome **backed Herod to crush these revolts**—but many **Jews saw Herod as an illegitimate ruler forced upon them**.

Messianic Expectations Were High

- Jews **believed the Messiah would be a warrior-king** like David who would **defeat Rome and restore Israel’s independence**.
- Any mention of a “new king” could lead to **mass uprisings**.

Why Was “All Jerusalem Troubled” (Matthew 2:3)?

- **If Herod panicked, he would respond with violence**.
- The Jewish leaders knew that **Herod would eliminate anyone he saw as a rival**—and their own safety was at risk.
- Soon to come: the **Massacre of the Innocents (Matt. 2:16)** will show **how extreme Herod’s reaction could be**.

Key Takeaway:

Herod didn’t just **dislike Jesus**—he saw him as a **threat to his throne, his survival, and Judea’s political stability**.

Discussion question: What do you think the general mood in was at the time of Jesus’ birth? Why might Jesus have come at a time like this?

The Contrast Between the Magi and Herod

- **The Magi** represent the **openness of the Gentiles** to Christ. They **seek him, worship him, and obey God’s guidance**.
- **Herod**, on the other hand, represents **hostility and fear** toward Jesus. He **sees him as a threat** rather than the fulfillment of prophecy.

Final Thoughts: Why This Story Still Matters Today

- The Magi show that **faith isn’t just about knowledge—it’s about action**.
- **Jesus is for all people**, not just the Jews.
- The contrast between **Herod and the Magi** reminds us to **choose between fear and faith**.
- True encounters with Christ **lead to transformation**.