

# Jesus Dethrones Illegitimate Kings (Matt. 2:1–12)

By Jacob D. Gerber

From his conception, Jesus was a stumbling block to those who came in contact with him. Judging by outward appearances, Joseph nearly divorced Mary because of the seemingly scandalous circumstances of her pregnancy, although Joseph changed his mind once God revealed to him the full story. Now, in Matthew 2, we discover that Jesus has been born, and we will see that he is still a stumbling block—although the stakes are rising. As wise men leave behind their country and their culture to worship the one born king of the Jews, the current king of Judea, Herod the Great, recognizes that Jesus’ own claims to the throne may be stronger than his. Rather than responding to the announcement of Jesus’ birth with faith, Herod plots and schemes to do away with Jesus. In the contest between a powerful king and a powerless baby, however, Herod’s plans will be thwarted until the day of his death. Matthew is continuing to prove to us Jesus’ kingship, but here he is also giving us a glimpse into the consequences of Jesus’ kingship: namely, that *Jesus dethrones illegitimate kings*.

## The Clash of Kingdoms (Matt. 2:1–2)

Matthew described the birth of Jesus indirectly at the end of chapter 1. At the beginning of chapter 2, Jesus is already born in Bethlehem, and we are not given any other information about the circumstances of his birth here in Matthew. To learn that information, we must turn to Luke’s account of the infancy narratives of Jesus. The focus of Matthew is, instead, on the continuing to develop the proclamation that Jesus is the royal king in the line of David. This begins with a uniquely Greek construction called a genitive absolute, which often gives some sense of time. The first phrase of v. 1 might be overly literally translated as, “And of Jesus’ having-been-born...,” which means, “after Jesus was born” (v. 1a). The two main words of this genitive absolute, however, are “Jesus” and “having-been-born” (γεννηθέντος; *gennēthentos*) which, as we have seen a number of times, the word from which we get our word “genesis.”<sup>1</sup> This word appeared back in Matthew 1:1, throughout the genealogy in Matthew 1:2–16 in a verbal form (“begat/was the father of”), in a closely related form in Matthew 1:17 (“generations”), and then in Matthew 1:18 (“birth”). This is the story of Jesus’ birth, a new genesis for God’s people that links back to the original genesis of God’s people.

Matthew then gives us another critical detail: Jesus was born in “Bethlehem of Judea” (v. 1b). Later, Jesus will be known as having come from Nazareth (Matt. 2:23), but Matthew insists that we know that Jesus was actually born in Bethlehem.<sup>2</sup> By this, Matthew is not only clarifying the

---

<sup>1</sup> Osborne, *Matthew*, 86.

<sup>2</sup> France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 61.

southern Bethlehem in Judea from a different Bethlehem in northern Galilee (Josh. 19:15), but he is also cluing us in to the fact that Jesus was born in the city of David, the same place where David himself was born.<sup>3</sup> Matthew is once again declaring to us that Jesus is not simply one more son born to a Judean family, but the rightful heir to the throne of David. By the language of “after Jesus was born” and the reference to “Bethlehem of Judea,” Matthew is going out of his way to connect the narrative here in chapter 2 with the background information that he had given us in chapter 1.<sup>4</sup> This is the story of the birth of Israel’s rightful king, born as the son of David!

Then, Matthew casually drops a note of background information that instantly forms a backdrop of conflict for this story: “in the days of Herod the king” (v. 1c). John Nolland gives the background information that Matthew assumes in his account: “The Herod here is Herod the Great, who ruled as king from 37 to 4 B. C. He was a figure of heroic proportions, whose rebuilding of the Jerusalem temple represented a major feat of architecture, but whose rule was tyrannical, ruthless, and cruel.”<sup>5</sup> The threat that Jesus poses to the kingship of Herod is central to the narrative that follows.<sup>6</sup>

Finally, then, at the end of v. 1, we come to the main figures in this narrative: “wise men from the east came to Jerusalem” (v. 1d). Upon arrival, these wise men ask, “Where is he who has been born king of the Jews? For we saw his star when it rose and have come to worship him” (v. 2). From the fact that these “wise men” (μάγοι; *magoi*) have followed a star to lead them out of the east into Judea, we may see that they were astrologers. Both the name and the astrology of these men probably links them with the nation of Babylon (cf. “wise men” [σοφός; *sophos*], LXX Dan. 2:48; “magicians” [μάγων; *magōn*], LXX Dan. 5:11).<sup>7</sup> Certainly, although Matthew presents the wise men as correct in their desire to come worship the child, he does not thereby approve of or commend the practice of astrology generally, especially in light of the many prohibitions against astrology in the Old Testament.<sup>8</sup> Although some Old Testament passages prophetically speak of “kings” coming to bring tribute to the Messiah (cf. Ps. 72:10; Isa. 60:3), Matthew gives us no indication that these wise men are themselves kings—and Matthew also does not tell us whether there were only three of them.<sup>9</sup> A better model for this story from the Old Testament may come instead in the person of Balaam, a foreign prophet who foresees that “a star shall come out of Jacob, and a scepter shall rise out of Israel” (Num. 24:17).<sup>10</sup>

Matthew tells us this story to underscore the extraordinary nature of Christ’s birth. Although Jesus’ fellow Israelites did not make much of the event, wealthy, educated Gentiles came from a far away country—likely from Israel’s old enemy, Babylon—to worship this king.<sup>11</sup> The word “worship”

<sup>3</sup> Morris, *The Gospel According to Matthew*, 35; Osborne, *Matthew*, 86.

<sup>4</sup> Hendriksen, *Exposition of the Gospel According to Matthew*, 149.

<sup>5</sup> John Nolland, *The Gospel of Matthew: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, ed by. I. Howard Marshall and Donald A. Hagner, *The New International Greek Testament Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2005), 108.

<sup>6</sup> Hagner, *Matthew 1 - 13*, 32.

<sup>7</sup> Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Matthew’s Gospel*, 58.

<sup>8</sup> Carson, “Matthew,” 112.

<sup>9</sup> Hendriksen, *Exposition of the Gospel According to Matthew*, 152.

<sup>10</sup> France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 62.

<sup>11</sup> Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Matthew’s Gospel*, 57.

may sometimes simply mean “pay homage,” but the pagan ancient world often regarded kings as gods, so that it is likely that they mean exactly what they say: they have come to worship this child born as king (and who, therefore, is divine).<sup>12</sup> These magi, then, are the “first-fruits of the Gentiles” who will come to worship this Jesus, who was born the son of David in the city of David.<sup>13</sup> They recognize from the outset not merely that Jesus was “born to be king” some day in the future, but that that Jesus was “born king”—that is, born as the rightful king at his birth.<sup>14</sup>

### **Clinging to Illegitimate Kingship (Matt. 2:3–8)**

Matthew contrasts the great joy of the wise men to come find Jesus against the dismay of Herod and Jerusalem: “When Herod the king heard this, he was troubled, and all Jerusalem with him” (v. 3). From other historical sources, we know that Herod became paranoid about preserving his power at the end of his life, and his death is not far off from the time of this story (cf. Matt. 2:19): “He was particularly vulnerable to one ‘born as king,’ that is, of the traditional royal house, whereas Herod himself, son of an Idumean adventurer, had no such ancestral right to the throne.”<sup>15</sup> It is possible, then, that “all Jerusalem” becomes troubled simply to hear that a new king is born, but it is more likely that they are troubled as they imagine what Herod might do to deal with such a threat.<sup>16</sup> Regardless of the reasons for their troubled reactions, Craig Blomberg observes that, “The rejection of Jesus by Jerusalem foreshadows his similar fate at the end of his life.”<sup>17</sup>

Immediately, Herod gathered together his chief priests and scribes to inquire where the Christ would have been born (v. 4). By calling the chief priests and scribes, it is clear that Herod called the full Sanhedrin to weigh in on the issue, a group that would have also included the elders of the people, even if they are not explicitly mentioned here.<sup>18</sup> The question is clearly answered in the Old Testament, so they give their answer quickly, telling him that the Christ would be born “in Bethlehem of Judea” (v. 5). This is now the second time (shortly to be followed by a third) where we read the phrase “Bethlehem of Judea.” Matthew is going out of his way to emphasize that Jesus is the son of David, born in the city of David. Indeed, the Sanhedrin slightly alters Micah 5:2 when they say, “And you, O Bethlehem, in the land of Judah...,” since Micah 5:2 has “But you, O Bethlehem Ephrathah...” (v. 6). Now, Ephrathah is well known to describe the region where Bethlehem of Judah is located (cf. Gen. 35:19; 48:7; Ruth 4:11); however, again, Matthew is going out of his way to link Jesus’ birth with David, who was born of the tribe of Judah (Matt. 1:1, 3, 5, 17).<sup>19</sup>

There are two other subtle changes to Micah 5:2 in Matthew’s quotation here. First, Micah 5:2 has “...who are too little to be among the clans of Judah,” while Matthew’s quotation from the

---

<sup>12</sup> Osborne, *Matthew*, 87.

<sup>13</sup> Calvin, *Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists, Matthew, Mark, and Luke*, 128.

<sup>14</sup> Morris, *The Gospel According to Matthew*, 36.

<sup>15</sup> France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 69–70.

<sup>16</sup> Osborne, *Matthew*, 88.

<sup>17</sup> Craig L. Blomberg, *Matthew*, The New American Commentary 22 (Nashville, TN: Broadman Press, 1992), 63.

<sup>18</sup> Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Matthew’s Gospel*, 62.

<sup>19</sup> France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 72.

Sanhedrin has, “are by no means least among the rulers of Judah” (v. 6). Where Micah emphasized the smallness and obscurity of Bethlehem, Matthew shows that great glory has come to this obscure town because of its being the birthplace not only of David, but of the greater son of David.<sup>20</sup> Finally, rather than carrying the quotation to the line “whose coming forth is from of old, from ancient days,” Matthew’s quotation here appends a prophecy from a different portion of Scripture (“who will shepherd my people Israel”), a phrase declared about David when he was anointed as king in 2 Samuel 5:2 and 1 Chronicles 11:2.<sup>21</sup> Matthew is not playing fast-and-loose with the text, but paraphrasing words and bringing in another passage to show how these ancient prophecies have been fulfilled, albeit in an entirely unexpected way through the birth of Jesus as king.<sup>22</sup>

In response to Herod’s new knowledge, we read that he “summoned the wise men secretly...” (v. 7). Importantly, this word for “secretly” is the same word to describe how Joseph intended to divorce Mary “quietly” (Matt. 1:19). Joseph’s secrecy was to protect Mary from shame, and, furthermore, when Joseph received revelation that Mary’s pregnancy was from God, he abandoned his plan to divorce her. By contrast, Herod engages in secrecy once he receives the revelation of where the child would be born, so that he can determine the timeline outside of the hearing of those around him. Herod is not seeking to protect others, but himself. Furthermore, he does not respond to revelation by faith, but by a scheme to remove this threat to his kingdom. So, Herod tells the wise men to find the child, and then to send word to Herod so that he may come to worship the child as well (v. 8). Herod’s plan may have come to fruition if he had simply sent a murderous delegation with the wise men; however, John Calvin rightly sees the providence of God in protecting Christ: “Let us learn, that a miracle was effected, in rescuing the Son of God from the jaws of the lion. Not less at the present day does God infatuate his enemies, so that a thousand schemes of injuring and ruining his Church do not occur to their minds, and even the opportunities which are at hand are not embraced.”<sup>23</sup>

### Coming Under the True King (Matt. 2:9–12)

The unsuspecting wise men listened to the king, and went on their way, following the star as it led them to the precise place where Jesus was staying (v. 9). We do not know if the star corresponds to any stellar phenomena that we may track, although some have proposed a supernova or a comet; however, whatever this star is, Matthew tells us that it moves and leads the wise men on their journey. When the star leads them to their destination, they “rejoiced exceedingly with great joy” (v. 10). Upon entering the house, we read that they see the child with Mary. Matthew does not tell us that Joseph is here; however, Leon Morris is probably right when he suggests that including the mother, but excluding the father, is somewhat natural if a mother is holding her child.<sup>24</sup> When they finally find Jesus, they fall down and worship him (v. 11a). Again, the word “worship” does not

---

<sup>20</sup> France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 73.

<sup>21</sup> Osborne, *Matthew*, 89.

<sup>22</sup> “For those who are familiar with the original text the alteration will stand out as a challenge to think through how Matthew’s story relates to the prophetic tradition.” (France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 73.)

<sup>23</sup> Calvin, *Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists*, 1:135.

<sup>24</sup> Morris, *The Gospel According to Matthew*, 41.

necessarily refer to the worship of a deity, and sometimes only to showing honor to royalty. Even so, William Hendriksen notes that there are multiple places in the Bible when someone (wrongly) falls down to worship a mere creature, and are rebuked for it (e.g., Acts 10:26; Rev. 22:8, 9; cf. 19:10): “The magi, however, are not told to desist. They may have made more progress in the true faith than we realize.”<sup>25</sup>

More than worshipping the child, they offer him gifts: gold, frankincense, and myrrh. Some have tried to find symbolism in these gifts, seeing gold as symbolic of royalty or the temple, frankincense as a gift for a god, and myrrh for death; however, if this is intentional, “Matthew says nothing about this.”<sup>26</sup> Matthew’s emphasis is rather on the way that Gentiles come from afar to worship Israel’s Messiah. It is in this connection that we gain some background to explain the specific gifts that these wise men bring, as R. T. France notes:

Most obviously, the visit of foreign dignitaries to Jerusalem to see the son of David recalls the story of the Queen of Sheba (1 Kgs 10:1–10), and Matthew’s specific mention of the presentation of gold, frankincense, and myrrh echoes her royal gift to Solomon of “gold and a great quantity of spices” (1 Kgs 10:10), as well as other OT passages which take her visit and gifts as a model for the future glory of the Messiah (Ps 72:10–11, 15: “tribute,” “gifts,” “gold of Sheba”; Isa 60:5–6: “the wealth of the nations,” “gold and frankincense,” also with specific mention of Sheba). The “kings” who are the donors in Ps 72:10–11; Isa 60:3 are the source of the later Christian tradition which by the early third century had turned Matthew’s magi into kings. Matthew thus prepares the way for Jesus’ later declaration that “something greater than Solomon is here” (12:42).<sup>27</sup>

In contrast to the “suspicions of illegitimacy” in chapter 1, and against the plotting of Herod to murder this child, these Gentiles fully and freely recognize the glory of the child whom they worship.<sup>28</sup> Jesus’ status as king is not only established by his legal lineage through adoption, but by the formal recognition of the nations.

This story ends with a remarkable dismissal of Herod’s schemes: “And being warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they departed to their own country by another way” (v. 12). God thwarts Herod’s plans with the ease of shooing away a fly. While Herod may have secured so much power to himself that the people are terrified of hearing that a new king has been born (v. 3), he is no match for the One who truly holds power. We see in this a magnificent picture of Christ’s kingdom.<sup>29</sup> Christ’s kingdom is worthy of all adoration, praise, and honor; His glory and power are spiritual and invisible, rather than worldly and visible. Nevertheless, it is in this that the glory of Christ’s kingdom shines all the more brightly, as the kingdoms of this world routinely underestimate it and suffer because of their miscalculations.

---

<sup>25</sup> Hendriksen, *Exposition of the Gospel According to Matthew*, 171.

<sup>26</sup> Morris, *The Gospel According to Matthew*, 41.

<sup>27</sup> France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 62.

<sup>28</sup> Blomberg, *Matthew*, 66.

<sup>29</sup> Calvin, *Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists*, 1:128.

## Discussion Questions

1. What is the significance of the fact that Jesus was born in “Bethlehem of Judea” (v. 1a)? What is the significance of this fact for the reign of “Herod the king” (v. 1b)? Why do the wise men from the east come to Jerusalem in search of Jesus (v. 2)? What has led them there? What do they hope to find? How does Matthew portray this clash of two kingdoms—the earthly kingdom of Herod, and the heavenly kingdom of Jesus—from in just two short verses?
2. What is Herod’s response to the question of the wise men (v. 3)? Why are the people of Jerusalem troubled as well (v. 3)? Why does Herod need to assemble the full Sanhedrin to answer such a simple question from the Bible (v. 4)? What does Herod’s ignorance tell us about his faith? What does the apathy of the members of the Sanhedrin (in contrast to the eagerness of the wise men) tell us about their faith? Why is Herod unwilling to worship this new king?
3. What is the response of the wise men as they continue on their quest (v. 9–10)? Why do these Babylonian wise men have such joy to find the one born king of the Jews—a people their country had conquered only a few hundred years earlier? What do their gifts tell us about their devotion (v. 11)? What is the goal of their faith? What do we learn from the simplicity with which God thwarts the plots of Herod (v. 12)?
4. How much revelation have you been given in comparison with the wise men, who followed a star? How much revelation have you been given in comparison with the members of the Sanhedrin, who studied the Old Testament? What is your response to the revelation you have given in the Scriptures of the Old and New Testament? Do you willingly surrender your own kingdom to the true kingship of Jesus? Where do you try to retain some of your power and authority? Why?