

EVENTS ACCOMPANYING JESUS' BIRTH

Many have attempted to demonstrate from Matthew 2:16 that the visit of the Wise Men (*Magi* = Latin from Greek *Magoi*, plural of *Magos*) and Herod's subsequent slaughter of the infants in Bethlehem occurred when Christ was about two years old.

Then Herod, when he saw that he was mocked of the wise men, was exceeding wroth, and sent forth, and slew all the children that were in Bethlehem, and in all the coasts thereof, from two years old and under, according to the time which he had diligently enquired of the wise men.

To strengthen their thesis, they note that the Lukan account uses the Greek term "*brephos*" (βρεφος, 2:12) which they say is used to pertain to an unborn, newborn, or an infant whereas Matthew uses the words "*paidion*" (παιδιον, 2:8, 9, 11, 13, 14, 20, and 21) and "*pais*" (παις, 2:16) which supposedly designates a child of at least one year of age rather than an infant.¹ They add that the Wise Men came to the house in Matthew's account (2:11) rather than a manger as in Luke 2:16, indicating that a different time frame is involved in the two narratives. Thus, they insist, Luke is speaking of the time of Christ's birth whereas Matthew is referring to events about two years after His birth.

However, the distinction is neither that precise in the Greek nor in the Scriptures.² The word "*Paidion*" **is** used of infants. John the Baptist is said to be a "*paidion*" when he is but 8 days old (Luke 1:59, 66, 76), as is Christ Jesus at the time of His birth (Luke 2:17) and when He was 40 days old (Luke 2:27; also see John 16:21; Heb.11:23). Indeed, "*brephos*" **is** used of a young child (2 Tim. 3:15; Luke 18:15–17). Furthermore, "*pais*" would fall into the same age group as "*paidion*" in Mat. 2:16 since the latter term is used nine times in the same context in that chapter.

To insist that Jesus was no longer an infant because the *Magi* visited Him in a house rather

¹ Leslie P. Madison, "Problems of Chronology in the Life of Christ", (unpublished Th.D. dissertation, Dallas Theological Seminary, 1963), pp. 25–27.

² Harold W. Hoehner, *Chronological Aspects of the Life of Christ*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Pub., 1977), p. 24.

than a stable is imprudent. His parents would have moved into a house as soon as possible. After all, Bethlehem was the city of Joseph's birth (Luke 2:2–3), and he would be known there. Further, the whole tone of Matthew 2:1 ff. is that the *Magi* visited the Christ child soon after His birth. This is seen by their question: "Where is he that *is* born King of the Jews?" They did not say "was" born (past tense) which would have been proper had two years elapsed.

The timing in the Authorized Version is clear that "**When**³ Jesus was born in Bethlehem ... there came wise men from the east to Jerusalem". As far back as c. AD 135, Justin Martyr wrote in support of this thesis saying, "the Magi from Arabia, who as soon as the Child was born came to worship Him" as did Tertullian (c. AD 200).⁴

Indeed, they were directed to go to Bethlehem as it was the foretold place of the child's birth. Were Jesus two years old when the Wise Men came, they should then have been led to Nazareth not Bethlehem, for that is where he was living at that time (Mat. 2:23; Luke 2:39–40). Yet no mention whatsoever is made of Nazareth in the verses that follow until after the return from Egypt.

Moreover, the "two years" of Matthew does not demand that Jesus be of that age. Herod's slaughter of children up to two years of age was only to make certain that his infant rival did not escape. This is in keeping with his documented wicked and ruthless character. He already had 3 of his own sons murdered, 45 members of a rival faction slain, his wife's 17-year-old brother drowned in a bath, her 80-year-old grandfather put to death, and even had her falsely accused and executed — all in order to secure the throne for himself.⁵

³ William Tyndale's 1534 NT, the 1557 Geneva Bible, the 1380 Wycliffe, the 1539 Great Bible (Cranmer's), the 1595 Bishops Bible and other pre-King James English versions also read "When" here at Matthew 2:1.

⁴ Justin Martyr, *Dialogue with Trypho*, *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, vol. I, Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson, eds., (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Pub. Co., 1885), 88; Tertullian, *On Idolatry*, *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, vol. III, ch. ix, p. 65. Jack Finegan reached the same conclusion: *Handbook of Biblical Chronology*, (Princeton University Press, 1964), p. 248.

⁵ Henry S. Gehman, (ed.), *The New Westminster Dictionary of the Bible*, (Phil., PA: The Westminster Press, 1970), pp. 379–382 (Herod).

So desperate a man would neither take chances nor have any compunction for slaying additional innocent children to maintain that security. Herod's natural propensity for overkill, inherent in his makeup, is unmistakably demonstrated by the salient fact that his edict did not merely call for the destruction of the male children in Bethlehem. He extended the blood bath as far as Ramah, a village in the tribal allotment of Benjamin some ten miles north of the City of David (Mat. 2:16–18).⁶

Finally, if Matthew is telling us of a time when Jesus is two years old and living in Nazareth (Matthew 2:23; Luke 2:39), why should God instruct Joseph to flee to Egypt in order to escape Herod? The children were only being slain in the area around Bethlehem. This would hardly seem prudent as in order to reach Egypt from Nazareth they would have to pass through or in close proximity to Herod's domain of Judea.

They would be manifestly safe where they already were, being about 70 miles north of the slaughter. Indeed, the same reasoning applies to the fact that the Wise Men returned to their own country "another way" (Mat. 2:12).

Were they in Nazareth such action would have been unnecessary for they would have been well out of harms way by simply returning back up the "Fertile Crescent" to the "east" as King Herod was in Jerusalem (Mat. 2:3). However, such evasive steps would have been judicious had they have been south of Jerusalem in Bethlehem.

Now **when** Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judaea in the days of Herod the king, behold, there came wise men from the east to Jerusalem, (Mat. 2:1)

Thus, the correct order of events concerning the birth of Christ Jesus is:

1. He was born in Bethlehem – five miles south of Jerusalem (Mat. 2:1). The shepherds came that night (Luke 2:11–16).
2. **When** He was born in Bethlehem, the *Magi* (or Wise Men) came (Mat. 2:1, KJB; compare "having been" or "after" in other versions).

⁶ Flavius Josephus, *Josephus Complete Works*, trans. by William Whiston, (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Publications, 1960), *Wars of the Jews*, I, 29, 2; *Antiquities*, XVI 11, 7; XVII 3, 2, etc.

Thus the *Magi* came before Herod's presence the following morning or afternoon and, being warned of God in a dream that night, departed to their own country (singular! thus they are all from the same country, not 3 different ones as tradition relates) from Bethlehem by a route that would by-pass Jerusalem and Herod (Luke 2:12).

He was born in a manger because there was no room for them in the inn (Luke 2:7) and was moved into a house almost certainly on the following day (Mat. 2:7) as word of the birth had not yet reached Jerusalem (a point which will be explained subsequently).

Note: There is no mention of a cave or is the number of the *Magi* given as 3; their names are not given or their races. The number 3 was selected because three gifts were brought (Mat. 2:11), but such reasoning is pure conjecture and constitutes adding to Scripture. This is all based on Roman Catholic tradition and is unsupported by Scripture.

3. They fled to Egypt before news of His birth could reach Jerusalem, Jesus being only a day or so old.
4. He was circumcised on the 8th day (Luke 2:21), almost certainly while en route to Egypt – as was done to Moses' "firstborn" son, Gershom, on the way down to Egypt (Exo. 4:21–25, 2:22, cp. 18:4).
5. Herod dies within 40 days of his edict to slaughter the male children (like Pharaoh's attempt to kill the male babies – again similar to Moses) so that Joseph and Mary returned from Egypt to Jerusalem by the 40th day after Jesus' birth in order to dedicate Jesus at the Temple (Luke 2:22; Lev. 12:26; see Mat. 2:22, and note: "notwithstanding", KJB).
6. Immediately afterward, they left to return to Nazareth (Luke 2:39, cp. 2:4 and Mat. 2:19–23), being warned of God in a dream and not wanting to tarry there for fear of Herod's son, Archelaus.

So Joseph and Mary fled to Egypt very soon after Jesus' birth. Herod died within a few days so that they can return back to Jerusalem by the 40th day after the birth for the Temple dedication.

Luke 2:17–18 tell us that the shepherds gave testimony throughout all the region as to the message which the angels had given unto them:

For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, which is Christ the Lord (Luke 2:11)

Bethlehem is only about five miles south of Jerusalem. It is inconceivable that two years could have elapsed and such a momentous story had not yet reached Herod or the priests in Jerusalem.

The entire religion of Judaism is founded upon the coming of a Messiah. The whole expectancy of that religious order was looking forward to His appearance. Yet when Herod inquired of all the chief priests and scribes as to where the Messiah should be born, not one of them made mention of the testimony of the shepherds. Rather, they quoted from Micah 5:2:

But thou, Bethlehem Ephratah, though thou be little among the thousands of Judah, yet out of thee shall he come forth unto me that is to be ruler in Israel; whose goings forth have been from of old, from everlasting (Mic. 5:2).

Are we to believe that the rabbi from the synagogue in Bethlehem did not report this message to his superiors in Jerusalem? Are we actually expected to think that in two years no layman had carried this story to the Temple and that so ruthless a despot as Herod had no “ears” to hear of his rival’s birth – that he knows nothing of an event which is being told openly and that has occurred under his very nose? The answer is obvious.

This constitutes irrefutable proof that the Wise Men came at Jesus’ birth for if *two* years had elapsed, Herod would surely have already heard of the birth. The priest and scribes did not mention the testimony of the shepherds when Herod inquired of them (Mat. 2:1, 4) because the story had not yet had time to travel the five miles to Jerusalem.

This point is greatly strengthened when Luke 1:57–66 and 76 are considered. A similar series of events had occurred only six months earlier at the birth of John the Baptist; namely, a supernatural birth (Luke 1:7, 18), an angel’s presence, and the whole matter being published throughout all the hill country of Judea (Luke 1:65–66). Furthermore, this wonder child was to be the forerunner of the Messiah (Luke 1:76, cp. Mal. 3:1, 6). Moreover, not only was no effort made to keep these happenings “under wrap”, they were openly proclaimed abroad.

Lastly, the account of Mary’s purification at the Temple in Jerusalem on the 40th day after the birth of Jesus (Luke 2:22–39, cp. Lev. 12:2–6)

relates that two credible witnesses, Simeon and Anna, gave public testimony as to Jesus’ personage. Again, this was all done openly at the Temple.

Could two years have passed and *none* of these events come to the attention of Herod, much less to that of the priests and scribes who ministered at the Temple daily? Do not these simple considerations from the Holy Writ instruct all would-be scholars and laity alike as to the actual circumstances attendant to the birth of our Lord?

Indeed, the prophecies foretold Messiah’s birth – the birth of the God-King, of Immanuel – that God would become flesh. Thus, the *birth* was the momentous event. There is neither mention nor allusion to His second year anywhere in the Old Testament; hence, no significance whatever can rightly be attached to it.

Moreover, the reason the Lukan account of the Birth and that in Matthew are so dissimilar is that they are from two different perspectives. The Holy Spirit directed Matthew to record the events attendant to the birth of Christ Jesus from the husband’s point of view. This is obvious for in it we find Joseph featured as the main personage (second only to Christ).

Matthew depicts:

- (1) Joseph’s struggle with Mary’s “premature” pregnancy;
- (2) the angel’s appearance giving him encouragement and instructions as to what to name the baby (Mat. 1:18–25);
- (3) the dream wherein the angel tells him (not Mary) to flee to Egypt (2:13);
- (4) instructions to him by the angel to return from Egypt (2:19–21); and
- (5) his bringing his family to dwell in Nazareth (2:23).

Clearly, Joseph is prominent in this account revealing that Matthew is recording the “father’s” viewpoint of the Birth. Thus the genealogy in Matthew 1:1–17 is that of Joseph. It depicts him as a direct descendant of King David through whom Messiah Jesus (as Joseph’s adopted son) obtained the *royal right* to David’s throne as prophesied in many Scriptures (2 Sam. 7:4–29; Psa. 89:3–4, 19–37; Luke 1:30–33).

Conversely, Luke records the events relevant to the Birth from the mother's perspective and features Mary. For example, we find:

- (1) the angel Gabriel appearing to Mary to explain the impending supernatural conception (Luke 1:26–38);
- (2) her commendation from her cousin Elisabeth (who had been carrying John the Baptist in her womb six months, Luke 1:31–45);
- (3) Mary's "magnificat" (Luke 1:46–56);
- (4) her purification and sin offering 40 days after Jesus' birth at His Temple dedication; and
- (5) Mary "kept" all the happenings of these days and "pondered" them in "her heart" as is twice recorded in the second chapter (Luke 2:19, 51).

Even at the Passover episode at the Temple in Jesus' 12th year, it was Mary's words that were recorded – not Joseph's (Luke 2:48). Therefore it must be seen that the genealogy preserved in the third chapter of Luke is that of Mary's.

This genealogy shows that although she was maternally of the tribe of Levi (Luke 1:5, cp. vs. 36), she was also of the family of David and thus of the Tribe of Judah but through a different non-kingly lineage than Joseph (cp. Psa.132:11; Rom.1:3; Heb.7:14; and Rev.22:16). Therefore, it is through Mary's egg that Jesus obtained the *legal right* to David's throne, fulfilling many OT Scriptures that Messiah would be a *physical* descendant of that son of Jesse (several Scriptures demand this in stating that there was a genuine "conception", Gen. 3:15; Isa. 7:14; Mat. 1:21; Luke 1:31, cp. vs. 36).

Hence, the Matthew and Lukan genealogies are identical in the generations from Abraham to David, but Matthew traces our Lord's ancestry from the royal line through David's son Solomon. However Luke follows the lineage through another of David's sons, Nathan – who did not inherit the throne. Thus the differences between the two Gospel accounts may be appreciated and understood.

Moreover, the curse God put upon Jehoiakim: "He shall have *none* to sit upon *the throne of David*" (Jer. 36:30) and upon his son Jeconiah (Coniah = Jehoiachin = Jechoniah): "he *and his seed*...Write ye this man *childless*, a man that shall not prosper in his days: *for* no man of his seed shall prosper, sitting upon *the throne of David*" (Jer. 22:28 & 30) was fulfilled and no

contradiction exists for Jehoiakim's son Coniah (Jeconiah) did not sit on David's sovereign throne but only upon a vassal throne under King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon.⁷

These verses do not say Jeconiah was to have no children. In fact they speak of his having "seed" and they are listed in 1 Chron. 3:16–18 and Matthew 1:12–13. Rather, Jeremiah 22:30 says to count him childless in the sense that none of his offspring would ever sit on the sovereign throne of his ancestor (father) David. This was fulfilled as his successor on the chattel throne to Nebuchadnezzar was his uncle Zedekiah, not his son Shealtiel (Jer. 37:1).

Note that the curse on Jeconiah (Coniah) necessitates a miraculous birth for the Messiah, as He must somehow come through the kingly line in order to obtain the *royal right* to David's throne; yet he cannot be a blood descendant of Jeconiah (Coniah). God solved this by the miracle of the incarnation (cp. Gen.3:15, "her seed").

The Wise Men (Jews whose ancestors had remained in Persia after the Babylonian exile and had not returned under Zerubbabel) were *not* astronomers or astrologers as is often surmised, but were Jewish rabbis or priests who were looking for the promised "Star out of Jacob" (Num. 24:17–19; Esther 1:13).

Furthermore, the star was neither the result of a conjunction of the planets nor was it a comet. It was a miraculous supernatural occurrence as the Scriptures demand; it moved, disappeared, reappeared and *stood still* over the place where Jesus lay. These then are the scriptural facts attendant to the birth of Jesus the Christ, the Son of the Living God – indeed, the Creator Himself come in the flesh.

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⁷ Indeed, Josiah was the last of the sovereign kings of David's lineage to sit upon David's throne. The point being made is God promised David that his throne and kingdom were to have an enduring and everlasting fulfillment (2 Sam. 7; Psalm 89). Further, the throne of David was a sovereign dominion, not a puppet or vassal to any foreign kingdom. All of Josiah's sons that reigned, as well as his grandson Jeconiah (Mat. 1:11, "Jeconiah and his brethren"), were vassals to either Egypt or Babylon. None were sovereign rulers. Whereas Ahaz, Hezekiah and Manasseh did have periods during their reigns in which they endured subjugation and paid tribute to various monarchs of the Assyrian Empire, all enjoyed intervals of sovereign autonomous rule.