

Jim's Notes for The Gospel According to St. Matthew 2:1-23

Matthew 2:1, "behold, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem"

The Magi (*μαγοι*) "wise men" were originally a priestly caste of the Medes, they retained their functions after their conquest by the Persian Empire. The term later became more general, for astrologers, sorcerers, etc. of any nationality (Daniel 1:10; Acts 8:9; 13:8). The Revised Standard Version translates magi as "wise men". One could also translate it as "sages" since Matthew clearly does not intend a derogatory sense. Their homeland ('the East') is most probably the district just beyond Jordan and the Dead Sea, *i.e.* Nabataean Arabia which at that time reached as far north as Damascus. For this use of "the East": see the early writers: Justin, Origen, Epiphanius. Here Jews and Arabs speaking similar dialects formed a mixed population. The nature of their gifts confirms the Arabian origin of the wise men: Arabia was renowned for its gold (I Kings 9:28) incense, (Jeremiah 6:20), and myrrh, (Pliny, *Natural History*, 12, 30-5).

The traditional names of the wise men Caspar, Melchior, and Balthazar were not used until the 9th century. In the middle ages the relics believed to be the bodies of the wise men were kept in Milan, Italy. In 1164, they were transferred to Cologne, Germany where they are housed to this day in the great gothic cathedral of that city.

Matthew 2:6, "And you, O Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for from you shall come a ruler who will govern my people Israel." Micah 5:2.

Septuagint: "And you, Bethlehem, house of Ephrathah, are few in number to be reckoned among the thousands of Judah; yet out of you shall one come forth to me, to be a ruler of Israel; and his going forth was from the beginning, from eternity." Micah 5:2.

Hebrew: "But you, O Bethlehem Ephrathah, who are little to be among the clans of Judah, from you shall come forth for me one who is to be ruler in Israel, whose origin is from old, from ancient days." Micah 5:2.

According to passage in John 7:27 and also 7:42, there was some disagreement amongst the Jews as to from where the Messiah would come. It would seem that Herod's scholars had no such difficulty. The Messiah, the son of David, according to their interpretation of the prophet Micah, would be born in the same city in which David was born, Bethlehem.

Matthew 2:11, "going into the *house* they saw the child with Mary his mother. . ."

The wise men enter the *house* (οικια). This is either new more permanent housing or possibly still the cave-stable (cf. the 2nd cent. tradition recorded by St. Justin Martyr, *Against Trypho*, 78,5), not an unusual home for people in Judea at that time. The time of the wise men's visit is to be put after the Purification and Presentation of our Lord in the Temple, (Luke 2:33-38), which took place forty days after our Lord's birth, since Joseph plainly would not have taken his Jesus and Mary to the capital after the warning of from God to Joseph in (Matthew 2:13). It was probably not more than a year after the nativity. Joseph though he may have been present is not mentioned; with this delicate touch, Matthew recalls the virginal conception and Mary's incomparable closeness to the child.

Matthew 2:11, "Then, opening their treasures, they offered him gifts, gold and frankincense and myrrh. . ."

The gifts are probably products of the Magi's native land (cf. Gen 43:11), indispensable for visits to a king. The 'frankincense' (i.e. precious' incense) is, like the myrrh, a resin. Myrrh, a perfume, (Song of Solomon 3:6), was used in powdered form as a deodorant at burials (John 19:39) and, mixed with wine, as a narcotic (Mark 15:23), hence its suggestion of mortality, adopted in later symbolism: *gold* for the king; *incense* for the God; *myrrh* for the mortal'.

In no place in St. Matthew does it ever speak of "three wise men". There could have been any number of magi who came to that house in Bethlehem to venerate the newborn King whose coming had been foretold for so long. The number three is derived from the three gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh.

Matthew 2:15, "Out of Egypt have I called my son."

Hosea 11:1 is made to fit the incident. The original text refers in the strictly literal sense to the end of the Egyptian exile for Israel (God's' son', cf. Ex 4:22 f.). The text is not a formal prophecy since the tense of the verb, faithfully preserved by Matthew, is past. Matthew, therefore, introduces the original situation merely as a providential rehearsal of the present event, thus calling our attention to a fuller sense of "son" than Hosea could have imagined. God had called his son, Israel, out of Egypt through the leadership of Moses. Jesus was, one at the same time, the Son of God and the new Moses. It was only fitting that God would fulfill the Old Testament type in Exodus through calling his Son Jesus.

Matthew 2:16, "Then Herod, when he saw that he had been tricked by the wise men, was in a furious rage, and he sent and killed all the male children in Bethlehem and in all that region who were two years old or under, according to the time which he had ascertained from the wise men."

King Herod the Great, who reigned from 37 to 4 B.C, had a persecution complex. The sacrifice of a few children, in Bethlehem, to ensure the safety of his throne would have meant nothing to Herod. He killed over half of his ten wives. He put to death his sons, Aristobulus and Alexander, in 6 BC, whom Antipater, his son by his wife Doris, had accused of plotting against their father's life (Josephus, *The Antiquities of the Jews*, 16,11). This same Antipater, who in cruelty was a true son of Herod, was himself accused and convicted of having prepared poison for his father, and was also put to death (Josephus, *Wars of the Jews* 1,33,7). The last joy of the dying king was afforded by a letter from Rome authorizing him to kill his son Antipater. Five days later King Herod died. The Emperor Augustus is quoted as saying that it would be safer to be Herod's pig than to be his son.

"Bethlehem and in *all that region*" (the term excludes neighboring villages) had a population of about 1,000 which, allowing for the high infant-mortality rate, would bring the number of boys of two years and under to perhaps around 20. The age of the victims indicates that the star had appeared not more than two years before (about 6 BC) probably about one year (5 BC), Herod callously leaving a safety-margin on either side.

Matthew 2:18: "A voice was heard in Ramah, wailing and loud lamentation, Rachel weeping for her children; she refused to be consoled, because they were no more" (Jeremiah 31:15).

Septuagint: "A voice was heard in Ramah, of lamentation, and of weeping, and wailing; Rachel would not cease weeping for her children, because they are not" (Jeremiah 31:15).

Hebrew: "A voice is heard in Ramah, lamentation and bitter weeping. Rachel is weeping for her children; she refuses to be comforted for her children, because they are not" (Jeremiah 31:15).

At first glance this could be a little confusing. Bethlehem is five miles south of Jerusalem. Ramah is five miles *north* of Jerusalem on the border between Judah and Benjamin. It was the city in which the Babylonians gathered the people of Judah before they were sent into exile, in 586 BC. Since Ramah was in the land of Benjamin, Jeremiah puts this lament for the children of Israel into the mouth of Rachel, the mother of Benjamin and Joseph. Rachel was buried in Bethlehem (Genesis 35:20-21) and thus became associated with that town. St. John Chrysostom, in the 4th century said in a homily on this passage of Matthew, "Rachel was buried in the racecourse near Bethlehem. Since her grave was nearby and the property belonged to her son Benjamin, (Ramah was of the tribe of Benjamin) the children beheaded in Bethlehem could reasonably be called Rachel's children" (*Homily on Matthew*, 9).

Matthew 2:20, "Rise, take the child and his mother, and go to the land of Israel, for those who sought the child's life are dead."

It seems that Herod died very soon after an incident involving the execution of several individuals including the high priest during a fast day.

"But Herod deprived this Matthias of the high priesthood, and burnt the other Matthias, who had raised the sedition, with his companions, alive. And that very night there was an eclipse of the moon" *The Antiquities of the Jews* (17,6,4).

This eclipse of the moon (which is the only eclipse mentioned by Josephus) occurred on March 13, 4 BC. This is the best indicator that we have of calculating the date of the death of King Herod.

According to Josephus, recorded in *The Antiquities of the Jews* (17, 9, 3), Herod died before the feast of the Passover of that year, which fell on April 11, 4 BC. Thus it can be safely assumed that King Herod died sometime between March 13 and April 11, 4 BC.

Matthew 2:22, "But when he heard that Archelaus reigned over Judea in place of his father Herod, he was afraid to go there, and being warned in a dream he withdrew to the district of Galilee."

Archelaus, the elder son of Herod by the wife Malthace, was designated to be king of Judea and Samaria in his father's will. Archelaus had to wait six months for confirmation from the emperor Augustus. The emperor granted him only the title *ethnarch* (nation ruler) instead of *king*. He soon aroused opposition by marrying his brother's wife (a crime like that of Herod Antipas later) and having been accused of cruelty by his subjects, "not able to bear his barbarous and tyrannical usage of them", he was banished to Vienne, Gaul (today's France), in AD 7 (Josephus, *The Antiquities of the Jews* 17,13,1-2).

Matthew 2:23, "And he went and dwelt in a city called Nazareth, that what was spoken by the prophets might be fulfilled, "He shall be called a Nazarene." "Nazareth was a tiny and insignificant Palestinian village. [It had, in the 1st century, perhaps a population of 200 to 400 residents.] It was located in Galilee, the most northerly part of the country. The term "Nazarene" refers to Jesus' geographic origin, but the critics used it as a term of abuse when he began his public mission (John 1:45). Even in the time of St. Paul the Jews tried to humiliate the Christians by calling them Nazarenes (Acts 24:5). Many prophets predicted that the Messiah would suffer poverty and contempt (Isaiah 52:2 ff.; Jeremiah 11:19; Psalm 22), but the words "he shall be called a Nazarene" are not to be found as such in any prophetic text. They are, rather, as St. Jerome

points out, a summary of the prophets' teaching in a short expressive phrase. However, St. Jerome himself (cf. Commentary on Isaiah 11:1) says that the name "Nazarene" fulfills the prophecy of Isaiah 11:1: Christ is the "shoot" (*nezer*, in Hebrew) of the entire race of Abraham and David" (*The Navarre Bible St. Matthew*, p. 40).