



[Matthew 2.1-23](#)

King Herod and the birth of Jesus

Date: 70 CE

Place: Antioch (majority view)

Language: Greek

Category: New Testament

Title of work: The Gospel According to Matthew

Reference:

2:1-13

Commentary:

Much scholarship has been devoted to establishing the Jewish context of Matthew's Gospel, with its Gentile context (including significantly the Roman imperial system) less discussed. Some scholars of the last decade or so, however, such as Warren Carter (see "Matthew and the Gentiles," p. 259-261), have sought to address this. There have been two dominant positions on this issue: 1) that the Matthean author is addressing a mixed audience of both Jews and Gentiles, and as such, supports taking the salvific message of Jesus to both (see Brendan Byrne, "The Messiah in whose Name 'The Gentiles will Hope,'" p. 55-73); and 2) the Gospel writer's community have suffered greatly at the hands of the Romans in Antioch, and wish to avoid the Gentile world as far as possible (see David Sim, "The Gospel of Matthew and the Gentiles," p. 19-48). In order to appreciate the complexity of the Matthean author's narrative, the Roman imperial context cannot be ignored, as it is alluded to in various episodes with varying degrees of subtlety.

This passage relates the famous, but ahistorical story of the so-called "massacre of the innocents." Eastern magi following astral signs to the location they believe to be the birthplace of the "king of Jews" have arrived in Jerusalem, and inquired as to the baby's whereabouts. King Herod (i.e. Herod the Great, the client king of Judea put in place by the Romans) hears of their search and immediately worries that this supposed new king might supplant him. After consulting with the chief priests and scribes, who tell him that the Hebrew Scriptures prophesy the birth of a ruler of Israel in Bethlehem, Herod instructs the magi to report back to him when they locate the child. The magi eventually arrive at the birthplace of Jesus, but they and Jesus's father, Joseph, are warned in dreams that Herod poses great danger to the new child, and so both take precautions to avoid him, with Joseph, Mary, and Jesus fleeing to Egypt. In a brutal killing spree, Herod has all male children in Bethlehem killed, in an attempt to do away with this new threat to his throne. Even after Herod's death, when his son Archelaus takes over his rule, Joseph is afraid for his family, and so avoids Judea altogether, settling instead in Galilee. King Herod the Great is portrayed in the ancient sources as both a homicidal tyrant and a highly successful builder (he was responsible for building a huge artificial harbour at Caesarea Maritima, renovating the Jerusalem temple, and completing a huge fortress on a hill (Herodium) at Masada) (see [Josephus, Jewish Antiquities XV](#); Strabo, *Geography* XVI.2.46). Herod was placed on the throne of Judea by the Romans after serving them on the battlefield, and reigned from around 37 BCE until his death in 4 BCE. In order to ensure that his throne was secure, however, Herod killed his brother-in-law, his grandfather, and three of his sons, in addition to his wife and mother-in law! After his death, Augustus divided his kingdom between his three surviving sons – it is one of these, Archelaus, placed in charge of Judea, Samaria, and Idumea, whom the Gospel writer has Joseph choose to avoid in verse 22. For a discussion of the historical details of Herod's life during the last decade of his rule, see Samuele Rocca, *Herod's Judaea*, p. 349-350, who argues that the increasingly physically ill king was viewed with hostility not because of his alleged cruel personality, but because of mental illness. In this connection, Maurice Sartre notes a Sabaean inscription which reads: "the year that Herod went mad" (Maurice Sartre, *Alexandre à Zénobie*, p. 784). Moreover, Josephus, *Antiquities* XVII.175–180, 193 and *War* I.659–660, 666, relate that Herod ordered his soldiers to imprison many "illustrious men coming from every village" in the hippodrome of Jericho, who were to be executed upon the public announcement of Herod's death as a public display of grief for the king (contrary to his wishes, however, the men were freed once Herod was dead).



The details of the story related in this passage, particularly Herod’s mass murder of Bethlehem’s young and the staying of the holy family in Egypt are inventions of the Gospel writer, intended to present Jesus as a new Moses figure, who will also lead God’s people out of subjugation. Exodus narrates that Moses too escaped mass infanticide ordered by the Egyptian Pharaoh, who like Matthew’s Herod, is also concerned that he will be supplanted, in this case by rebellious Israelites. Moses is placed by his mother in a basket on the river Nile, where he is eventually found by Pharaoh’s daughter, and raised in the Egyptian royal palace (Exodus 1:8-2:10). Later of course, he would come to lead the enslaved Israelites out of Egypt, when Pharaoh finally submits to Moses’s request after suffering the ten plagues inflicted upon Egypt by God (Exodus 7:14-12:32). Jesus will also grow up to be a redeemer figure, but this time not one who will free people from physical slavery, but from their sin.

The figure of Herod for the Matthean author, therefore, is used partly to make this comparison between Jesus and Moses. There is more to it than this theological message, however, as this passage reveals various significant viewpoints: firstly, the extremely negative view that the Matthean author has of leadership figures (notably Herod and the chief priests, who both play their part in attempting to murder the infant son of God); and secondly, the political relationship between the Roman imperial order and the Jews. The Gospel writer is no fan of Herod, but this is not simply because he attempts to murder the Messiah – Herod represents Rome, he has allied himself with the Romans in order to seek power and authority, and as can be seen in the fourth chapter of the Gospel, in the narration of Jesus’s temptation in the wilderness by Satan, Matthew understands the Roman imperial order to be an agent of Satan ([Matthew 4:1-11](#)). Herod, then, can be understood to be doing Satan’s bidding also, having succumbed to the very temptation of rulership that Jesus refuses to take from Satan in Matt 4:8-10. The chief priests, whom Herod summons to help him locate Jesus, are also described by Josephus, *Jewish Antiquities* XX.249-251, as appointed by Rome as rulers, and Josephus emphasises their readiness to prove their allegiance. They, along with Herod, then, share the Gospel writers disdain, and are readily named as taking an active role in Jesus’s attempted murder.

Herod’s fear in this passage is that another “king of the Jews” will overthrow him. Indeed, that this is the title given to Jesus was politically subversive, aside of any religious connotations that it also holds (i.e. the citation of Micah 5:2 in verse 6 that this king will be the “shepherd” to lead God’s people, Israel). Herod has worked hard to ensure that his allegiance with Rome has benefitted him, and his allegiances with local Jewish elites who are also cooperating with Rome (verse 3) and readiness to use military force to protect his interests (verse 16) are telling of his tenacity. Ultimately, however, the Gospel writer makes sure to highlight his futile efforts, referencing his death three times (verses 15, 19, and 20) (see Warren Carter, “Matthew and the Gentiles,” p. 273). In the end, true and just power will come from aligning oneself with God and his plan (Jesus), not the dominant, yet temporary, imperial rulers.

Keywords in the original language:

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Thematic keywords in English:

- [Archelaus](#)
- [Bethlehem](#)
- [chief priests](#)
- [client king](#)
- [dream](#)
- [Egypt](#)
- [Galilee](#)
- [Herod the Great](#)
- [Jerusalem](#)
- [Jesus](#)
- [Joseph](#)
- [Judea](#)
- [king of the Jews](#)
- [magi](#)
- [Mary](#)
- [Messiah](#)
- [murder](#)
- [Nazareth](#)
- [prophecy](#)
- [scribes](#)
- [star](#)
- [succession](#)

Bibliographical references: Byrne, Brendan, "[The Messiah in Whose Name 'The Gentiles will Hope' \(Matt 12:21\): Gentile Inclusion as an Essential Element of Matthew's Christology](#)", Australian Biblical Review 50 (2002) : 55-73

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Jesus is tempted by Satan in the wilderness

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