# Matthew 2

## How Will People Respond to the King?

### Key Verse

*"Where is He who has been born King of the Jews?"*

Matthew 2:2

### Big Idea

Encountering the King demands a response. Knowledge alone is not enough; Matthew places before us worship, hostility, indifference and obedience, and asks us to consider our own response to Yeshua.

### Introduction

Chapter 1 answered the question, "Who is this child?" Matthew established Yeshua's identity as the promised Messiah, the Son of David and the Son of Abraham, and showed how He entered David's royal line through Joseph's obedient faith. Chapter 2 now asks a different question: How will people respond to the King?

Matthew's answer is immediate and revealing. Gentile Magi travel a great distance to worship Him. Religious leaders know the Scriptures but remain unmoved. Herod hears of the King and responds with fear and hostility. Joseph continues to listen to God and obey. From the beginning, Matthew makes it clear that encountering Yeshua demands a response.

Matthew 2 introduces sharply different responses to Israel's King. The Magi seek Yeshua and worship Him; Herod fears Him and tries to destroy Him; the religious leaders know the Scriptures yet remain where they are; Joseph repeatedly hears God and obeys. Through Bethlehem, Egypt, the Slaughter of the Innocents and Nazareth, Matthew also shows that Yeshua's story is inseparably connected with Israel's story and the Hebrew Scriptures.

### Opening Prayer

Heavenly Father, as I read this chapter, help me to see Yeshua as Matthew presents Him: Israel's promised King, surrounded by the story and Scriptures of His people. Give me eyes to notice the different responses of the Magi, Herod, the religious leaders and Joseph.

Keep me from being satisfied merely with knowing the right answers. Teach me to seek You, worship You and obey when You speak. As I study Your Word, help me to hear what You are saying and to respond with faith. Amen.

# Commentary

## Strangers Come Looking for Israel's King (Matthew 2:1–2)

Matthew begins simply enough: "After Yeshua was born in Bethlehem in Judea, during the time of King Herod..." (Matthew 2:1). We know the name of the village Bethlehem. Christmas cards, carols and nativity scenes have made it one of the most familiar place names in the Bible. But Matthew isn't giving us geography merely to set the scene. Bethlehem is the city of King David. David was born there, and it was there that Samuel anointed the shepherd boy who would become Israel's great king (1 Samuel 16:1–13). Now, centuries later, another King has been born in David's town.

And what a surprise that a king should be born there. Kings rule from capital cities. Surely Israel's King should be born in Jerusalem. But God often surprises His people. His ways are not always our ways, and His choices are not always the ones we would make. The King is born, not in Jerusalem, but in the little village of Bethlehem.

Why does Matthew tell us this? Because the location is part of the story. Chapter 1 has already established Yeshua's connection with David through the genealogy. Now even the place of His birth points us back to the promises God made concerning David and his descendants.

Then some unexpected visitors arrive. Matthew calls them simply Magi from the east. We need to clear away some Christmas-card imagery here. Matthew never says there were three of them. He never calls them kings. He gives us no names. The familiar picture of three kings named Caspar, Melchior and Balthazar belongs to later Christian tradition, not to Matthew. The word 'Magi' probably describes learned men from the East who observed the heavens and advised rulers. They may have come from Persia or Babylonia, but Matthew does not tell us their point of origin. What we can say is that they appear to be Gentiles—that is, non-Jews. And that is worth noticing.

But perhaps there is more background here than first meets the eye. Centuries earlier, large numbers of Jewish people had been carried east into Babylon. Daniel rose to extraordinary prominence there, eventually being placed over the wise men of Babylon (Daniel 2:48). Later, under the Persian Empire, Esther and Mordecai also occupied positions of remarkable influence (Esther 2:17; 8:1–2). The Jewish people did not disappear from that part of the world when the exile ended. Jewish communities remained throughout Babylon and Persia, carrying with them their Scriptures, their traditions and their expectation of what God had promised Israel.

So when Magi arrive "from the east" looking for the King of the Jews, it is reasonable to wonder what they already knew. The Jewish people had been there for centuries. The Word of God had been there too. What did these men know, and how did they know it? Matthew does not answer that question. He simply tells us that they arrive in Jerusalem asking an extraordinary one: "Where is He who has been born King of the Jews?" Notice what they do

not ask. They do not ask whether a king has been born. They ask where He is. They have come expecting to find Him, and they tell us why: they have seen His star and have come to worship Him.

## The King Who Was Troubled by Another King (Matthew 2:3–8)

Then Matthew gives us another response. “When King Herod heard this he was troubled, and all Jerusalem with him” (Matthew 2:3). Of course Herod was troubled. The Magi have just walked into Jerusalem asking, “Where is He who has been born King of the Jews?” There was already a man in Jerusalem who considered that title his own. Herod. And Herod had not been born King of the Jews. His position depended upon Rome. The arrival of foreign dignitaries asking about someone who had actually been born king was not simply an interesting theological question. To Herod, it sounded like a political threat.

Herod summons the chief priests and the scribes and asks where the Messiah is supposed to be born. And here comes one of the great ironies of the chapter. They know. They do not need months of research. They know their Bible. Bethlehem. They quote the prophet Micah, who speaks of a ruler coming from Bethlehem who will shepherd God’s people Israel (Micah 5:2; Matthew 2:5–6). And then, apparently, they stay in Jerusalem.

Think about that. The Magi have travelled a considerable distance because they have seen a sign and are looking for the King. The religious leaders have something far more substantial: the Scriptures themselves. They know the prophecy. They know the town. Yet Matthew gives us no indication that they make the short journey to Bethlehem. The Magi have a little light and follow it. The religious leaders have God’s Word and remain where they are.

## Life Application

The problem is that knowing the answer is not the same as responding to it. We can know our Bibles. We can answer theological questions. We can win arguments. We can even teach other people what the text says and still remain sitting in Jerusalem when we ought to be heading for Bethlehem.

The chief priests and scribes know the prophecy. The Magi seek the Person.

Herod’s response is becoming clear as well. He secretly calls the Magi and determines when the star first appeared. Then he sends them to Bethlehem with instructions that sound wonderfully spiritual: search carefully for the child and report back so that he too may worship Him (Matthew 2:7–8). Of course, Herod has no intention of worshipping anybody. The Magi genuinely want to worship the King. Herod merely wants to know where He is. Two people can use exactly the same religious language while having entirely different hearts.

## They Came to Worship (Matthew 2:9–12)

After listening to Herod, the Magi continue toward Bethlehem. Then something remarkable happens. Matthew tells us that the star they had seen in the east went ahead of them until it

stopped over the place where the child was (Matthew 2:9). People have spent centuries trying to identify that star. Was it a conjunction of planets? A comet? A supernova? Some other astronomical event? Or was this an entirely supernatural manifestation of God's guidance? Matthew is much more interested in where the star leads the Magi than in explaining what the star was.

When they see it, they rejoice. Not mildly. Matthew piles up the language: they rejoice exceedingly with great joy. These men have travelled a long way looking for the King, and now their search is coming to an end. Then Matthew gives us a detail that has been largely overwhelmed by our Christmas traditions: "After coming into the house they saw the Child with Miriam His mother..." (Matthew 2:11). The house. Not a stable. Not a manger. And Matthew calls Yeshua a child, not a newborn baby. Matthew uses the Greek word *paidion*, "child," here. That does not prove a particular age, but it does reinforce what Matthew actually presents: the Magi encounter a child in a house, not explicitly a newborn in the manger.

We get another clue later. Herod will order the deaths of the boys in Bethlehem and its vicinity who are two years old and under, based upon the time he had learned from the Magi (Matthew 2:16). Herod was hardly a man inclined to take chances. His two-year limit may tell us something about the timing of the star, but it also tells us something about Herod. When his throne was threatened, Herod was taking no chances.

Then the Magi do what they said they had come to do. They worship Him. These learned Gentile visitors do not merely satisfy their curiosity. They do not congratulate Miriam. They do not simply admire the child. They fall down before Him. Then they open their treasures and present Him with gifts: gold, frankincense and myrrh (Matthew 2:11). Three gifts, incidentally, not three Magi. That is probably one reason Christian tradition eventually settled upon three visitors. Matthew never gives us their number.

Much has also been made of the meaning of the gifts: gold for a king, frankincense for deity or priesthood, and myrrh anticipating suffering and death. Those connections can make for a beautiful sermon, but Matthew does not explain the gifts that way. What he does tell us is that these were treasures. The Magi have come prepared to honour a king.

## Life Application: Giving as Worship

Many times in church or synagogue we hear about offerings and tithes, and often the appeal relates to the needs of a building or a program. The roof needs fixing. The electric bill needs paying. The ministry needs supporting. Those are legitimate needs. But that is not what is happening here. The Magi are not giving to fix the new roof or pay the electric bill. They bring costly gifts because they have come to worship. Their giving says something about the One before them: He is worthy.

That is a motivation worth keeping in all our giving. Yes, our gifts may pay bills, support ministries, feed people, or accomplish any number of practical things. But before any of that, our giving can be an act of worship.

We give “unto the Lord.”

There may also be a very practical side to their generosity. Immediately after this, Joseph will be told to take Miriam and Yeshua and flee to Egypt. A family suddenly becoming refugees would need resources, and now they have been given gold, frankincense and myrrh. We have seen something like this before. At the Exodus, God caused the Egyptians to give the Israelites silver, gold and clothing as they departed (Exodus 3:21–22; 12:35–36). Later, those people possessed the precious materials from which they could contribute generously toward the Tabernacle (Exodus 25:1–8; 35:20–29). God had provided what they would need before they knew what they would need it for. And here, before Joseph knows that he will soon be taking his family into Egypt, costly gifts arrive from strangers from the East. God’s provision can precede God’s instruction.

Then God warns the Magi in a dream not to return to Herod, and they leave for their country by another way (Matthew 2:12). There is almost a touch of irony there. Herod believes he is manipulating the Magi to locate his rival. Instead, God simply removes them from Herod’s scheme. The powerful king in Jerusalem thinks he is controlling events. He is not. Herod says he wants to worship Yeshua. The Magi actually do. One talks about worship. The others fall on their faces. Matthew is showing us that our response to the King is revealed by considerably more than our words.

## Out of Egypt I Called My Son (Matthew 2:13–15)

No sooner have the Magi departed than the mood changes dramatically. The joy of worship gives way to danger. An angel of the Lord appears to Joseph in a dream and tells him to get up, take the child and His mother, flee to Egypt and remain there because Herod is about to search for the child to destroy Him (Matthew 2:13). This is becoming quite a pattern for Joseph. He has already been told in a dream not to be afraid to take Miriam as his wife. Now comes another dream, another angelic message and another instruction that will turn his life upside down.

And once again, Joseph obeys. He does not wait until morning. He does not ask whether there might be a more convenient solution. Matthew tells us that Joseph gets up during the night, takes the child and His mother, and leaves for Egypt (Matthew 2:14). Joseph does not say very much in Matthew’s Gospel. In fact, Matthew never records a single word spoken by him. But Joseph’s actions speak loudly. When God speaks, Joseph obeys. Joseph demonstrates his faith not by what he says, but by what he does.

On one level, Egypt makes practical sense. It was outside Herod’s territory, and there was a substantial Jewish population there. Joseph and Miriam would not have been the only Jewish family living among fellow Jews in Egypt. But Matthew sees something much bigger happening. He tells us that this took place to fulfil what the Lord had spoken through the prophet: “Out of Egypt I called My Son” (Matthew 2:15). That quote is from Hosea 11:1.

And here is where things get interesting. Go back and read Hosea and you discover that Hosea is not predicting the Messiah's childhood escape to Egypt. He is talking about Israel: "When Israel was a youth I loved him, And out of Egypt I called My son" (Hosea 11:1, NASB). Hosea is looking backwards to the Exodus. So why does Matthew take a verse about Israel and apply it to Yeshua? Why does Matthew tell us this?

Here Matthew gives us a deeply Jewish insight. Yeshua is the consummate Israel. He represents the nation. Israel was God's son, called out of Egypt; now Yeshua, God's Son, is also called out of Egypt. Matthew is not looking through the prophets for isolated predictions that he can match with certain events in Yeshua's life. He is reading Israel's Scriptures as Israel's story, and seeing that story reaching its fullest expression in Israel's Messiah.

Yeshua does not replace Israel. He walks within Israel's story and embodies Israel's calling. That gives us an important principle for reading Matthew. When Matthew says something happened "to fulfil" the Scriptures, we should not automatically assume that the original passage was a prediction waiting for an event to make it come true. Sometimes Matthew is showing us an earlier event or pattern in Israel's story that takes on greater significance in Messiah.

## Rachel Weeping for Her Children (Matthew 2:16–18)

When Herod realizes that the Magi have not returned to Jerusalem, his pretence disappears. Matthew tells us that Herod becomes furious. He orders the killing of the boys in Bethlehem and the surrounding area who are two years old and under, using the information he had obtained from the Magi to determine the age (Matthew 2:16). This event became known in Christian tradition as "the Slaughter of the Innocents." This is where Herod's response to the King reaches its terrible conclusion. The Magi hear about the King and worship Him. Herod hears about the King and tries to kill Him.

Herod's action is horrifying, but it is consistent with the man we have already met. He will tolerate no rival. The arrival of the Messiah does not immediately remove evil from the world. Instead, His arrival exposes it. One man's determination to preserve his own power brings unimaginable grief into the homes of Bethlehem.

And once again Matthew takes us back to the Hebrew Scriptures. He quotes Jeremiah's picture of a voice heard in the city of Ramah, with Rachel weeping for her children and refusing to be comforted because they are no more (Jeremiah 31:15; Matthew 2:17–18). Why Rachel?

Rachel, Jacob's beloved wife, died while giving birth to her second son on the journey from Bethel toward Ephrath, that is, Bethlehem (Genesis 35:16–19). As she was dying, she named the child Ben-Oni, "son of my sorrow," while Jacob renamed him Benjamin, Binyamin, "son of the right hand" (Genesis 35:18). Centuries later Jeremiah pictures Rachel weeping again, this time for her descendants. At that time, the people of Judah had been conquered by Babylon, and captives were gathered in the city of Ramah before being taken into exile (Jeremiah 40:1).

Jeremiah poetically hears Rachel, one of Israel's mothers, weeping for her children as they are carried away (Jeremiah 31:15).

Now Matthew brings Rachel's tears back to Bethlehem. Why does Matthew tell us this? Once again, he is not searching the Hebrew Scriptures for a sentence that happens to resemble what has just occurred. He sees another moment in Israel's story being lived out before us. Rachel wept for Israel's children. Now the mothers around Bethlehem weep for theirs.

But there is something important about Jeremiah 31 that we could easily miss if we read only the single verse Matthew quotes. Rachel's tears are not the end of Jeremiah's story. Immediately after Rachel's weeping, God tells her to restrain her tears because there is hope for her future, and her children will return (Jeremiah 31:16–17). Later in the same chapter comes the extraordinary promise that God will make a new covenant with the whole house of Israel and with the house of Judah (Jeremiah 31:31–34).

The grief is real. But it is not the end of the story.

## Jewish Insight

There is also an echo here that a Jewish reader might hear. Another ruler once feared the growing number of Israel's children and ordered Hebrew boys to be killed (Exodus 1:15–22). In that story, one child escaped the slaughter: Moses (Exodus 2:1–10). Now another murderous ruler orders the deaths of Jewish boys, and once again a child whom God intends to use for deliverance escapes. We are not forcing the comparison. Matthew is already surrounding Yeshua's childhood with the language and story of Israel: Egypt, a threatened child, a murderous king, Israel's sorrow, and God's purposes continuing through it all.

## Back to the Land of Israel (Matthew 2:19–22)

Herod's violence does not have the final word. Matthew tells us that after Herod dies, an angel of the Lord appears once again to Joseph in a dream in Egypt and tells him to take the child and His mother and go into the land of Israel because those who sought the child's life are dead (Matthew 2:19–20). There is something familiar about that language. In Exodus, Moses had fled Egypt because Pharaoh sought to kill him. Years later, while Moses was living in Midian, God told him to return because all the men who were seeking his life were dead (Exodus 4:19). Now Joseph receives remarkably similar instructions concerning Yeshua.

We have already seen Matthew connect Yeshua with Israel through Hosea's words, "Out of Egypt I called My Son." Now the language surrounding Yeshua's return also echoes the story of Moses. Israel's Scriptures provide the language through which Matthew tells the story of Israel's Messiah. And Joseph does what by now we have come to expect. He gets up, takes the child and His mother, and returns to the land of Israel. Joseph's obedience has become almost wonderfully predictable. God speaks; Joseph acts. There is no recorded argument, delay or negotiation.

But returning to Israel does not mean the danger has completely disappeared. Herod is dead, but his son Archelaus is ruling Judea. Herod the Great's kingdom had been divided after his death, and Archelaus received Judea, Samaria and Idumea. He quickly earned a reputation for brutality. Joseph's fear of returning to Judea, therefore, was hardly unreasonable. Once again Joseph is warned in a dream, and the family withdraws north into Galilee, settling in Nazareth (Matthew 2:22–23).

## He Shall Be Called a Nazarene (Matthew 2:23)

That brings us to Matthew's final—and perhaps most puzzling—fulfilment statement in this chapter. Matthew tells us that Joseph came and lived in a city called Nazareth, fulfilling what was spoken through the prophets: "He shall be called a Nazarene" (Matthew 2:23, NASB). There is a problem. Where is that in the Hebrew Scriptures? Go looking for a prophet who says, "He shall be called a Nazarene," and you will not find one. That has puzzled readers for a very long time.

But notice something Matthew does differently here. Earlier he has referred to what was spoken through the prophet. Here he says the prophets. Plural. That may be our first clue. Matthew does not appear to be giving us a direct quotation from one particular prophet. He may instead be drawing together a theme found among the prophets.

One explanation is especially interesting from a Jewish perspective. Isaiah says, "Then a shoot will spring from the stem of Jesse, And a Branch from his roots will bear fruit" (Isaiah 11:1, NASB). The Hebrew word translated Branch is netzer (נֵצֶר). Netzer. Nazareth. The similarity has led many interpreters to suggest that Matthew is making a Hebrew word connection between Yeshua's hometown and Isaiah's promised Branch from the line of Jesse.

There is another possibility. Nazareth was an obscure place, and the prophets portray God's servant as one who would be despised and rejected. Matthew may be gathering up that broader prophetic theme: the Messiah would be regarded as insignificant and rejected, just as someone identified with Nazareth could be looked down upon. Matthew may even expect his Jewish readers to hear more than one echo.

What matters is that Nazareth is not an embarrassing footnote Matthew needs to explain away. The Messiah who belongs to David's royal line will grow up, not in a palace in Jerusalem, but in an obscure Galilean town.

## The Question Remains for Each of Us

And that brings us to the end of an extraordinary chapter. Foreigners have come looking for Israel's King. Religious leaders knew where He should be found but apparently stayed where they were. Herod tried to destroy Him. Joseph repeatedly heard God's instruction and obeyed. Yeshua went down into Egypt and returned to the land of Israel. Once again, Israel witnessed the horror of mothers weeping for their children. And through all of it, Matthew has kept taking us back to the Hebrew Scriptures.

How will people respond to the King? The Magi worship. Herod rages. The religious leaders know. Joseph obeys. And Matthew leaves the question with us: How will we respond?

## Takeaways

Encountering the King demands a response.

Knowing the Scriptures is not the same as responding to the One they reveal.

Worship is seen not only in our words but in what we are willing to offer the King.

God's provision can precede God's instruction.

Yeshua does not replace Israel; He walks within Israel's story and embodies Israel's calling.

Joseph shows us an obedience that listens and acts.

Grief is real, but it is not the end of the story.

God's purposes continue even when powerful people oppose them.

## Memory Verse

*"Where is He who has been born King of the Jews? For we saw His star in the east and have come to worship Him."*

Matthew 2:2

## What's Next?

Yeshua has been identified as Israel's King, worshipped by visitors from the East, threatened by Herod, taken into Egypt and brought back to Israel. But many years will pass before Matthew tells us anything more about Him.

When the story resumes, another remarkable Jewish figure suddenly appears in the wilderness with a message for Israel: "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand" (Matthew 3:2, NASB). John the Immerser is about to prepare the way.