

# The Divine Protection of the Child Jesus

by John F. Walvoord

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*John F. Walvoord's sermon explores the divine protection surrounding the early life of Jesus, emphasizing key events and their prophetic significance.*

**Scripture:** Isaiah 11:1, Matthew 2:1-19, Acts 12:23

**Topics:** "Christ's Birth", "Divine Protection"

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## Description

John F. Walvoord delves into the significant events surrounding the birth and childhood of Jesus as recorded in Matthew, focusing on the visit of the Magi. These wise men, students of astrology, followed a star to find the newborn King, causing turmoil in Jerusalem and troubling King Herod. Despite the Jewish leaders' knowledge of the prophecy of the Messiah's birthplace, they did not actively seek the child. The Magi, guided by a supernatural star, worshiped Jesus with fitting gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh, then departed without returning to Herod. Joseph, warned by an angel, fled to Egypt with his family to protect Jesus from Herod's wrath, fulfilling prophecies and highlighting Christ's significance as the Son of God.

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## Transcript

From the many incidents relating to the birth and childhood of Jesus, Matthew mentions only three highly significant events (cf. Lk 1:26-2:52). The first is the visit of the Magi. Many misconceptions have arisen concerning the visit. These Magi were students of astrology who searched the heavens for significant movement in the stars. They were not magicians in the evil sense, as liberals have charged; neither were they kings, even though they brought kingly gifts to the child King, Jesus. Their number is not told, but it probably was more than three. The time of their arrival was not the night of the birth of Jesus but some weeks later.

In Matthew's account, they appeared in Jerusalem, where they inquired concerning the birth of the King of the Jews. At this time, there was widespread expectation of the coming of a great ruler, a truth which was inherent in Jewish prophecy and spread by Jews as well as others over the Roman world. The Magi probably came from Babylon, which, for centuries, was a center of the study of astrology, as both Lenski and Allen observe.<sup>10</sup> Allen, after citing a dozen or more instances in ancient literature referring to Messianic expectation, comments, "The whole world was expecting the Savior King."<sup>11</sup>

The wise men, or the Magi (Gr. magio, from a Persian word for those who were expert in the stars), told inquirers that their interest was aroused by seeing an unusual star in the East, which signified to them that

the King had come. These tidings, when reported to King Herod, troubled him, for Herod knew all too well the Jewish aspiration of throwing off the Roman yoke and his own rule over them. Herod was an Edomite, a people hated by the Jews, and there was always the possibility that Jewish hope, aroused by the arrival of a supposed Messiah, could inflame them to rise up against him. The tidings of the Magi are reported by Matthew as troubling Herod and all Jerusalem with him.

Herod, having called an official meeting of the Sanhedrin--including all its three classes of members, the high priest, scribes, the elders--demanded of them a formal statement where the Messiah was to be born. This was common information, as it was stated in Micah 5:2, and Herod may have known the answer, but he wanted it officially from the Jewish leaders. They replied by paraphrasing Micah 5:2, with some additional facts from other Scriptures, or at least translated the Hebrew freely.<sup>12</sup> They named Bethlehem in Judea, which, although a small town, would distinguish itself as the birthplace of the one who would rule over Israel. Matthew adroitly answers Jewish unbelief concerning Jesus Christ by quoting their own official body to the effect that the prophecy of His birth in Bethlehem was literal, that the Messiah was to be an individual, not the entire Jewish nation, and that their Messiah was to be a King who would rule over them.

In the cunning mind of Herod, a plot had already formed to nip this growing bud of Messianic hope before it got out of hand. Having dismissed the Sanhedrin, he called the wise men to him privately and, with skill, inquired when the star appeared. He did so to pinpoint the age of the child. He further urged them to find the child and then bring him word that he also could worship Him. It is an amazing thing that Herod did not send his servants with them, and that the Jews themselves, stirred up as they were by the report, apparently did not lift a finger to search out the young child. As Richard Glover expresses it, "It is strange how much the scribes knew, and what little use they made of it."<sup>13</sup> Such is the appalling gulf between religious belief and practice.

The wise men, however, immediately set out for Bethlehem. To their amazement and delight, the star in the East reappeared and guided them so unmistakably that it even designated the house where the child was. The most probable explanation is that the star in the East as well as the star that guided them to Bethlehem were supernatural rather than natural phenomena. No star in the distant heavens could provide such accurate guidance.

With joy unbounded, they went to Bethlehem and found the young child with Mary, His mother. To Him, they made obeisance and worshiped in Oriental style, and presented their gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. Unquestionably the gifts were chosen appropriately: gold for His deity and majesty, frankincense for the fragrance of His life and His intercession, myrrh for His sacrifice and death.

#### Flight into Egypt, 2:12-15

That fateful night, God spoke both to the wise men and to Joseph. The wise men were instructed not to return to Herod, and they lost no time returning to their country by another route. In the night also, Joseph was warned by an angel of the Lord to take Mary and Jesus and flee to Egypt to avoid the murderous intent of Herod. Quietly, both the Magi and Joseph and his family stole away in the night. More details are not given. Artists picture Mary riding on an ass, holding the baby, and being led by Joseph. No Scripture is found as to where they stayed in Egypt. Matthew, however, anticipating the charge that Christ picked up magical arts by a long stay in Egypt, specifies that they were there only until the death of Herod, which occurred within three years of His birth.

Why was Joseph directed to Egypt? Why not to Babylon with the Magi, or some other direction? Matthew (2:15) cites Hosea 11:1, "Out of Egypt have I called my Son," referring to the exodus of Israel from Egypt to the promised land. Matthew draws the contrast between Israel, as the Son of Jehovah going to Egypt and returning, to Christ, the greater Son who also came from Egypt. In both cases, the descent into Egypt was to escape danger. In both cases, the return was important to the providential history of the nation Israel.

The reason for the departure to Egypt becomes all the more evident in Matthew's subsequent account. Herod, discovering he had been tricked by the Magi, ordered all the male children in Bethlehem, approximately two years old and under, to be killed. The number of children thus slain has been estimated to be from six to as many as thirty.<sup>14</sup> It, accordingly, was an outrage too small to be mentioned by historians, such as Josephus, who records many other murderous crimes of Herod.

The ruthless act, performed no doubt by soldiers who accomplished their horrible deed in the presence of the mothers, fulfilled the prophecy of Jeremiah 31:15-16. This prophecy referred to the captivity in Babylon and the slaying of children in the conquest of Judea by Babylon. The parallel in Bethlehem is all too evident. Rachel represents mothers in Israel who mourn their children. In both cases, sorrow came in a time when Israel religiously was in apostasy and under the heel of the oppressor. A later Roman ruler was to order this same Jesus nailed to a cross, the ultimate rejection of Israel's Messiah.

Death was also to overtake Herod shortly thereafter. Josephus, in his Antiquities, records Herod's horrible end, his body rotting away and consumed by worms.<sup>15</sup> His grandson, Herod Agrippa, was to die a similar death (Ac 12:23).

#### The Return to Nazareth, 2:19-23

The death of Herod made possible the return of Joseph from Egypt to Palestine (cf. Lk 2:39-40). Instructed in a dream by the angel of the Lord that he could return home because Herod was dead, Joseph began the long journey. Approaching Judea, however, he heard that Archelaus, the son of Herod, was on the throne. One of the first acts of Archelaus was to murder some three thousand people in the temple because some of their number had memorialized some martyrs put to death by Herod. Like father, like son. Instead of going back to Bethlehem, which Joseph probably considered a suitable residence for his royal Son, Joseph went instead to Nazareth in Galilee. Matthew declares this also was a fulfillment of prophecy: "He shall be called a Nazarene" (2:23). Endless explanations have been made of this, as no express passage in the Old Testament declared that Christ should be a Nazarene. The most plausible explanation is that it may be an oblique reference to Isaiah 11:1 where Christ is declared to be a rod (Heb. netzer) out of the stem of Jesse. Just as a rod has an insignificant beginning, so Nazareth was an insignificant city from which the Messiah would come. There is always the possibility that Matthew referred to an oral prophecy not recorded in Scripture.

The incidents of the worship of the Magi and the flight to and return from Egypt serve to emphasize Matthew's purpose not to give a complete life of Christ, but to record those incidents which significantly support the conclusion that Jesus Christ is the Messiah, the Son of David, the Son of God. Having skillfully painted this picture, Matthew picks up the narrative thirty years later with John the Baptist.

10 R. C. H. Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Matthew's Gospel*, p. 57; W. C. Allen, *The Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel According to S. Matthew*, pp. 11-12.

11 Allen, *ibid.*

12 Alfred Plummer, *An Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel According to S. Matthew*, p. 14.

13 Richard Glover, *A Teacher's Commentary on the Gospel of Matthew*, p. 14.

14 Lenski, p. 81.

15 Flavius Josephus, *Wars of the Jews*, 1:33. Cf. also Lenski, p. 83.

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