RECEPTION

Then Herod summoned the magi secretly and ascertained from them what time the star had appeared.
Matthew 2:7

The word Τότε – *then* – is a very common connective which introduces a new section of the narrative in Matthew. It is used about sixty-one times.

Why Herod summoned the presence of the magi is not told. Given his reputation, we can assume that Matthew desired to reflect Herod's character to the readers.

We can speculate that the design of secrecy was to prevent anyone from not only knowing Herod's possible murderous intentions, but to keep anyone from warning the magi of his treachery.

Herod appears to be keenly interested in the actions of the magi, and as a paranoid leader, why wouldn't he be? He had already killed three of his own sons to prevent any rival claims to his throne. Therefore, the news of the magi's inquiries regarding a child titled *"King of the Jews"* would be a priority for him.

The association of celestial phenomenon in conjunction with the birth or death of kings in the ancient world were seen as signs or portents. This would be why Herod *ascertained* the timing of the star in relation to the birth of the *King of the Jews.* It gave him a time frame to work with.

Worthy of note is that Herod did not challenge the magi's claim about the celestial phenomenon. Rather he proceeded as if he assumed its certainty.

And he sent them to Bethlehem, saying, "Go and search diligently for the child, and when you have found him, bring me word, that I too may come and worship him.
Matthew 2:8

The star had led the magi to Jerusalem but it was the prophecy of Micah and Herod's acquired knowledge of it, that led Herod to send the magi to Bethlehem.

Go and search diligently for the child – Why Herod who was so keenly interested in the affair, didn't just journey to Bethlehem with them, we are not told. What is related to us by Matthew is that the magi are told to *"search diligently."* Such is the concern of Herod's anxiety.

The hypocrisy of Herod's commission reeks; his sloth, too. He or his agents could make the two or three hour trip south to Bethlehem and taken a look for themselves. But neither his superstitious respect for the Magi's calculations nor a remnant of respect for Micha's Word moved him.
Chrysostom

The magi called the newborn *"the King of the Jews."* Herod once again does not refer to the one they seek with the same acknowledgment. Rather he diminishes the person of interest calling him instead παιδίου – *little child*. This seems to suggest that Matthew is allowing us insight into Herod's attitude as he views the new king in such diminutive terminology.

Whether or not the magi knew of Herod's reputation – and their absence concerning not seeking his audience when they came to Jerusalem suggests they may have – is unclear. What is not unclear nor will be left unclear to the readers are his intentions: and those intentions do not include going to worship the *"King of the Jews."*

> *After listening to the king, they went on their way. And behold, the star that they had seen when it rose went before them until it came to rest over the place where the child was. When they saw the star, they rejoiced exceedingly with great joy.*
> *Matthew 2:9-10*

Earlier the *star* had led the magi to the vicinity of Jerusalem. Once there they made inquiry as to where they might find the *King of the Jews.* Being directed by Herod's ascertained knowledge of the *Word of God* through the prophet Micah by the scribes, they are directed to Bethlehem.

Only now does the same star seem to appear once more to give guidance to the place where the child was located. By this account, it is suggested that the star was of a supernatural origin rather than a natural celestial phenomenon.

Whether natural, supernatural, or mythical, the point Matthew is making is that by divine guidance the magi are able to arrive at the destination they set out for. In this sense, their arrival to the *King of the Jews* corresponds and bookends their departure when they first saw the star rise.

What seems significant in the text is that Matthew is contrasting the phenomenon of the *appearing / reappearing / suggested uncertainty of the star* which had led the magi toward their destination, against the absolute certainty of the Word of God in Micah which pinpointed and brought them to their destination.

> *Ever since the coming of Jesus Christ we are not referred to any other source of saving revelation other than one: the ministry of the biblical Word of Jesus Christ.*
> *Bruner – Matthew, page 60*

The *star*, regardless of its natural or supernatural origins, is in Matthew's narrative, uniquely *Christocentric.*

Matthew makes sure we know that the significance of the *star* is that it drew the initiated to Christ. That was its purpose to Matthew. That was the reason the magi packed up and followed it. Nothing more is reported of it by Matthew. Nothing more needs to be.

The Word of God, the Scriptures, are where we find the fullest revelation of Yahweh.

To have Scripture without the knowledge of Christ is to have no scripture at all.
Bruner – Matthew, page 61

The divine guidance of the *star* for the magi is evident from the beginning of their story to the end of it. When they near the end of the journey, when they were coming to the child, *"they rejoiced exceedingly with great joy."*

Matthew uses what is called a *"Hebrasim"* here. That is, his wording is intentionally repeated to stress a point, in this case the *exceeding joy* of the magi.

And going into the house they saw the child with Mary his mother, and they fell down and worshipped him. Then, opening their treasures, they offered him gifts, gold and frankincense and myrrh. And being warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they departed to their own country by another way.
Matthew 2:11-12

When the magi finally arrive, they don't find a baby within a manger in a stable, but a child in a house. Clearly Matthew relays to us that the baby has grown some and the family has found a better residence within a home.

The first words Matthew reports to us when the magi first see the child born *King of the Jews* is that *"they fell down and worshipped him."*

In Matthew, this is the first reported *reception* by the world of the King.

Matthew, as all the Gospel writers, is an *evangelist* and as such his desire is to show the fundamental transformation occurring when anyone first encounters Christ.

They fell down and worshipped him.
They opened their treasures.
They offered him gifts.

The account is simple, the message clear, the reception awestruck and reverent.

The beauty of Matthew's account is that the child does not speak. There is no glory or ostentatious fanfare. There are no halos in evidence over mother and child. There is reverence but that reverence is reserved for the child alone.

Matthew will later call us back to the true source worship for all created beings.

Then Jesus said to him, "Be gone, Satan! For it is written, "You shall worship the Lord your God and him only you shall serve."
Matthew 4:10

The word *worshipped* means to *kiss the hand.* Among the Orientals or those from Persia and Mesopotamia, it means to fall upon the knees and touch the ground with the forehead as an expression of profound reverence. It is truly an act of humble adoration.

Matthew wants the readers to understand that this child is *Immanu-el – God with us!* No ordinary child is this. That was the point of his though-out genealogy – to reveal that this child of no paternity is the virgin-born *Immanuel*, the preeminent Son of God.

The magi do not simply *worship* the child in the modern sense, they fall down on their faces. If the child wasn't God incarnate, Matthew would certainly have revealed their reverence as false.

In Judaism this kind of worship is reserved only for God alone. Matthew suggests that the prophets foretold this type of reverence for Yahweh.

And nations shall come <u>to your light</u>, and kings to the brightness of <u>your rising</u>.
Isaiah 60:3

It's interesting that here, at the beginning of his Gospel narrative, and at the conclusion of it, Matthew emphasizes the worship of Jesus.

And going into the house they saw the child . . . and they fell down and worshipped him.
Matthew 2:11

Now the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain which Jesus had directed them. And when they saw him they worshipped him.
Matthew 28:16-17

Matthew reports that the magi's actions included more than veneration of the child.

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

May the kings of Tarshish and of the coastlands render him tribute; may the kings of Sheba and Seba bring gifts! May all kings fall down before him, all nations serve him!
Psalm 72:10-11

Matthew 1 reveals how Jesus miraculously became the *Son of David.* Matthew 2 reveals how Jesus miraculously became the Gentiel's *Son of Abrahm* – worshipped surprisingly by the astrological *outsiders.*

It is here that the four Gentile women who are woven into the genealogical account by Matthew prepare us for the universality of the Messiah. What might be surprising is how quickly this *universality* is initiated at the Messiah's birth.

And being warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they departed to their own country by another way.
Matthew 2:12

The magi are warned in a dream by divine revelation not to report back to Herod. This would give Joseph, Mary and the child time to leave Bethlehem.

Even at this point, the magi are still privileged recipients of divine guidance.

Matthew thus far has told us repeatedly of God's revelation coming in the form of dreams and will report of this same guidance later.

> *But as he considered these things, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream, saying, "Joseph, son of David, do not fear to take Mary as your wife, for that which is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit.*
> *Matthew 1:20*

> *Now, when they had departed, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream and said, "Rise, take the child and his mother, and flee to Egypt, and remain there until I tell you, for Herod is about to search for the child, to destroy him.*
> *Matthew 2:13*

> *Besides, while he was sitting on the judgement seat, his wife sent word to him. "Have nothing to do with that righteous man, for I have suffered much because of him toady in a dream.*
> *Matthew 27:19*

Being obedient to the revelation, Matthew reports that the magi returned a different route than the one came by and returned to their country, the unknown place from which they came.

> *Already in this passage we see a motif that occurs throughout the Gospel: the presence of the messianic king demands decision and therefore causes division between those who accept and those who reject him. This accounts for the glaring contradictions in this passage in the presence of two kings. The extent to which Herod understands his own status as threatened becomes the terrifying subject of the following pericope.*
> *Hagner – Matthew, page 32*