

BIBLE SERIES: **"EXPLORING OUR AWESOME BIBLE"**

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LUKE 2 & MATTHEW 2 –MASSACRE AT BETHLEHEM; NAZARETH



In the last Bible Study, we ended with the wise men in the presence of king Herod, who was “troubled” by the news of the birth of the Messiah Child and a “star” that was leading them, but he managed to conceal his true intentions to them.

We read in Matthew 2:3-8, “When Herod the king heard this, *he was troubled*, and *all Jerusalem with him*. And when he had gathered all the chief priests and scribes of the people together, he inquired of them where the Christ was to be born. So they said to him, ‘In Bethlehem of Judea, for thus it is written by the prophet: ‘But you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are you not the least among the rulers of Judah; for out of you shall come a Ruler who will shepherd My people Israel’ (Micah 5:2). Then Herod, when he had secretly called the wise men, determined from them *what time the star appeared*. And he sent them to Bethlehem and said, ‘Go and search carefully for the young Child, and when you have found Him, bring back word to me, so that I may come and worship Him also.’”

Of course, Herod had no intentions to worship the Christ, but rather *to kill him*. Robertson’s *Word Pictures* describes Herod’s bloody character and why he was so troubled: “Those familiar with the story of Herod the Great in Josephus can well understand the meaning of these words. Herod in his rage over his family rivalries and jealousies put to death his two sons by (his second wife) Mariamne, Mariamne herself, and Antipater, another son and once his heir, besides the brother and mother of Mariamne and her grandfather John Hyrcanus II. He had made will after will and was now in a fatal illness and his fury was great over the question of the Magi. He showed his excitement and the whole city was upset (and afraid) because the people knew only too well what he could do when in a rage over the disturbance of his plans. The Roman historian, Macrobius, notes that Augustus had said it was better to be Herod’s *sow* (*hus*) than his son (*huio*s), for the sow had a better chance of life [since in Israel no pork was eaten and Herod didn’t eat it either] (*Sat. II. iv. II.*)”

”What was behind Herod’s pathological jealousy? The Bible reveals it was none other than Satan himself! Revelation describes what was spiritually happening then: “And the dragon stood before the woman who was ready to give birth, to devour her Child as soon as it was born. She bore male Child

who was to rule all nations with a rod of iron...and the great dragon...called the Devil and Satan, who deceives the whole world” (Rev. 12:4-5, 9). Satan was using Herod to attempt to assassinate Jesus, but as always, God ended up thwarting his evil schemes.

Also, there was an air of expectation in that region of the world about a coming Savior. One reason was the counting and fulfillment of Daniel’s 70 week’s prophecy, that said: “Know therefore and understand that from the going forth of the command to restore and build Jerusalem until the Messiah the Prince, there shall be seven weeks and sixty-two weeks” (Daniel 9:25). A literal translation of “70 weeks” is “seventy sevens” or seventy times seven. In Bible prophecy, a day represents a year (Num. 14:34; Ez. 4:6). Multiplying 7 weeks by seven is 490—the span of years covered by this prophecy. The date most widely accepted as the starting point was King Artaxerxes’ decree in 457 B.C. to rebuild Jerusalem. Since the Messiah would come in the 69th prophetic week and then He would be cut off in the middle of the 70th week, or 3 ½ years later, which is how long his ministry lasted. So 483 years after the decree takes us to the year A.D. 27 (you need to add a year for the year 0), precisely when Jesus Christ appears as the Messiah and His ministry begins.

It is probable that the wise men from the East, where Jewish teachings were important in Babylon and Persia, were familiar with Daniel’s prophecy and were on the lookout for “*His Star*” to appear around that time—and it did. As Num. 24:17 says, “*A Star shall come out of Jacob*, a Scepter shall rise out of Israel.” Notice the magi did not speak to Herod about “a star” but about “*His star*” (Mt. 2:2).

It was likely that for this reason, there was then a general belief that a Messiah would then appear. Even the Roman historian Suetonius wrote, “There had spread *all over the Orient* an old and established belief, that it was fated *at that time* for *men coming from Judea to rule the world*. This prediction...the Jews took to themselves; accordingly they revolted” (*Lives of the Caesars—Vespasian*, book IV:5). Tacitus, another Roman historian, adds, “There was a firm persuasion ...that *at this very time*, the *East* was to grow powerful, and *rulers coming from Judea were to acquire a universal empire*” (Tacitus: *Histories*, 5:13). Josephus also notes: “About that

time one from their country should become *governor of the habitable earth*" (*Wars of the Jews*, 6:5:4).

We continue, "When they heard the king, they departed, and behold, the star which they had seen in the East went before them, till it came and *stood over* where the young Child was. When they saw the star, they rejoiced with exceedingly great joy" (Mt. 2:8-10). Some think this star was a comet, others, an astronomical conjunction of stars or planets--but no star can go "before them" and then stand "over where the young Child was." What is the biblical answer?

Throughout the Old and New Testaments, a star can symbolize an angel as we read in Job 38:7 and Rev. 1:20. The most probable explanation is that an angel, shining with his glory, led the magi to the precise spot where Jesus Christ was living. It could have been the very house where He was born, as was explained in the last study.

What happened next? "And when they had come into *the house*, they saw the young Child with Mary His mother, and fell down and worshiped Him. And when they had opened their treasures, they presented gifts to Him: gold, frankincense, and myrrh" (2:11).

These gifts were the most expensive in those days, and befitting the birth of a king. Joseph probably used them to finance their flight into Egypt.

Since the wise men couldn't read Herod's mind and his treacherous intentions, God intervened, as we read, "Then, being *divinely warned in a dream* that they should not return to Herod, they departed for their own country another way" (Mt. 2:12).

Meanwhile, Herod was impatiently waiting for the wise man's report, and when they didn't show up, he was furious. God then intervenes to take Joseph, Mary and Jesus out of harm's way. We read, "Now when they had departed, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream, saying, 'Arise, take the young Child and His mother, flee to Egypt, and stay there until the death of Herod, that it might be fulfilled which was spoken by the Lord through the prophet, saying, 'Out of Egypt I called My Son'" (Hosea 11:1). Then Herod, when he saw that he was deceived by the wise men, was exceedingly angry, and he sent forth and put to death all the male children who were in Bethlehem and in all its districts, from two years old and under, according to the time which he had determined from the wise men. Then was fulfilled what was spoken by Jeremiah the prophet, saying: 'A voice was heard in Ramah, lamentation, weeping, and great mourning. Rachel

weeping for her children, refusing to be comforted, because they are no more' (Jer. 31:15). Ramah was a small town near Jerusalem, and Bethlehem was five miles south of Jerusalem, so it would not take very long for Herod's cruel soldiers to do their dirty work.

Robertson comments, "Herod did not know, of course, how old the child was, but he took no chances and included all the little boys in Bethlehem two years old and under, perhaps fifteen or twenty in number. It is no surprise that Josephus makes no note of this small item in Herod's *chamber of horrors*."

Herod died a horrible death some months later and his sons ruled in his stead. Only by divine instructions did Joseph know when it would be safe to go back to Israel. We read, "Now when Herod was dead, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared in a dream to Joseph in Egypt, saying, 'Arise, take the young Child and His mother, and go to the land of Israel, for those who sought the young Child's life are dead.' Then he arose, took the young Child and His mother, and came into the land of Israel. But when he heard that Archelaus was reigning over Judea instead of his father Herod, he was afraid to go there. And being warned by God in a dream, he turned aside into the region of Galilee. And he came and dwelt in a city called Nazareth, that it might be fulfilled which was said by the prophets, 'He shall be called a Nazarene'" (Mt. 2:19-23).

Expositor's explains the historical background of these verses: "Herod the Great made a late change in his will, dividing his kingdom into three parts. Archelaus, known for his ruthlessness, was given Judea, Samaria, and Idumea. Augustus Caesar agreed and gave him the title 'ethnarch' (more honorable than "tetrarch") and promised the title "king" if it was earned. But Archelaus proved to be a poor ruler and was banished for misgovernment in A.D. 6. Rome ruled the south through a procurator. But by that time Joseph had settled the family in Galilee. Herod Antipas was given the title "tetrarch" and ruled in Galilee and in Perea. Herod Philip became tetrarch of Iturea, Trachonitis, and some other territories. He was the best of Herod the Great's children; Jesus frequently retired into his territory away from the weak but cruel Antipas. Joseph, guided by the fifth and final dream, settled the family in Galilee. The town Joseph chose was Nazareth, which, according to Luke 1:26-27; 2:39, was his former home and that of Mary. Nazareth was a despised place (John 7:42, 52), even to other Galileans (John 1:46). Here Jesus grew

up, not as 'Jesus the Bethlehemite,' with its Davidic overtones, but as 'Jesus the Nazarene,' with all the opprobrium of the sneer. When Christians were referred to in Acts as the 'Nazarene sect' (Acts 24:5) the expression was meant to hurt."

The term "Nazarene" shouldn't be confused with "Nazirite"--a special vow taken according to Numbers 6. Nazarene simply means "from Nazareth" and the root word in Hebrew *nezer* means "branch," alluding to the prophetic branch of David (Is. 11:1).

So Jesus grew up in this small town of Nazareth, as Luke 2:39-51 describes, "So when they had performed all things according to the law of Lord, they returned to Galilee, to their own city, Nazareth. And the Child grew and became strong in spirit, filled with wisdom; and the grace of God was upon Him. His parents went to Jerusalem every year to the Feast of the Passover. And when He was twelve years old, they went up to Jerusalem according to the custom of the feast. When they had finished the days, as they returned, the Boy Jesus lingered behind in Jerusalem. And Joseph and His mother did not know it. But supposing Him to have been in the company, they went a day's journey, and sought Him among their relatives and acquaintances. So when they did not find Him, they returned to Jerusalem, seeking Him. Now so it was that after three days they found Him in the temple, sitting in the midst of the teachers, both listening to them and asking them questions. And all who heard Him were astonished at His understanding and answers. So when they saw Him, they were amazed and His mother said to Him, 'Son, why have you done this to us? Look, your father and I have sought You anxiously.' And He said to them, 'Why did you seek Me? Did you not know that I must be about My Father's business?' But they did not understand the statement which He spoke to them. Then He went down with them and came to Nazareth, and was subject to them, but His mother kept all these things in her heart. And Jesus increased in wisdom and stature, and in favor with God and men." That's the summary of his first 30 years of life.

It's all the direct historical information we have in the Bible about Jesus' first thirty years until he begins his formal ministry. Some have speculated that he traveled around the world and gathered all kinds of mystical knowledge, but that is not what the Bible tells us. When He began His ministry, those in Nazareth spoke as if He had been with them all this time and was known as a carpenter, or a better

translation from the Gk. *tekton*, (where we get the work *architect*) is a builder that works not only with wood, but with stone in construction sites. Nazareth was close to a large city, Sepphoris, that had a large ongoing construction project, and Jesus Christ could have well been one of its workers.

Notice what the townspeople said of him, "Is this not *the carpenter*, the Son of Mary, and brother of James, Joses, Judas, and Simon? And are not His sisters here with us? And they were offended at Him. But Jesus said to them, 'A prophet is not without honor except in his own country, among his own relatives, and in his own house'" (Mark 6:3-4).

Expositor's notes, "The hostility of Jesus' townspeople toward him comes out more clearly in the rhetorical questions in this verse, 'Isn't this the carpenter?' In other words, isn't he just a common, ordinary fellow who makes his living with his hands like the rest of us? How is it that he's parading as a rabbi and miracle-worker? The second question, 'Isn't this Mary's son?' seems to be derogatory since it was not customary among Jews to describe a man as the son of his mother, even when the father was dead. Behind this question may be the rumor, circulated during Jesus' lifetime, that he was an illegitimate son (John 8:41; 9:29).

"The word translated 'they took offense' is from *skandalizomai*, (and 'scandal' is derived from it)...The idea is that of being offended and repelled to the point of abandoning belief in the Word (Lk. 8:13) or one's relation with Jesus (14:27, 29). Jesus responded to the doubts raised about the legitimacy of his teaching and his miracles by a proverb that has parallels in both Jewish and Greek literature. One of these proverbs states the principle on which all of them are based: Familiarity breeds contempt. The people of Nazareth were incapable of appreciating who Jesus was because, like Jesus' own family, they identified him with themselves so closely."

For the next study, please read Mt. 3 and Lk. 3.