

## Matthew 2—The Grinch Who Tried to Steal Christmas

You were probably like me and read “The Grinch Who Stole Christmas” by Dr. Seuss, to your children at Christmas. It is a masterpiece that teaches us all the true value of Christmas. That it is much more than just greedily amassing presents and gorging on food. The Grinch was a bitter, greedy, grouchy cave dweller with a heart “two sizes too small”. The Grinch lived in a mountain above Whoville, and it drove him crazy that there was so much joy and merriment in Whoville every Christmas. He assumed that they got so excited because of their lust for presents and food. The Grinch hated everyone being so happy when he was so miserable, so he decided to steal Christmas. He would stop Christmas from happening by stealing their presents, trees, and food. He disguised himself as Santa, but did a reverse Santa by going down the chimneys to take all the presents out. He was shocked later when he expected to hear crying and weeping, but instead there was still joyful Christmas singing and merriment. Suddenly it dawned on him that Christmas is more than presents and eating. The reformed Grinch returned all the presents and was invited to the Whoville feast and celebration.

About 2000 years ago there was another Grinch type who tried to steal Christmas from us for real. King Herod the Great tried to kill the baby Jesus so there would be no Christmas at all. King Herod hated the thought of Christmas even more than both the Grinch or Scrooge together. Herod was different from Grinch or Scrooge because he never reformed as they did. The evil story of Herod’s attempt to kill Christmas almost never comes up while we are all celebrating and having a merry time. The Christmas season is about everyone coming together to decorate the house, buy presents for each other, sing carols, and be happy. But there was one man in history who wasn’t happy and tried to kill Christmas before it began. He is not a make believe character like the Grinch or Dicken’s Scrooge. Herod was a real despot in Israel in 5-6 BC who was troubled by the concept of Christmas, and we can read his story in Matthew 2. At that time, Rome ruled over Israel and they had appointed Herod as king over Israel. He had proven himself to be ruthless in putting down revolts, keeping the peace with an iron fist, and collecting taxes for Rome. In 40 BC the Roman Senate named him King of the Jews. This was not at all popular with the Jews since Herod was Idumean and not Jewish. Herod was quite the villain with all the characteristics of an evil genius. He was a brilliant engineer, architect, and builder, but he was the epitome of an evil power grabber; and anyone who might be a threat to his power soon met an untimely demise. Before he was

through he had killed his brother in law, his mother in law, his own wife, and three of his sons because they seemed a little too ambitious.

### Matthew 2:1-12, Two Kings

Matthew 2 is the story of the battle of two kings in Israel. In one corner you have King Herod who was the wealthiest of kings, brilliant, ruthless, cruel, powerful, controlled armies, and he had the mighty empire of Rome as his ally. In the other corner, is the baby Jesus in the arms of His mother Mary. Herod had only his own self interest and his personal hunger for power to exalt himself. Herod lied, cheated, murdered, and forced his will on others. But Jesus carried out Gods will, served others, and self sacrificed. Jesus taught, healed, loved, and served others, while Herod lied, cheated, murdered, and grabbed for more and more power.

Matthew's intent is to establish Jesus' right to Israel's true and everlasting kingship. He gives four evidences in Matt.1-2. In chapter one, he gives us Jesus' royal genealogy and virgin birth. In chapter 2, Matthew gives us the testimony of the Wise Men, and the fulfilled prophecies. We read in Matt.2:1-2 that "after Jesus was born", the wise men came from the east to Jerusalem asking where the King of the Jews was so they could go and worship Him. This was probably several months later, because v.11 says they came into the house to see Him, therefore He was no longer in the stable. Also in Luke 2:21-27, they took Jesus to the Temple in Jerusalem about 40 days later to be dedicated at the Temple. By tradition they offered doves as a sacrifice because they had no money. If they already had the gold from the Wise Men they would have been required to buy a lamb and offer it. Also Herod determined from them that some time had passed since His birth because he gave orders to kill all the male children two years old and younger. Therefore the Wise Men came later, probably to their house in Nazareth since they would have gone home afterward (Luke 2:39). Church tradition developed much later says that there were three Wise Men and they went to Bethlehem, but there is little likelihood of this if you read the stories in Matthew and Luke's account. The tradition developed of three Wise Men because there were three gifts, but all we know is that there was a plural number of Wise Men. Also people assumed that the Wise Men went to Bethlehem because the priests directed them there, but the text says they followed the star to the place where Jesus was, so it makes more sense to me that the star led them to Nazareth to Joseph's home.

Notice in Matt.2:3 that when Herod heard that the child had been born he was greatly troubled along with all the religious leaders of Jerusalem. This makes for a great contrast between the joy of the foreign Wise Men versus the troubled leadership in Jerusalem. Throughout the accounts of Jesus in the Gospels there were three different reactions to Jesus-anger, indifference, and worship. Herod was troubled and angry, the priests and scribes were indifferent, and the Wise Men came to worship Jesus.

Who Were Those Guys and How did They Know?

The Wise Men most likely came from the Mesopotamian area to the east of Israel. The Babylonian Empire and later the Persian Empire of the same area had rich, well educated Wise Men who were advisors to the kings. In the book of Daniel, they were high ranking officials in Babylon, and Daniel was appointed as ruler over them in Daniel 2:48. After Israel's forced captivity was over about 536 BC, more Jews stayed in Babylon than came back to Israel. It is likely that the expectation of the Jewish Messiah remained there in the Mesopotamian region and was perpetuated as well. How did they know the time and place to come? In Matt.2:12 they were warned by God in a dream so it is obvious God informed them. Also God's glory (His star) led them, just as God's glory led the Shepherds to Bethlehem in Luke 2:9. That the star was not literally a physical star is evident from the fact it stood directly over the house, so it was probably a manifestation of the glory of God. Naturally, the Wise Men assumed everyone in Jerusalem would be aware and be going to see the newborn King of the Jews, so they first came to Jerusalem to inquire. Herod connected the dots and expected the King of the Jews to be the Messiah expected by all Israel, so he called in the religious experts to tell him where the Messiah would be born. They referred him to the prophet Micah 5:2, "And you Bethlehem of Judah...for out of you shall come forth a Ruler who will shepherd My people". Clearly they had more than enough evidence in the Scriptures to recognize Jesus, but since a humble baby born to common parents didn't fit their agenda, they were indifferent. So Herod sent the Wise Men to Bethlehem, but the star of God actually led them to where Jesus was "until it came and stood over where the Child was", which was probably Joseph's house in Nazareth. Again they had the opposite reaction than Herod or the scribes and priests-"they fell down and worshipped Him", and gave Him expensive gifts. Then God appeared to them in a dream and warned them not to go back to Herod, but to go another way. At this point we should be thinking about the proper reaction to Jesus. Are people today during Christmas time like Herod and the priests, or are they like the Wise Men?

In Matt. 2:13-15, the author gives us insight on how Jesus and His parents escaped the wrath of Herod who would murder anyone who might be a threat to his power. God sent Jesus and His parents to Egypt to live until Herod died. This also gave evidence of who Jesus was by fulfilling the prophecy of Hosea 11:1 that God would call them back out of Egypt when it was safe. Herod, not knowing they were gone, sent his soldiers to Bethlehem since he assumed they were there. To be safe, Herod gave orders to kill all the male children there under 2 years old. This also fulfilled prophecy from Jeremiah 31:15 about the weeping and mourning of the mothers in Bethlehem after their loss. Not long after this, the angel of The Lord called Joseph and family back to Israel, and they returned to their home in Nazareth which also fulfilled prophecy from Isaiah about the Messiah, "He shall be called a Nazarene". Remember the purpose of the author Matthew to give evidence and testimony of Jesus's identity as Messiah and King. We now know that His lineage from Abraham to Judah to David to both Joseph and Mary was exactly what Scripture said it would be. We know that according to Isaiah the prophet the Messiah would be born of a virgin and He was, and Jesus' birth and early life fulfilled four different prophecies listed by Matthew. Therefore like the Wise Men, we fall down and worship Jesus as the Christ and our Lord.

### Which King is Ruling Your Life?

Most people don't realize that they are serving somebody. Even if they are indifferent like the priests and scribes, they are unknowingly serving the adversary of God. Jesus said that if you are not for Him then you are against Him (Matt. 12:30). If we are a part of the godless world, then we serve the god of this world, which is the adversary of God. Therefore we must all answer the question-which king rules your life, Herod or Jesus? Herod was rich, powerful, selfish, ruthless, shrewd, and egotistical. Jesus is humble, kind, loving, teaching, serving, healing, and self-sacrificing. If you are like me and you will come clean, you have more in common with Herod than Jesus. Herod's belief system was all about self interest, self promotion, enforcing his will on others, and behind the scenes lie, cheat, and steal to get what you want because the ends justify the means. Jesus' belief system was centered around being a servant-leader. To be great, you have to be a servant. He loved people unconditionally and always had their best interest at heart instead of His own.

Most people are little Herods. When we would rather rule than serve, hoard money instead of giving it, and when we would rather exalt ourselves instead of Christ, then we are little

Herods. At the end of the day, Herod's wealth and power could not save him from a painful disease that soon killed him. He was buried and his naked body is still in the grave—now dust in the ruins of his palace called the Herodium. On the other hand, Jesus led a humble and sinless life, died to save others, but unlike Herod, Jesus lives and was restored to the ultimate throne in heaven. Still the world continues to serve the Herods (the adversary of God), but we will serve Jesus.

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