

### Scene Change: Herod's Rhetorical Veil Exposed: He Learns of the Magi's Deception; His Chronic Bitterness Billows into Explosive Anger, Orders Hit Squad to Slaughter the Innocents of Bethlehem; Effort to Assassinate Jesus Violates Invisible War's Rules of Engagement, Matt 2:16

Jesus Christ went into Egypt as a hunted Child who escaped the murderous wrath of Herod by means of the gratuitous gifts of the Magi. He came out later with his parents to become the savior of the people of Israel through His sacrificial substitutionary death on the cross.

The first generation of the Exodus did not understand the grace and power of the Shekinah Glory and rejected Him in favor of the familiarity of slavery they endured in Egypt. The people of Judea rejected Jesus as Savior blinded by the traditions of men. They were deceived because they did not know the Scriptures or the power of God.

**Matthew 2:15** - Jesus remained in Egypt until Herod died in early 1 B.C. This was to fulfill what the Lord had spoken through the prophet Hosea, "Out of Egypt I called My Son." (CTL)

In the next verse the scene changes back to Jerusalem on the night of the holy family's evacuation from Bethlehem. Upon learning of the Magi's deception, Herod sends out his squad of assassins on a bloody mission to Bethlehem:

**Matthew 2:16** - Then when Herod saw that he had been tricked by the magi, he became very enraged, and sent and slew all the male children who were in Bethlehem and all its vicinity, from two years old and under, according to the time which he had determined from the magi. (NASB)

This verse begins a new paragraph which switches the scene away from Egypt back to Palestine on the night the Magi and the Holy Family evacuate Bethlehem.

In verse 8, Herod had encouraged the Magi to hurry to Bethlehem and locate the Messiah and, if successful, to let him know so he could go and worship Him, too.

This was a ploy—a rhetorical veil—that concealed while it advanced Herod's hidden agenda: securing Herod's Idumean line on the throne of Palestine. No greater coup d'état could have been accomplished by "the Dragon" than to have simultaneously assassinated the Messiah while perpetuating Arab kings on the Jewish throne.

This very idea and its ramifications violated the rules of engagement for the appeal trial of Satan. It was forbidden for the attorney for the defense to execute the Chief Witness for the Prosecution. Therefore, God intervened to prevent this violation in the person of the Archangel Gabriel.

In verse 12, the Magi were warned in a dream, by most likely Gabriel, not to advise Herod of their discovery but rather to leave Bethlehem immediately and return to Parthia. By dawn they were gone, having taken a southeasterly route around the southern shores of the Dead Sea where they then turned north on the King's Highway.

Once Herod's spies reported to him that the Magi had left Bethlehem after actually having an audience with the Messiah, the king realized he had been deceived by them.

The word used in the NASB is "tricked"; the Greek word here is the aorist passive indicative of the verb **ἐμπαίζω (empaizō)** which can be translated in quite a number of ways dependent upon context. This synopsis gives us the idea:

**ἐμπαίζω: The vocabulary of Mockery in the Greek Old Testament.** ἐμπαίζειν means first “to play with,” “to dance around,” then “to take one’s sport with someone,” “to mock,” “to deceive,” “to defraud.” It belongs to a large group of words for the disparagement or low estimation of others, or indeed the world, creatures, and even deity, in word, attitude or act: contemptuous speech, scorn and insult, ridicule, speaking ill, turning up the nose. (p. 630)

**ἐμπαίζω in the New Testament.** The word group ἐμπαίζειν is not very common in the New Testament. The verb ἐμπαίζειν occurs in the Synoptic Gospels. At Matthew 2:16 Herod is outwitted by the wise men.<sup>1</sup> (p. 634)

Of the translations suggested by uses noted in the Old and New Testaments, the context of Matthew 2:16 would require “to mock,” “to deceive,” and “to outwit.”

In Matthew 2:8, Herod commands the Magi to report back to him if they are fortunate enough to discover the Messiah down in Bethlehem. “Report to me” is an aorist active imperative of the verb ἀπαγγέλλω (*apangellō*): “to bring back word” followed by the dative of advantage of the pronoun ἐγώ (*egō*): “to me.”

The word for angel is a part of this compound: ἄγγελος (*angelos*) and it means “messenger,” or “one sent in order to announce.”

The Magi were ordered to “report back” the location of Messiah when and if they found Him. The message by the archangel Gabriel to the Magi trumped the order by Herod. They were instructed to leave Palestine “by another way,” that is to not return to Parthia by way of Jerusalem but to continued to move southward around the Dead Sea and return to Damascus via the King’s Highway.

Herod was not used to anyone disobeying his commands. He did not grasp the facts that: (1) there were others who outranked him, e.g., God, Gabriel, and most assuredly the Christ Child, or (2) that the imperative is the mood farthest removed from reality; it requires a positive response to the mandate for it to become a reality.

Herod considered this to be mockery of his person and office as king of the Jews; he felt deceived by their departure from Palestine under the cover of darkness, and, he realized he had been outwitted by their failure to inform him of their discovery.

Mockery is defined as an “insulting or contemptuous action”; deceit carries the idea of “playing a trick”; outwit means “to get the better of by superior cleverness.”

Probably all three of these ideas are involved in Herod’s reaction to the news that the Magi had left Palestine without reporting back to him.

His murder lust was piqued by the assumed insults and he retaliated with the order to kill all the children in and around Bethlehem aged 2 and younger. The mental attitude sin is identified in the text by the word *enraged*, the aorist passive indicative of the verb: θυμῶν (*thumō*).

This word is an overt, turbulent, irrational, and emotional outburst of anger which billows from the bed of smoldering embers of bitterness. This explosion occurs whenever any circumstance provides it the fuel of opportunity. This is operational anger.

An arrogant, power-hungry individual maintains suppressed anger indicated in the Greek by the word ὀργή (*orgē*).

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<sup>1</sup> Georg Bertram, “ἐμπαίζω,” in *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, ed. Gerhard Friedrich, trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1967), 5:630; 634.

*Orgē* is the mental attitude sin of anger and may also be referred to as motivational anger. It promotes cruelty and revenge and thus threatens to become entrenched as the chronic sin of bitterness: **πικρία (pikria)**, a lifestyle of wickedness, depravity, and evil. If *orgē* is not dealt with through rebound then it becomes suppressed and is transformed into bitterness.

Herod was not a happy man. He lived in a status quo of bitterness. As an unbeliever he has no problem-solving device to control the problem. His lust for unattainable ends made him distrustful of anyone he might consider a threat to his position and power. Any perceived threat caused the smoldering embers of bitterness to explode into the operational anger of *thumos*.

The failure of the Magi to report to him the location of the Messiah was the spark that ignited the explosion recorded in Matthew 2:16 described there by the verb *thumoō*.