

## INTRODUCTION

# *The Sages and the Star-Child*

---

The Magi—usually known as the “Three Wise Men” or “Three Kings”—are easily the most famous of the visitors who appear at Jesus’s birth in the Gospel accounts of the Christmas story. Whether or not one is a churchgoer, practically everyone has heard of them. Their bringing of gifts to the Christ child began a tradition that has linked them forever with the rite of holiday gift giving. Despite their great fame, however, there is only one short passage in the New Testament that tells of the Magi, and this account is remarkably vague about these figures. Found in the Gospel of Matthew, chapter 2, verses 1 through 12, it says this:

Now when Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea in the days of Herod the king, behold, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem, saying, “Where is he who has been born king

## *Revelation of the Magi*

of the Jews? For we have seen his star in the East, and have come to worship him.” When Herod the king heard this, he was troubled, and all Jerusalem with him; and assembling all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Christ was to be born. They told him, “In Bethlehem of Judea; for so it is written by the prophet:

*‘And you, O Bethlehem, in the land of Judah,  
are by no means least among the rulers of Judah;  
for from you shall come a ruler  
who will govern my people Israel.’”*

Then Herod summoned the wise men secretly and ascertained from them what time the star appeared; 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.” When they had heard the king they went their way; and lo, the star which they had seen in the East went before them, till it came to rest over the place where the child was. When they saw the star, they rejoiced exceedingly with great joy; and going into the house they saw the child with Mary

## Introduction

his mother, and they fell down and worshiped 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.

Notice the enormous gaps in this story, gaps that a thoughtful reader must attempt to fill in. The wise men have no specific country of origin. No number or names are given for the wise men, though three was destined to become the most common number because of the three gifts (See *The Three Kings (Wise Men)* on pages 4 and 5).<sup>1</sup>

In fact, “wise men” itself is a rather poor translation of the Greek word *magoi*,<sup>2</sup> which elsewhere in the New Testament means “magicians” in a clearly negative sense.<sup>3</sup> Equally problematic—if not altogether disturbing—is the puzzling nature of this “star” that the Magi have followed to Judea. The Gospel of Matthew never explains how the Magi came to know that this star revealed the birth of the King of the Jews. Moreover, the star itself behaves very strangely, reappearing to the Magi on their way to Bethlehem<sup>4</sup> and then coming to rest directly over the place where the child Jesus was. All in all, the story of the Magi from Matthew’s Gospel is a very bizarre one, and many early Christians struggled to make sense of it.

## *Revelation of the Magi*

Amid a wide range of early Christian speculation on the Magi—apocryphal Gospels, hymns, sermons, mosaics, wood carvings, and sculptures on sarcophagi—one composition is particularly impressive and yet surprisingly unknown. Called the *Revelation of the Magi*, it is a lengthy narrative that claims to be the personal testimony of the Magi themselves on the events of Christ's coming. Though versions of this legend were well known in Christian Europe throughout the Middle Ages, this book presents the first-ever complete English translation of the *Revelation of the Magi*.

I confess that I have had a lifelong fascination with the Christmas holiday, with the traditions of Jesus's birth and childhood, and with the story of the Magi and their star in particular. As a young child, I was captivated when my church in Flagstaff, Arizona, brought in an astronomer from the nearby Lowell Observatory one Advent season to discuss the range of possible scientific explanations for the Star of Bethlehem. Then, during my high school education at a Jesuit school in Phoenix, I first learned about the existence of writings outside the New Testament that purported to fill in gaps in the Gospel accounts of Jesus's upbringing. Finally, as a doctoral student studying early Christianity at Harvard University, I was deeply impressed during a study trip to Italy when I saw how popular a subject the Magi were in paintings, altarpieces, and sculptures. Upon my return

## Introduction

to Cambridge, I resolved to learn as much as I could about early Christian legends of the Magi. In this search, I happened upon an article that mentioned the *Revelation of the Magi*. I asked around and was surprised to find that none of my colleagues had even heard of it. Did such a document really exist? It sounded like such a remarkable text that almost immediately I decided to investigate further.

Later in this introduction, I will discuss where this text came from, why it is so little known today, and why it may be a writing of great importance. But I'll start with the contents of the story itself, which I eventually discovered hidden away in the Vatican Library.

## THE STORY

The *Revelation of the Magi*, mostly narrated by the Magi in the first person, is a sweeping and imaginative work that begins in the Garden of Eden and ends with the Magi being baptized at the hands of the Apostle Thomas. These Magi are members of an ancient mystical order and reside in a semimythical land called Shir, located in the extreme east of the world, at the shore of the Great Ocean. The *Revelation of the Magi* says these individuals are called “Magi” in the language of their country because they pray in silence. The story implies that the name “Magi” is thus a play on the words *silence* and/or

## *Revelation of the Magi*

*prayer*; but that implication does not make sense in any of the most common languages spoken by early Christians. Despite this unsolved mystery, however, this description sharply distinguishes the Magi of this story from any of the most common ancient usages of the term *magoi*: these Magi are not magicians, astrologers, or even priests of the Iranian religion of Zoroastrianism.<sup>5</sup>

These mystics, who live in a mysterious, far-off land, as the *Revelation of the Magi* depicts its Magi, are the descendants of Seth, the third son of Adam and Eve. Seth was believed by many early Jews and Christians to be extremely pious and virtuous, so it is very fitting for the *Revelation of the Magi* to trace the ancestry of the Magi back to such an illustrious founder. The Magi inherited from Seth a prophecy of supreme importance for the world: *a star of indescribable brightness will someday appear, heralding the birth of God in human form*. Seth himself had learned about this prophecy from his father, Adam, since the star originally had hovered over the Tree of Life, illumining all of Eden, before Adam's sin caused the star to vanish.

Every month of every year, for thousands of years, the order of the Magi has carried out its ancient rituals in expectation of this star's arrival. They ascend their country's most sacred mountain, the Mountain of Victories, and pray in silence at the mouth of the Cave of Treasures of Hidden Mysteries, where Seth's own prophetic books

## Introduction

are housed and read by the Magi. Whenever one of the Magi dies, his son or one of his close relatives takes his place, and their order continues through the ages.

All of this lore about the origins of the Magi and their prophecy has been narrated, we are told, by the generation of the Magi that was alive to witness the coming of the star. They have gathered together to ascend the Mountain of Victories, as was their ancient custom, but suddenly the foretold star appears in the heavens. As promised, the star is indescribably bright, so bright that the sun becomes as faint as the daytime moon; yet because the Magi alone are worthy of guarding this prophecy, the star can be seen by no one but them. The star descends to the peak of the mountain and enters the Cave of Treasures, bidding the Magi to come inside. The Magi enter the cave and bow before the star, whose incredible light gradually dissipates to reveal *a small, luminous human!* This “star-child” reveals to the Magi that he is the Son of God, but—and this is of crucial importance—never calls himself by the familiar names *Jesus* or *Christ*. Nor do the Magi themselves ever call him by these names, and the absence of these designations will provide us with a critical clue about the central message of the *Revelation of the Magi*.

The star-child instructs the Magi to follow it to Jerusalem so that they may witness its birth and participate in the salvation God has planned for the entire world.

## *Revelation of the Magi*

The Magi descend from the mountain, discussing excitedly what they have just seen. In the course of their conversation, however, they learn that *each of them saw the star-child in a different form, with each vision representing a different time in the life of Christ!* They prepare a caravan and supplies for the lengthy trek, but thanks to the overwhelming power of the star, their journey proves to be truly extraordinary. The star removes any and all obstacles from their path, leveling valleys and mountains, making rivers passable on foot, and protecting the Magi from wild animals. The star's light also relieves the Magi of their fatigue and continuously refills their food supplies. For the Magi, this vast journey from the eastern edge of the world to the land of Judea seems to have transpired in the mere blink of an eye.

The star leads the Magi into Jerusalem, where the city's inhabitants puzzle at these exotic foreigners. Because the star is invisible to the inhabitants, they presume these visitors to be astrologers of some kind, since the Magi keep looking up at the heavens. The Magi's encounter with Herod and the Jewish religious leaders in Jerusalem unfolds almost identically to the narrative of Matthew's Gospel—one of the rare times that the *Revelation of the Magi* closely follows the story line of Matthew.

Immediately after the Magi hear the Jewish prophecy about the birth of the Messiah at Bethlehem, the star



## *Introduction*

reappears to them<sup>6</sup> and leads them to a cave in the environs of the village. Just as upon the Mountain of Victories, the star enters the cave and beckons the Magi inside. Here the star transforms into a luminous, talking infant, whose “birth” is accompanied by unseen angels singing his praises. In a lengthy speech, the infant tells the Magi that their ancient mysteries have at last been fulfilled and commissions them to become witnesses to him and his Gospel for the people of their homeland.

As the Magi exit the Bethlehem cave, rejoicing at the fulfillment of their ancient prophecy, they are met by Mary and Joseph, who have suddenly appeared on the scene. In a very odd exchange, Mary accuses them of trying to steal her newborn infant, but the Magi assuage her concern by explaining that the child is actually the savior of the world and can be in many places simultaneously.

The Magi then begin their journey back to Shir, a trip that, through the awesome power of the star, transpires for them as quickly as did their travel to Bethlehem. The star’s light refills their food supplies even more abundantly than before, and when the Magi eat of these provisions, they again see their guide in a multitude of different forms. When they reach the borders of their homeland, crowds of their family members and kinspeople come out to meet them, marveling at the appearance and health of the travelers. The Magi relate the

## *Revelation of the Magi*

story of their miraculous encounter with the star and subsequent journey to the people of Shir. They conclude their story by revealing to the people that they, too, can come to experience the presence of the star-child, whom the Magi claim is still with them—since he is, in fact, present throughout the entire world. The Magi present the people with the overflowing bags of food that the star has produced for them and invite them to partake. Those people who eat immediately see visions of the heavenly and earthly Christ, and thus many in the land of Shir accept the faith proclaimed by the Magi.

Thus far, the Magi's age-old prophecy has been fulfilled: they have journeyed with the star, witnessed the birth of Christ, preached his Gospel to their kinspeople, and now remain in the light of Christ's eternal presence. This would seem like a most fitting and fulfilling way for this story to conclude, yet the only copy of the *Revelation of the Magi* that we possess does not end here. In a concluding episode that may not have been part of the original story (more on the reasons for this later), the Apostle Thomas comes to the homeland of the Magi on a missionary journey—presumably after many years have passed. The Magi hear of his arrival and come to meet him, telling him of their experience of Christ's coming. Thomas recognizes that they have indeed had contact with Christ, and he relates to them his own memories of the ministry of Jesus. The Magi rejoice at

## Introduction

what Thomas has said, and they ask him to initiate them into the Christian fellowship. When Thomas baptizes them early on Sunday morning, the heavenly Christ descends and administers the Eucharist, first to the apostle and then to the Magi. Thomas then commissions the Magi to proclaim the Gospel throughout the world, and the *Revelation of the Magi* ends with the Magi performing miracles and preaching.

### FIRST IMPRESSIONS

Not only does the *Revelation of the Magi* have the distinction of being the most substantial early Christian composition about the Magi; its narrative complexity matches almost *any* early Christian writing. Thus, the first thing that one notices about the *Revelation of the Magi* is that whoever wrote it devoted a great deal of time and thought to crafting a rich and intricate story line. As a scholar of early Christian writings, I noticed several other surprising features immediately. Its location of the Magi in the far-eastern land of Shir was highly unusual, since most early Christians thought that the Magi came from Persia, Babylon, or Arabia (see *Adoration of the Magi* on page 14).

Also surprising was its identification of the Star of Bethlehem with Christ himself, an interpretation found nowhere else in the diverse array of early Christian

## Introduction

speculation about this mysterious celestial portent. The late entry of the Apostle Thomas into the action of narrative was quite unexpected, and raised a new series of questions for me about the relationship between the *Revelation of the Magi* and other texts that discuss the Apostle Thomas. I was also captivated by the very strange incident of the food that produced visions of Christ for the Magi and the people of Shir, given its parallels to the use of hallucinogenic substances in other religious traditions.

But finally and most importantly, I was surprised that neither I nor any of my colleagues knew of this impressive text's existence before I stumbled across a mention of it in an article. There are certainly a significant number of early Christian apocryphal writings that are familiar only to scholars specializing in apocryphal literature, but the *Revelation of the Magi* was completely unknown to me and to other specialists in this field that I consulted. For me as a doctoral student, such a poorly known text represented a wonderful opportunity to bring an important document into the mainstream of early Christian scholarship. Yet it would also prove to be a serious challenge to my skills as a researcher, since even basic questions about when and under what circumstances it was written were unresolved.

## *Revelation of the Magi*

### WHERE DID THE “REVELATION OF THE MAGI” COME FROM?

As I mentioned earlier, the *Revelation of the Magi* has never before been translated into English, and very few specialists in early Christian apocryphal literature even know of its existence. How did this remarkable text come to be so neglected? Part of the problem is that the only known copy of the text is preserved in Syriac, a language used by ancient Christians throughout the Middle East and Asia, but one in which only a relatively small number of early Christian scholars are fluent. By comparison, many more scholars know Coptic, an Egyptian language in which such important texts as the Gospel of Thomas, the Gospel of Mary, and the Gospel of Judas have been preserved.

Another important reason for this text's neglect, however, is that it belongs to two categories of material that historically have been scorned in the study of early Christianity. First, it is an apocryphal writing, and scholars have long privileged the canonical writings of the New Testament to the exclusion of writings outside of the canon. There are, of course, a few exceptions, such as the writings just mentioned, but beyond these, most apocryphal writings remain sorely neglected.

Second, the *Revelation of the Magi* is one of a handful of canonical and apocryphal texts that focus on events

## Introduction

surrounding the birth of Jesus. Although the Christmas story has fascinated believers throughout the centuries, there are only two accounts of Jesus's birth among the four canonical Gospels, suggesting that the birth of Jesus was not nearly as important for the first Christians as the death, Resurrection, and teachings of Jesus of Nazareth. Furthermore, Matthew and Luke tell markedly different stories about Jesus's birth, and the differences cannot be easily harmonized.<sup>7</sup> As a result, the great majority of scholars today believe that this material has very little claim to historicity and have therefore ignored it. The study of the historical Jesus has mostly focused on his sayings and his final days in Jerusalem; only a few recent scholars have found any reliable historical details in the infancy narratives—and the story of the Magi is not one of them.<sup>8</sup>

Even if it is poorly known today, the manuscript that contains the *Revelation of the Magi* was never truly lost—certainly not in the way that, say, the Dead Sea Scrolls were. After the existing manuscript was copied down at the Zuqnin monastery in southeastern Turkey by an anonymous monk at the end of the eighth century, it changed hands at some point and was kept in a monastery in the Egyptian desert. There it stayed until the eighteenth century, when G. S. Assemani, collecting manuscripts on behalf of the Vatican Library, brought it to Rome, where it resides today.

## *Revelation of the Magi*

Though this manuscript had been known by European scholars for several hundred years, it was not until rather recently that scholars first began to look closely at the legend of the Magi that it contained. An Italian translation of the *Revelation of the Magi* was made in the 1950s, and a few scholars in the decades since have discussed the text in journal articles, often peripherally. Quite serendipitously, when I first learned of the existence of the *Revelation of the Magi*, I had just finished my first year of studying the Syriac language. I was therefore well prepared to begin translating the text with the help of J. F. Coakley, Professor of Syriac at Harvard.

After nearly a year of biweekly meetings with Professor Coakley to check my work, I had managed to produce a rough but complete translation of the *Revelation of the Magi*. Despite the many hours of work that this had required, my task as a scholar of early Christian writings was only beginning. Unlike a scholar working on a New Testament text or even a well-known apocryphal writing, there was virtually no preexisting “conversation” about the *Revelation of the Magi* into which I was entering. Very few scholars knew that the text existed at all, so there were only some tentative suggestions about how old the *Revelation of the Magi* might be, who might have written it, and where it was composed.<sup>9</sup>

To figure out the most likely date of composition, my first step was to start with the *latest* possible time the

## Introduction

text could have been written and then work backward as far as possible. As mentioned earlier, there is only one copy of the *Revelation of the Magi* in existence, and that manuscript is securely dated to the late eighth century. Is it possible that the anonymous scribe who wrote this manuscript was actually the author of the *Revelation of the Magi*? Not likely, for several reasons. First, as a general matter, scholars of early Christianity know that the date of a manuscript is very rarely the date of the text it contains.<sup>10</sup> Second, the manuscript itself—known as the *Chronicle of Zuqnin*, for the monastery in which it was written—contains a number of writings that are known to have existed much earlier than the eighth century. Third, a Christian writer named Theodore bar Konai, who lived on the Arabian Peninsula at almost the same time that the chronicle was written, seems to have known about the *Revelation of the Magi*.<sup>11</sup> There is no reason to suspect that the *Chronicle of Zuqnin* would have traveled from southeastern Turkey to the Arabian Desert in the span of only a few years. It seems far more likely that the *Revelation of the Magi* was written—and circulated rather widely—earlier than the eighth century.

But how much earlier? Fortunately, even though we possess only one full copy of the *Revelation of the Magi*, there is another very important witness to this text. This other witness is a Latin commentary on the Gospel of Matthew, usually thought to have been written in the



## *Revelation of the Magi*

fifth century and known by scholars as the *Opus Imperfectum in Matthaeum*. The anonymous writer of this commentary, when he comes to Matthew's story of the Magi, relates a legend about these mysterious figures. Even though he summarizes this legend in only a few short paragraphs, it is clearly the same story as that found in the *Revelation of the Magi*.<sup>12</sup> Moreover, it is very likely that he had actually seen a written copy of the *Revelation of the Magi*, since there are several parts of his summary that agree, practically verbatim, with the copy of the *Revelation of the Magi* that has survived for us.<sup>13</sup>

So it seems certain that a version of the *Revelation of the Magi* existed when the *Opus Imperfectum* was written in the fifth century. But how do we know that the Syriac text of the *Revelation of the Magi* that we have was written earlier than the fifth century? After all, it *could* be a later form of the legend that had been expanded significantly. There is one small, seemingly insignificant detail in the Syriac text that tells us when it was written. In the Syriac language, nouns can be either masculine or feminine, and in the *Revelation of the Magi*, "the Holy Spirit" is a feminine noun. Although it might surprise us today to think of the Holy Spirit as a female entity, this is exactly what Syriac writers of the second, third, and fourth centuries considered it/her. Starting in the fifth century, however, Syriac writers

## Introduction

began to treat “the Holy Spirit” as a masculine noun, under influence from Greek Christian thought. What this means, therefore, is that *the Syriac language itself* confirms that the form of the *Revelation of the Magi* that we possess must have been written earlier than the fifth century.

But this quirk of the Syriac language tells us only that the text must have been written earlier than the fifth century. To determine how much earlier it was written, we need to look for other clues in the Syriac form of the *Revelation of the Magi*. Recall that in the summary of the *Revelation of the Magi* presented earlier, I suggested that the story of the Apostle Thomas’s conversion of the Magi was probably not originally part of the *Revelation of the Magi*. Not only does it seem superfluous from a narrative point of view, but it also has a number of literary features that do not fit very well with what has come before. First, the Thomas episode is narrated in the third person, whereas the rest of the *Revelation of the Magi* is narrated by the Magi themselves, in the first person. Although such shifts in the perspective of the narrator are not unheard of in ancient Christian writings, this shift is especially abrupt and unexplained within the narrative. Second, the Thomas episode contains a striking change in terminology as compared with the first-person section of the *Revelation of the Magi*. One of the most distinctive features of the

## *Revelation of the Magi*

first-person section is its complete avoidance of the proper name “Jesus Christ” to refer to the divine being whom the Magi encounter. Yet as careful as the author is to forgo this name and other obviously Christian terminology, the Thomas section is not at all concerned to avoid the name “Jesus Christ,” using it almost twenty times!

Because of these reasons, I believe that the Thomas episode was a later addition to the *Revelation of the Magi*. I will say more shortly about the reasons that someone might have wanted to tamper with a text that purported to be the authentic testimony of the Magi about the coming of Christ. But for now, let us use the Thomas episode to help find out more about when the *Revelation of the Magi* was written—or at least when it was tampered with. As it happens, stories about the Apostle Thomas were especially popular among ancient Christians living in Syria. The most famous collection of these stories is known as the Apocryphal Acts of the Apostle Thomas, and it includes accounts of his miracles, his preaching, and his eventual martyrdom in India. Even though the *Acts of Thomas* and the Thomas episode from the *Revelation of the Magi* do not tell the same story, they share numerous connections in their language and theology.<sup>14</sup> These similarities suggest that the Thomas episode was probably composed and added to the *Revelation of the Magi* around the same time and place as other Thomas legends were being written down—that is, around the

## Introduction

late third or early fourth century in Syria. Therefore, the first-person form of the *Revelation of the Magi* must have been composed by this time *at the latest*,<sup>15</sup> and perhaps earlier if it came from someplace outside of Syria.

But how much earlier might the original form of the *Revelation of the Magi* have been written? Might it be, as it claims, the authentic testimony of the Magi themselves? As tantalizing a possibility as this might be, it is highly unlikely. First of all, there is the basic problem of historicity with the whole Magi story found in Matthew's Gospel. As mentioned earlier, scholars have by and large concluded that there is virtually nothing of historical value in the infancy narratives of the New Testament. This judgment has been applied with particular vigor to the Magi story.<sup>16</sup> Even the Star of Bethlehem, the most impressive feature of the story, has never been incontrovertibly identified, arguments to the contrary notwithstanding.<sup>17</sup> And the fact that no trace of the Magi story is found in Luke's infancy narrative, which has the humble shepherds as the first outside witnesses to the child Jesus, or in any other of the earliest Christian writings does not enhance its credibility.

But even if we were to grant that Matthew's story of the Magi was based on an actual historical event, the *Revelation of the Magi* would not be a very strong candidate to have been written by the Magi themselves. True, the author of the *Revelation of the Magi* has carefully

## *Revelation of the Magi*

crafted this story and added levels of detail such that one might *believe* it to be the work of the Magi themselves. Once we closely inspect the story, however, it becomes clear that the author has used written sources—such as the letters of the Apostle Paul, the Gospel of John, and the Book of Revelation, to name a few—that were written years after the “historical Magi” almost certainly would have died.<sup>18</sup>

In fact, the author not only used many of the earliest Christian writings in the New Testament. He seems to have used a rather obscure apocryphal Infancy Gospel that was likely written in the mid- to late-second century, a Gospel so obscure that it lacks an agreed-upon name!<sup>19</sup> For the sake of (some) clarity, let us call it *Infancy Gospel X*.<sup>20</sup> In *Infancy Gospel X*, the Magi come to visit the child Jesus at a small house outside the village of Bethlehem. Joseph—the main actor in *Infancy Gospel X*, as opposed to the narratives in Matthew and Luke, where he never says a word—proceeds to question these strange visitors about how they knew of the child’s birth.

During the ensuing dialogue with Joseph, the Magi mention a number of details corroborated by the *Revelation of the Magi*. These include learning of the star’s coming through their own very ancient writings, the Magi’s lack of fatigue after a lengthy journey, and the indescribably bright star being visible to the Magi alone. Joseph even presumes the Magi to be astrologers because

## Introduction

they keep looking up at the sky, apparently watching their invisible celestial guide. A very similar scene takes place in the *Revelation of the Magi*, but there it is the leaders in Jerusalem, not Joseph, who cannot see the star. Finally, *Infancy Gospel X* envisions the Magi not as three in number, but as a much larger group—an interpretation hinted at in the *Revelation of the Magi* (see *The Adoration of the Magi* on page 27).<sup>21</sup>

These parallels are very striking, but in *Infancy Gospel X* all these details are tightly concentrated in the Magi's brief appearance at the Bethlehem cave, not spread throughout the narrative as in the *Revelation of the Magi*. It seems quite probable that there is some sort of literary relationship between these two works, but who has borrowed from whom? It is very difficult to tell, and it is even possible that the authors of these two works used a third source (whether oral or written) independently of each other. I myself have gone back and forth many times about which writing was older. More research on *Infancy Gospel X* would be necessary before a decisive judgment could be made.

Even so, if we assume that the *Revelation of the Magi* came into being sometime after *Infancy Gospel X*, then it was probably written in the late second or early third century. It was then “corrected” in the late third or early fourth century by adding the concluding narrative about the Apostle Thomas's visit to the Magi.

## *Revelation of the Magi*

If the *Revelation of the Magi* was not, as it claims, written by the Magi themselves, then who might have written this strange story? Although it is possible to give, with a reasonable degree of confidence, a window of time during which it was composed, we have almost nothing to go on regarding the author's identity or location. Only a small number of early Christian writings are written by the person put forth as the author anyway, so the *Revelation of the Magi* is not much different from them in this respect.<sup>22</sup> The place of authorship is similarly unknowable: presumably the author's sophisticated theology—which we will address momentarily—suggests an urban location, perhaps Rome, Alexandria, Antioch, Ephesus, or another major urban center of the Roman world. All we know is that the *Revelation of the Magi* was known in Constantinople (where the author of the *Opus Imperfectum* found it) in the fifth century, and in southeastern Turkey (where an anonymous monk at the Zuqnin monastery copied it) and the Arabian Peninsula (where Theodore bar Konai lived) by the end of the eighth century.

Yet even if we cannot say much of anything substantial about the identity of the author or his whereabouts, we can actually say quite a bit about his understanding of the Christian message, and about why his understanding might have been viewed as theologically dangerous enough to warrant a new ending for the *Revelation of the Magi*.<sup>25</sup>

## *Revelation of the Magi*

### WHY WAS THE “REVELATION OF THE MAGI” WRITTEN?

As mentioned earlier, one of the most noticeable features of the *Revelation of the Magi* is its careful avoidance of the name “Jesus Christ” to designate the Magi’s celestial guide. This consistent omission is one of the reasons that the Apostle Thomas episode’s free use of the name seems so jarring. Why has the author refused to use the name “Jesus Christ?” If the Magi in the first-person narrative come to the end of the story without ever using the name, this implies that they have had an experience of Christ without ever knowing this savior figure *as* Christ. The case of the Magi, then, raises the possibility that Christ has appeared to many people and yet not revealed himself *as* Jesus Christ.

The idea of Christ remaining unidentified in manifestations to the peoples of the world is, in fact, affirmed by statements that the celestial Christ makes to the Magi. He tells them that he has appeared not only to them in a manner congruent with their religion. Indeed, this is only one of many instances of Christ’s revelation to humanity, since he has been sent “to fulfill everything that was spoken about me in the entire world and in every land” (13:10). Having heard this revelation from Christ, the Magi themselves then affirm it before others. To the inhabitants of Jerusalem, they explain



## Introduction

that they have come to worship Christ “because he has worshipers in every land” (17:5). Even to the child’s mother, Mary, they insist on the universality and omnipresence of the Christ event: “[T]he forms with him are seen in every land, because he has been sent by his majesty for the salvation and redemption of every human being” (23:4).

According to the author of the *Revelation of the Magi*, the fundamental Christian message is not simply that Christ has been sent in order to save all humanity. That is a common enough belief among early Christians that its presence in this text would be unremarkable. The *Revelation of the Magi* goes much further than this, claiming that *the revelation of Christ is actually the foundation of all humanity’s religious beliefs and practices*. What the Magi have experienced in the fulfillment of their age-old prophecy, while obviously of great significance for them, is but “one drop of salvation from the house of majesty” (15:1)—one limited instance of Christ’s salvific activity in the world.

What are the practical consequences of this belief that all forms of religious experience are revelations of Christ? Two especially come to mind. First, this belief means that the *Revelation of the Magi* has a far more positive view of non-Christian religious traditions than any other early Christian writing. There were a handful of early Christian thinkers who held that glimpses of

## *Revelation of the Magi*

Christ were had in the past by the greatest of the pagan philosophers—Socrates, to name one example. But these thinkers also maintained that such glimpses were woefully incomplete when compared with the definitive revelation of Christ in the person of Jesus of Nazareth. And such an opinion, it must be remembered, is quite charitable when compared with most early Christian beliefs about non-Christian religions. The vast majority of early Christians, like their Israelite forebears, tended to regard the gods of other peoples as illusory at best, demonic at worst.

A second consequence of the *Revelation of the Magi*'s opinion about Christ's all-encompassing revelation is that it renders the traditional model of Christian expansion completely pointless. Throughout much of Christian history, and particularly since the beginning of the Age of Exploration in the fifteenth century, one dominant means by which Christianity has spread among non-Christian populations is through the work of dedicated missionaries. The general assumption is that the work of missionaries has been absolutely necessary because Jesus Christ delegated this task to the most devoted of his followers.<sup>24</sup>

But why could not Christ *himself* have been the principal agent of Christian expansion? If Christ existed before Jesus of Nazareth did (as the first verses of the Gospel of John claim) and could even visit people after his ascension (as Acts of the Apostles claims that he did

## Introduction

to the Apostle Paul), then what would prevent Christ from appearing to *anyone*, in any place, at any time? This appears to have been a question asked by the author of the *Revelation of the Magi*, and his answer was, “Nothing.” Christ appeared to the Magi before he assumed human flesh, and what is more, he apparently felt no need to identify himself to the Magi as Christ. The author, to be sure, is very concerned that the Christian revelation be spread to all the people of the world, but in his estimation, human missionaries are in no way essential for this task.

If we see this view of Christ as central to the author of the *Revelation of the Magi*, then it becomes much clearer why someone else would have felt compelled to change the original ending of the story. As the *Revelation of the Magi* originally ended, the Magi and the people of Shir have all come to experience the presence of Christ, though they have done so completely without any of the trappings that we might associate with institutional Christianity. They are, in the words of the great twentieth-century Catholic theologian Karl Rahner, “anonymous Christians.” The Apostle Thomas episode solves this “problem” by having the Magi baptized and commissioned by an apostolic emissary to go preach the Gospel throughout the entire world.

A helpful analogy for what has happened to the *Revelation of the Magi* would be the difference between the

## Revelation of the Magi

“abrupt ending” and the “longer ending” of the Gospel of Mark, most likely the first of the canonical Gospels to be written. The vast majority of scholars today believe that the original ending of Mark’s Gospel was at 16:8. This would mean that Mark ended with the women running terrified from the angel’s appearance at the empty tomb of Jesus—that is, without any appearances of the resurrected Jesus. Mark would therefore have ended with the words “they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid.” Although the precise reasons for the “abrupt ending” will likely never be completely clear, some scholars believe that by it Mark intended to convey a powerful theological message to his audience—possibly that Christian faith grows and perseveres *in spite of* the frailty and often failure of its would-be messengers.

A powerful theological message, and arguably a brilliant ending to this Gospel. But also one that could be misunderstood or seem rather inadequate, particularly given the presence of Resurrection appearances in later Gospels. So someone, probably in the second century, attached a “longer ending” to Mark’s Gospel (16:9–20) that contained several appearances of the risen Jesus, along with Jesus’s missionary charge to his disciples. In other words, this individual changed the ending of Mark’s Gospel to reflect much more clearly and explicitly how Christians in his time and place expected a Gospel to end. Something much like that seems to have happened

## Introduction

to the *Revelation of the Magi*. It was simply not good enough for the Magi to have had a revelation of Christ that did not “make them Christians” in a straightforward and unambiguous way,<sup>25</sup> just as it was not good enough for the women of Mark’s Gospel to hear that Jesus had been raised without *seeing* any definitive evidence of it or telling anyone about what they saw at the tomb. Hence, the endings of both Mark’s Gospel and the *Revelation of the Magi* were rewritten and expanded to make them more palatable to the typical expectations of later Christians.

So, the *Revelation of the Magi* has a view of other religious traditions that is highly unusual among early Christian writings. That feature, along with its status as the longest and most developed apocryphal narrative about the Magi, should make it of considerable interest for scholars of Christian origins. But the present book would not have been written were *Revelation of the Magi* of interest for only a limited number of academic specialists. Over the past several years I have shared my work on this writing with both members of several church communities and with a number of friends and relatives, some of whom do not consider themselves especially religious. Their enthusiastic response, I believe, has much to do with the way in which the Magi have embedded themselves in popular culture to a degree surpassing many other figures from the Bible. Fewer and

## *Revelation of the Magi*

fewer people may have much understanding of such a monumental personality as, say, the Apostle Paul, but it seems as if *everyone* knows the wise men!

The *Revelation of the Magi* is indeed a fascinating and imaginative story about some of the Bible's most intriguing figures. But the emphasis of the *Revelation of the Magi* on the universality of Christ's revelation may also captivate many readers. The questions this writing poses are of potential importance for anyone who considers herself or himself religious, spiritual, or simply interested in theological questions. Could Christ actually be the source of multiple revelations throughout human history? Would there be any way of knowing this? What would the implications of this be for Christian attitudes toward non-Christian religions? What would this mean for the practice of evangelism? Would it even be correct to regard such a divine being as "Christ" if the Christian revelation is but a single isolated example of this being's salvific activity? Does any revelation take precedence over others? The answers to these questions will probably differ depending on one's basic religious convictions. But whether one is a born-again Christian, a Latter-day Saint, a "religious seeker," or a Buddhist, the *Revelation of the Magi* raises challenging questions about divine revelation, religious pluralism, and the uniqueness of religions—questions that merit deep, sustained reflection.

## CONCLUSION

# The Meanings of the “Revelation of the Magi”

---

What are the most important things we learn from the *Revelation of the Magi*? Is it merely a colorful and captivating piece of fiction? Or does it tell us anything about the Magi and the Christmas story that we wouldn't otherwise know? What might be the broader significance of this ancient tale—not just for scholars who specialize in early Christianity, but for a wide range of lay readers as well?

Two points especially come to mind. First, the *Revelation of the Magi* is an outstanding example of how much influence writings *outside of* the Bible can have on our conceptions of biblical texts, people, and events. Of course, some readers may deny that their understandings of the Bible are determined by anything other than the Bible itself. But to illustrate how apocryphal writings

## *Revelation of the Magi*

can shape our views of biblical stories, I'd like you to ask yourself this question: in the Christmas story, how do Mary and Joseph get to Bethlehem?

I would imagine that many of you said that they used a donkey. Indeed, some of you may have been more specific: that Mary rode the donkey while Joseph walked. But take a look at Luke 2:1–7, the most famous account of the Christmas story and of the census that brought Mary and Joseph to Bethlehem.

In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered. This was the first registration and was taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria. All went to their own towns to be registered. Joseph also went from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to the city of David called Bethlehem, because he was descended from the house and family of David. He went to be registered with Mary, to whom he was engaged and who was expecting a child. While they were there, the time came for her to deliver her child. And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn.



## Conclusion

Do you see the familiar donkey mentioned anywhere? Why isn't it mentioned? The reality is that although it has become common knowledge that Mary and Joseph used a donkey to get to Bethlehem, this information isn't found anywhere in Luke or, in fact, in the rest of the Bible.

The famous donkey first appears in the *Protevangelium of James*, a second-century apocryphal Infancy Gospel. Here is what that writing says:

He [i.e., Joseph] saddled the donkey and seated her [i.e., Mary] on it; and his son led it along, while Joseph followed behind. (*Protevangelium of James* 17:2)

From its debut in the *Protevangelium*, the donkey appeared in other ancient retellings of the Christmas story, and from there to Christmas pageants, greeting cards, carols, and so forth—despite its never being mentioned at all in the Bible! Might the *Revelation of the Magi*, like the *Protevangelium*, also have elements that have influenced our understanding of the Christmas story?

To my knowledge, there is nothing in the *Revelation of the Magi* that has filtered into the version of the Christmas story that we know *today*; certainly not like the donkey has. Yet the *Revelation of the Magi* has not always been as invisible as it is now. In fact, for European

## *Revelation of the Magi*

Christians in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, this story had an immense influence.

How did the *Revelation of the Magi*, an ancient Syriac writing, become such a powerful influence in medieval and Renaissance Europe? Recall that in the introduction, I mentioned a summary of the *Revelation of the Magi* found in the *Opus Imperfectum in Matthaeum*, a fifth-century Latin commentary on the Gospel of Matthew. When I discussed it before, its significance was as a key witness to the *Revelation of the Magi*, helping us to learn how old the text actually might be. But my very brief mention of the *Opus Imperfectum* does not do justice to how influential this text became in the centuries after which it was composed.

We don't know who wrote the *Opus Imperfectum*; all we can infer is that it was written in the fifth century and that the author lived somewhere close to the great city of Constantinople. But for reasons unknown, it became incorrectly attributed to Saint John Chrysostom, a major Christian thinker and bishop in fourth-century Antioch. Because it was believed to have been penned by Chrysostom, the *Opus Imperfectum* continued to be copied and read throughout medieval Europe.

And this meant that its legend about the Magi also entered the world of medieval Christianity. Several pieces of artwork are reproduced in this book that show unquestionable influence from the *Revelation of the*

## Conclusion

*Magi*. Consider the two paintings associated with Rogier van der Weyden and his school, which today reside in the Gemäldegalerie in Berlin and the Cloisters Museum in New York, respectively (see frontispiece and page 49). In each of these, the three Magi stand in awe of the Christ child, who prominently hovers above them in the form of a star! As I said in the introduction, the *Revelation of the Magi* is the only ancient Christian text to identify the Star of Bethlehem with the celestial Christ himself, which makes it virtually certain that this legend is the source of these paintings. Further details confirm this. Behind the Magi stands their sacred mountain, the Mountain of Victories. And in the Cloisters painting, the Magi again appear in the background, immersing themselves in their Spring of Purification. The influence of the *Revelation of the Magi* is also evident in the depictions of the Magi found in manuscripts and printed books of the *Speculum Humanae Salvationis* (Mirror of Human Salvation), an immensely popular devotional writing of the fourteenth century (see *Speculum Humanae Salvationis* on pages 40 and 41).

Apart from inspiring artistic representations of the Magi, this legend also captivated Christian thinkers as distinguished as Saint Thomas Aquinas. In the *Summa Theologica*, his greatest work, Aquinas uses the *Revelation of the Magi* as evidence that the Star of Bethlehem was a clear and unmistakable way for God to tell human

## *Revelation of the Magi*

beings about the birth of Christ. Even if the meaning of the star wasn't obvious to everyone, it certainly was to the Magi, who knew about its coming through Seth's books of revelation and were waiting attentively for it.<sup>295</sup>

The *Revelation of the Magi* even influenced the way explorers of the New World understood the indigenous cultures they encountered (See *Adoration of the Magi* on page 95). Two examples will suffice. First, there is the seventeenth-century Augustinian monk Antonio de la Calancha, who studied the Incan culture of Peru. He was impressed by the similarities between Andean traditional religion and Christianity, and he believed that the Apostle Thomas and the Magi must have missionized the region together, just as the *Opus Imperfectum* indicated.<sup>296</sup> Second, the Franciscan missionary and historian Juan de Torquemada described the belief among some of the Aztecs that the conquistador Cortés was the god Quetzalcoatl with recourse to this legend. Just as the Magi had stood atop the Mountain of Victories awaiting

*Adoration of the Magi*, attributed to Vasco Fernandes, Museu Nacional de Arte Antiga, Lisbon, Portugal. This early-sixteenth-century painting represents one of the three Magi as a Native American. Both the biblical story of the Magi and the *Revelation of the Magi* influenced the ways in which explorers of the New World interpreted indigenous cultures of the Americas.

## *Revelation of the Magi*

the fulfillment of their prophecy, Torquemada notes, so, too, did the Aztecs anxiously await the foretold return of Quetzalcoatl, and were all too willing to accept Cortés as the returned Quetzalcoatl when Spanish ships appeared off the Mexican coast.

So the legend found in the *Revelation of the Magi* was demonstrably important for Christians in Europe half a millennium ago. And it is a powerful example of the way that an apocryphal writing can strongly influence understandings of biblical events, even if it does not figure into the portrayal of the “Wise Men” in the Christmas story as we know it today.

But as my second and final remark, I want to suggest a different reason that the *Revelation of the Magi* may be especially relevant for today’s world. Speaking for a moment as a theologian rather than a historian, I think that the most important thing about the *Revelation of the Magi* may not be what it says about the Magi, but what it says about *Christ*.

Recall that in the introduction I asked the question of why the *Revelation of the Magi* has been so neglected by modern scholars of early Christianity that it has only now been translated into English. The answer I gave there was that it had the misfortune of being preserved in a language few scholars knew, and of being part of not one but *two* neglected spheres of early Christian litera-

## Conclusion

ture—stories about Jesus’s birth, and writings that were not included in the New Testament.

But one might as willingly believe, if so inclined, that the introduction of the *Revelation of the Magi* to a wide audience at this precise moment in time is hardly a matter of chance. As already discussed, the *Revelation of the Magi* has a very unusual understanding of the origins of the world’s religious traditions. Instead of seeing non-Christian religions as products of human vanity or demonic inspiration, as most ancient Christians did, the *Revelation of the Magi* sees potentially all revelation as coming from Christ himself. Moreover, because the star-child never reveals himself to the Magi as Christ, the *Revelation of the Magi* apparently believes that having *an experience of Christ’s presence* is much more important than *being a Christian*.

Taking this radical viewpoint, the *Revelation of the Magi* practically stands alone among early Christian writings in its positive appraisal of religious pluralism. So, another way of answering the question of why the *Revelation of the Magi* is now beginning to be studied more closely is that such a text could be fully appreciated *only* in a moment such as today. Now more than ever before, religious diversity is a fact of life in many parts of the world. And this religious diversity has given birth, in recent decades, to a great deal of theological reflection on

## *Revelation of the Magi*

the place of Christianity among the world's religious traditions. It has become more intellectually challenging to insist on the obvious and exclusive truth of one's religion when one lives and works in close proximity to other people who cherish their own religious tradition just as much. Are those who do not share our religious beliefs foolishly misguided? According to the *Revelation of the Magi*, the answer of Christ to the Magi appears to be no:

And I am everywhere, because I am a ray of light whose light has shone in this world from the majesty of my Father, who has sent me to fulfill everything that was spoken about me in the entire world and in every land by unspeakable mysteries, and to accomplish the commandment of my glorious Father, who by the prophets preached about me to the contentious house,<sup>297</sup> in the same way as for you, as befits your faith, it was revealed to you about me. (13:10)

## NOTES

---

1. The names Balthazar, Caspar, and Melchior are most familiar to Westerners, but these names appear in written sources from only the sixth century onward. Several other lists of names survive from ancient Christian writings.
2. Going forward, I will prefer the term *Magi* to *wise men*. First of all, it respects what Matthew calls them, since it is simply a transliteration of the Greek *magoi*. Second, it leaves unresolved the question of precisely *who* these individuals are, since it is not at all clear who Matthew believed them to be. Leaving the question of their identity open-ended is important, since early Christians had a range of theories about their identity; the story addressed in this book has its own very distinct understanding of who the Magi were.
3. For other uses of the noun and its cognate verb, see Acts 8:9, 13:6, 8.
4. Matthew's Gospel never specifies whether the star had led them to Jerusalem and then disappeared when they entered the city, or whether the Magi had seen it only initially in "the East." In either case, Mt 2:9–10 seems to imply that the star had disappeared from the Magi for some period of time.
5. All three of these beliefs appear in early Christian literature. One story relates that the Magi were in the midst of



## Notes

their magical spells at the time of the star's appearance; when the spells ceased to work, they consulted their ancient prophecies and learned about the star (see Origen *Against Celsus* 1.60). Some members of John Chrysostom's congregation in fourth-century Antioch regarded the Magi as astrologers and believed (to his great frustration) that the Magi story showed that astrology really worked (*Homilies on Matthew* 6.1). Lastly, an ancient Infancy Gospel preserved in Arabic says that the Magi came to Jerusalem because of a prophecy of Zoroaster, the founder of their religion (*Arabic Infancy Gospel* 7).

6. Precisely when the star disappeared is unclear, just as in Matthew's Gospel.

7. In their book on the infancy narratives, Marcus Borg and John Dominic Crossan demonstrate these differences quite well by showing what a Christmas pageant based on only Matthew or only Luke would look like. See Borg and Crossan, *The First Christmas: What the Gospels Really Teach About Jesus's Birth* (San Francisco: HarperOne, 2007), 3–24.

8. Two recent scholars have argued for the historicity of some aspects of the infancy narratives. Jane Schaberg, in her *Illegitimacy of Jesus: A Feminist Theological Interpretation of the Infancy Narratives* (Revised edition, Sheffield, UK: Sheffield Phoenix, 2006), asserts that the detail that Jesus was conceived outside of wedlock is historical, though she does not specify who she believes his father was. Not surprisingly, Schaberg's claim is quite controversial and has not been accepted by many scholars. Andries van Aarde, in his *Fatherless in Galilee: Jesus as Child of God* (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity, 2001), suggests that the presence of Joseph in the infancy narratives and his corresponding absence during Jesus's adulthood indicates that Joseph died when Jesus was quite young, leaving Jesus to grow up without a father figure.

## Notes

9. The small number of scholars who investigated the *Revelation of the Magi* in the twentieth century mainly regarded the text as the product of Zoroastrian converts to Christianity in Iran, written with the goal of reconciling their ancestral religious tradition with their new Christian identity. Although this theory is quite intriguing, I have not found it to be at all persuasive. It is not possible to treat this issue in the very limited space of an introduction; however, the basic fact that these Magi live in the mythical land of Shir—not Persia—is one powerful indication that the *Revelation of the Magi* has nothing to do with Zoroastrianism.

10. For example, no original copies of any of the writings of the New Testament exist. The earliest copy of a New Testament writing is a tiny papyrus fragment of the Gospel of John, usually dated to 125–150 C.E. (The Gospel itself was most likely written in 90–100 C.E.) Apart from this fragment, the earliest copies of New Testament writings are from the late second and early third centuries or later.

11. Theodore bar Konai tells us that the Magi arrived in Jerusalem during the month of April—a rather odd claim, given that practically all ancient Christians celebrated the arrival of the Magi (Epiphany) in early January. The only other ancient Christian writing that claims that the Magi came to Jerusalem in April is none other than the *Revelation of the Magi*.

12. A translation of the *Opus Imperfectum*'s summary of the *Revelation of the Magi* is found in the appendix.

13. The author knows that the Magi's name in their language refers to their practice of silent prayer, that the sacred mountain of the Magi is called the "Victorious Mountain" (as opposed to "Mountain of Victories" in the Syriac text), and that this mountain has a cave, a fountain, and trees (though the placement of these features differs slightly in the two witnesses).

## Notes

14. Most notably, the Apostle Thomas section of the *Revelation of the Magi* contains a baptismal hymn sung by Thomas that invokes the Holy Spirit; several similar hymns exist in the Acts of Thomas. The account of the Magi's baptism also shares a number of parallels with baptismal scenes in the Acts of Thomas. But it is important to emphasize that these are parallels of *form*, not *content*: the *Revelation of the Magi* and the Acts of Thomas do not share any narrative elements.
15. This is because the Apostle Thomas section of the *Revelation of the Magi* appears to have been written in direct response to what is said in the first-person section of the *Revelation of the Magi* and would not have circulated separately.
16. In fact, as Raymond E. Brown has noted in *The Birth of the Messiah: A Commentary on the Infancy Narratives in the Gospels of Matthew and Luke* (2nd ed.; New York: Doubleday, 1993), belief in the historicity of the Magi story has, in the recent past, been used as an indicator of whether a scholar was inside or outside of the mainstream of biblical studies.
17. Of course, there have been numerous attempts to link the Star of Bethlehem to a supernova, comet, or other celestial phenomenon. But these attempts almost always fail to recognize that the behavior that Matthew attributes to the star—especially its ability to mark the direct spot of the child Jesus in Mt 2:9—cannot occur in any natural fashion.
18. If we assume that that Jesus was born in approximately 4 B.C.E. (the most common date estimated by scholars) and that the Magi visited Jesus shortly thereafter, more than fifty years would pass before Paul wrote his earliest letters, which are the earliest Christian writings we possess.
19. The most famous of the apocryphal Infancy Gospels are the *Protevangelium of James*, which focuses more on the upbringing of Mary than Jesus, and the *Infancy Gospel of Thomas*,

## Notes

famous for its depiction of Jesus as a vindictive child possessing frequently deadly miraculous powers. The Infancy Gospel that the *Revelation of the Magi* has used is preserved in medieval Latin and Irish manuscripts and is a lengthy expansion and harmonization of the materials found in the canonical infancy narratives, plus a number of traditions not found elsewhere.

20. This name is on the analogy of “Planet X,” a designation coined by the astronomer Percival Lowell (the namesake of Flagstaff’s Lowell Observatory) for an unknown planet beyond the orbit of Neptune—a hypothesis that, although flawed in some respects, ultimately led to the discovery of the planet Pluto. Although the name “*Infancy Gospel X*” is by no means ideal, unfortunately so little work has been done on this text that no more descriptive name presents itself.

21. For more discussion of the number of the Magi, see the note at 16:2 in the translation.

22. Pseudonymity, or the practice of writing under a false name, is acknowledged by most scholars to describe the authorship of many New Testament writings. This includes all four canonical Gospels (even if some scholars believe that the nucleus of one or more of the Gospels ultimately goes back to the name associated with the text) and roughly half of the letters attributed to Paul (even if some of the spurious letters perhaps contain authentic Pauline fragments).

23. I assume here that the author was male simply because of the much higher literacy rate of men as compared with women in the ancient world. But none of my arguments about the purpose of the *Revelation of the Magi* necessarily demand male authorship.

24. The most famous sending forth of the disciples to worldwide evangelism is the so-called Great Commission of Mt 28:18–20: “All authority in heaven and on earth has been

## Notes

given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.”

25. In fact, a number of early Christian writers were uncomfortable with Matthew’s Magi story precisely because it did not indicate that their visit to Christ had altered their lives in any fashion. One commentator, Tertullian (*On Idolatry* 9), solved this problem by understanding Matthew’s phrase “they departed to their own country by another way” (Mt 2:12) to mean that they had converted to faith in Christ.

26. These accompanying notes are intended to aid readers in understanding the basic meaning and significance of important passages in the *Revelation of the Magi*. For greater detail and analysis, please consult my dissertation (available online at <http://ou.academia.edu/BrentLandau/Papers>) and my forthcoming critical edition of the *Revelation of the Magi* for the Corpus Christianorum Series Apocryphorum, published by Brepols.

27. The titles of the individual chapters are my own, and do not appear in the manuscript of the *Chronicle of Zuqnin* (the Syriac world chronicle in which the *Revelation of the Magi* is preserved). Only two symbols in the text require comment. In places where the manuscript has suffered damage, square brackets [ ] contain what I consider to be the most likely original reading. In places where it is impossible to determine the original reading, square brackets simply contain the words *text missing*. In contrast, parentheses ( ) indicate places where a word or words have been added to clarify the meaning of the text beyond a literal translation of the Syriac.

28. The short descriptive statement contained in 1:1 is the work of the compiler of the *Chronicle of Zuqnin*, not the au-

## Notes

thor of the *Revelation of the Magi*. This is certain not only from the appearance of such statements elsewhere in the *Chronicle*, but also because this statement misrepresents the *Revelation of the Magi* in two important ways. First, the statement emphasizes the gifts that the Magi bring, but the *Revelation of the Magi* cares much less about these gifts than the canonical account of Mt 2:1–12 does. Second, the statement uses the proper name *Christ*, but this name is used only during the Apostle Thomas’s appearance at the end of the *Revelation of the Magi*, an incident that is most likely a secondary addition to the *Revelation of the Magi*.

29. The association of the Magi with royalty began quite early in Christian exegesis, perhaps thanks to such suggestive passages as Ps 72:10–11 and Is 60. Tertullian (*Against Marcion* 3.13) remarks that in the East, the Magi are treated practically as kings. For Augustine in the fourth century, they are definitely kings, and their piety is contrasted against King Herod’s impiety (*Sermon* 200). However, in the first-person-plural section of the *Revelation of the Magi*, there is almost no mention of their royal status. The term *king* never appears in reference to the Magi; the only indication that the Magi are kings occurs at 18:5, where they remove their crowns and lay them at Christ’s feet in recognition of his kingdom.

30. The phrase “kings, sons of kings” is how Syriac writers describe hereditary kingship, as compared with the inconsistent manner of succession found in the Roman Empire.

31. The residence of the Magi here derives, unsurprisingly, from Mt 2:1. Throughout the *Revelation of the Magi*, however, it appears that “East” is not simply directional, but has the status of a specific nation with a corresponding ethnic group (cf. “Easterners” in 24:4). There are nine such usages of “East” in the *Revelation of the Magi* (in addition to three

## Notes

directional instances), though the name “Shir” (2:4 and corresponding note; 4:1) also appears in the *Revelation of the Magi* as the land of the Magi. It may be that the “great East” is understood in the *Revelation of the Magi* as a quite large country or region, of which Shir is the outermost district, as 2:4 seems to imply.

32. This statement reveals the *Revelation of the Magi* as a pseudepigraphon (i.e., a writing that makes false claims about the identity of its author), stating as it does that it was produced by the Magi themselves. No other Magi pseudepigrapha are known to exist from antiquity, and this is one of only a handful of cases where Christians produced writings purported to have been authored by non-Christians.

33. According to the *Revelation of the Magi*, the word *Magi* is related etymologically to their practice of praying in silence, which the text mentions on several other occasions (cf. 1:5, 2:1, 3:8, 5:7, 5:11, 12:2). Yet, a verbal similarity between the words *Magi* and *silence* is not easy to find in any of the obvious languages of transmission (Syriac, Greek, or Latin). It may simply be an exoticizing device and not an actual word derivation. Strikingly, the *Opus Imperfectum in Matthaeum* (the fifth-century Latin commentary on the Gospel of Matthew that contains a brief version of this same legend about the Magi) agrees with the *Revelation of the Magi* in almost verbatim fashion on this point: “And they were called Magi in their language, because in silence and with a silent voice they glorified God.” This close agreement suggests that the author of the *Opus Imperfectum* had not simply heard of this legend, but also had access to a written version of the *Revelation of the Magi*. In a number of Syriac monastic writings, silence is a means for inducing ecstasy. Unlike these monastic traditions, though, the *Revelation of the Magi* nowhere suggests that the silent praying of the Magi facilitates ecstatic

## Notes

experience. It has sometimes been thought that Zoroastrian priests prayed in silence, but other scholars have rejected this view. A hagiographic Syriac text, the *Life of John of Tella*, relates that the Magi frequently convey information to one another in silence by using hand gestures. However, this is not in the context of prayer, but rather the interrogation of a prisoner.

34. This title for God is used infrequently in Jewish and Christian literature (cf. 2 Mc 14:46). However, it does appear in Babylonian, Zoroastrian, and Hindu materials from antiquity. Though it is very difficult to prove that the author of *Revelation of the Magi* knew of its use in any of these written materials, the fact that it had a reasonably wide currency in non-Christian religious traditions may explain its use here. One of the major agendas of the author is the depiction of the Magi as a kind of quasi-pagan group that nevertheless distantly echoes Christian terminology and practice.

35. The “gift” is an important theological concept in the *Revelation of the Magi*, mentioned on multiple occasions throughout the Revelation of the Magi. In the abstract, it is the mechanism by which an unknowable God communicates with the inhabitants of the upper and lower worlds. In a concrete sense, it refers specifically to the revelatory activity of Christ. The Syriac term underlying this concept must be distinguished from the other term used for “gift” in the *Revelation of the Magi*, which refers to the offerings brought to Christ by the Magi (Mt 2:11; see note at 4:7). The New Testament, like the *Revelation of the Magi*, generally uses the abstract sense of the term, describing the “gift” of the Holy Spirit, Christ, or God (cf. Jn 4:10; Acts 2:38, 8:20, 10:45, 11:17; Rom 5:15–17; 2 Cor 9:15; Eph 3:7, 4:7; Heb 6:4; Jas 1:17).

36. The *Revelation of the Magi* is one of only a handful of ancient texts to refer to the Magi as “wise.” For the most part,



## Notes

the familiar description of the Magi as “wise men” appears only from the Renaissance onward.

37. Cf. Jn 1:3.

38. In the development of traditions about the Magi, the attribution of names to them is a relatively late exegetical development. The most familiar names in the West for the (three) Magi are Caspar, Melchior, and Balthazar, but these names appear only in the sixth century in the *Excerpta Latina Barbari*, a Latin translation of a Greek chronicle. As for the names found in the *Revelation of the Magi*, I have incorporated without changes the spelling of the names as found in the Latin translation accompanying the most recent critical edition of the *Chronicle of Zuqnin*. The names play no further role in the *Revelation of the Magi*'s narrative beyond this single mention, and their presence in other Syriac sources strongly suggests that 2:3 is a later accretion to the *Revelation of the Magi*. In a peculiar case of interrelation, the *Revelation of the Magi* has a *list* of the Magi numbering twelve, but nowhere explicitly does it say that there are *twelve* Magi, whereas the *Opus Imperfectum in Matthaëum* does state that there were twelve Magi, *without* giving a list of names. The information of the *Opus Imperfectum* is perhaps more archaic, and specific names may have been given to the twelve Magi only at a later time (but cf. 16:2 and accompanying note for a possibly even earlier tradition of a larger, numerically unspecified membership for the ranks of the Magi).

39. The name “Gudaphar” is almost identical to “Gûdnaphar” (Gundaphorus), an Indian king baptized by the Apostle Thomas in the Acts of Thomas. The Acts of Thomas is the earliest written source that narrates Thomas's missionary activities in India. Although King Gûdnaphar appears to have been a historical figure, it is unclear whether he was

## Notes

indeed ruling at the time that the Apostle Thomas is supposed to have been in India—a very contentious debate in and of itself.

40. In contrast to the “land of the East,” the name “Shir” is less common in the *Revelation of the Magi*, used only twice. However, it appears in a number of other ancient texts as a mysterious and faraway land, sometimes identified with China. In one of the Gnostic Christian texts discovered at Nag Hammadi, “Mount Shir” is the place where Noah’s ark comes to rest; more remotely, “Mount Nisir” is where the ark of Utnapishtim lands in the *Epic of Gilgamesh*. The *Revelation of the Magi* is the only ancient Christian text that identifies the homeland of the Magi as Shir. The majority opinion of ancient commentators was that the Magi came from Persia, understanding the term *Magus* in its technical sense of a Zoroastrian priest; cf. Clement of Alexandria (*Miscellanies* 1.15); Origen (*Against Celsus* 1.58–60); John Chrysostom (*Homilies on Matthew* 6.2). Most early Christian artistic representations of the Magi also imply this, depicting them in the typical Persian dress of a pointed “Phrygian cap,” belted tunic, and leggings; cf. especially the mosaic of Sant’Apollinare Nuovo in Ravenna (pages 4 and 5) and the wooden door detail of Santa Sabina in Rome (page 12). A notable and early minority opinion regarding the homeland of the Magi is Arabia; cf. Justin Martyr (*Dialogue with Trypho* 78, 106); Tertullian (*Against Marcion* 3.13, *Against the Jews* 9).

41. The concept of a great world ocean outside of the inhabited world had existed in antiquity at least as early as Homer. The location of the Magi’s homeland in the *Opus Imperfectum in Matthaëum* is described in almost identical language: “situated at the very beginning of the East near the Ocean.”

42. The precise geographical layout envisioned here is ambiguous; it is unclear whether the Ocean or Shir is east of the

## Notes

land of Nod. The most logical solution seems to be that the Ocean is directly east of Shir, which is east of Nod.

43. Cf. Gn 4:16, though there it is the place of Cain's exile. Nod is mentioned very little in extrabiblical literature, and in no other cases does it appear to be the dwelling place of Adam.

44. I.e., "when Adam had Seth." The idea that Adam had received foreknowledge of the future and transmitted it to later generations through Seth or some other means occurs in numerous Jewish and Christian noncanonical writings. This understanding most likely derives from the incident of Adam eating from the Tree of Knowledge, which would have provided him with some sort of predictive ability.

45. Cf. Gn 3:23–24.

46. Mention of Seth's purity also appears in several other Jewish and Christian sources, and has implications for the character of his progeny. See Josephus *Antiquities* 1.68–69.

47. Cf. Gn 4:26 for the tradition that during the time of Seth and his son Enosh "people began to invoke the name of the LORD."

48. In claiming that Seth produced a written revelation, the *Revelation of the Magi* also has some general similarities with writings preserved in the Nag Hammadi corpus.

49. Cf. Gn 7:1.

50. This is the first instance of a phrase, "hidden mysteries," that occurs on twenty-one separate occasions in the *Revelation of the Magi*. Roughly half of these times it appears in the title "Cave of Treasures of Hidden Mysteries" (4:1); in this title and elsewhere it generally functions as the primary designation for the knowledge handed from Seth through the generations of Magi (but cf. 30:3, where it apparently refers to Christ).

## Notes

51. Here it becomes clear that the narrators of the story are the Magi themselves (or more precisely, the generation of Magi living at the time of Christ's coming). This first-person narration continues uninterrupted until 28:4, just prior to the arrival of the Apostle Thomas, where the text abruptly switches into third-person narration.

52. The praying posture of the Magi has analogues in ancient Jewish and Christian literature, even if it is not as well known as the *orans* position or other postures. It is most commonly mentioned in the Hebrew Bible; cf. 1 Kgs 8:54; 2 Chr 6:13; Ezr 9:5; Ps 68:31; Lam 3:41; 1 Tm 2:8.

53. The "Mountain of Victories" is paralleled in the *Opus Imperfectum in Matthaeum*, where it goes by a very similar name, "Victorious Mountain." The meaning of the name "Mountain of Victories / Victorious Mountain" is difficult to interpret, and several scholars have sought to connect it with one of several mountains associated with Zoroaster. However, these theories have little to commend to them. Holy mountains where theophanies take place are hardly a phenomenon exclusive to Zoroastrianism, and parallels to Jewish and Christian texts, such as Ex 24 and Mk 9:1–8, are perhaps more appropriate.

54. The "Cave of Treasures" also appears in a Syriac writing of the same name. The *Cave of Treasures* is a retelling of biblical history from the creation of the world through the coming of Christ, usually thought to have been written sometime between the fourth and sixth century C.E. In this work, the "Cave of Treasures" appears as the place of Adam's burial and as the repository of gifts that are brought by the Magi to Christ (*Cave of Treasures* 5.17, 6.22, 45.12). In the *Revelation of the Magi*, however, the primary importance of this cave is its housing of Seth's books of revelation, though the gifts are also mentioned, albeit briefly. Its usual title in the *Revelation*

## Notes

*of the Magi* is the “Cave of Treasures of Hidden Mysteries,” but variants occur both here and in 4:2. The meaning of the phrase “the Mysteries of the Life of Silence” is not at all clear. It would seem to relate to the Magi’s practice of silent prayer, yet the term “life of silence” is not found elsewhere in the *Revelation of the Magi*.

55. What follows is the prophecy of central importance for the descendants of Seth: the appearance of a star, and thus the manifestation of the Father’s Son. The prophecy, like the rest of the *Revelation of the Magi* prior to 28:6, never mentions the name “Jesus” or “Christ,” though allusions to Christian texts are frequent. This feature is part of the author’s agenda to refer to Christian names and terminology only in an opaque manner. The idea that the Magi expect the star because of a prophecy going back to Seth is unparalleled in ancient Christian literature. According to Origen (*Against Celsus* 1.60; cf. also *Homilies on Numbers* 13.7, 18.4), the Magi were in the midst of magical practice when a luminous new star appeared and caused their spells to lose their efficacy, prompting them to consult the prophecy of their forefather Balaam from Nm 24:17. In *On the Star*, a composition falsely attributed to Eusebius of Caesarea, the Magi have been closely following the prophecies of Balaam, since they have proven true in the past, and hence they immediately recognize the appearance of the star as the fulfillment of another of Balaam’s prophecies. Another pagan prophet who was thought to have predicted the events surrounding the star was Zoroaster. The *Arabic Infancy Gospel* 7:1 states that the Magi arrived in Jerusalem, “just as Zeradusht had predicted.” Zoroaster also predicts the birth of Christ in a narrative preserved by the Syriac writer Theodore bar Konai.

56. Cf. Mt 2:2.

## Notes

57. The information that the Magi are to expect a “light . . . in the form of a star,” rather than simply a star, is significant, since the star is actually the preexistent Christ.

58. The precise role and symbolism of this “pillar of light” in the narrative is unclear. Although the *Revelation of the Magi* mentions the pillar upon which the star sits ten times, these mentions are always during the sequence when the star appears, descends from heaven, and stands before the mouth of a cave (either in Shir or in Bethlehem). Thus, the pillar has no explicit role as a guide for the Magi during their journey; only the star is named at this point in the story. But it is difficult to understand the significance of this pillar without recourse to the Exodus narrative; indeed, the scribe responsible for the text wrote “pillar of cloud” instead of “pillar of light” at a point late in the narrative (27:4). This is the only time this phrase appears in the *Revelation of the Magi* (elsewhere it is “pillar of light”), so it may be no more than a transmission error, but at the very least, it demonstrates a possible (if unintentional) reference to Exodus.

59. Cf. 11:5–7 (and accompanying note at 11:5), 16:4.

60. Cf. Col 1:15.

61. Cf. Jn 4:14.

62. The phrase “who sent” (usually followed by “me”) appears twelve times in the *Revelation of the Magi*. This terminology is strongly connected with the language and theology of John’s Gospel, where it appears more than twenty times.

63. Cf. Mt 2:11. This is the first of several instances where “his” accompanies the gifts that the Magi are to bring to Christ. The translation “his own” presupposes that the gifts in some way have always belonged to Christ, but why this should be so is not made explicit in the text. It is remarkable that the

## Notes

*Revelation of the Magi* nowhere clarifies precisely what these gifts are, even if it might be expected that they are none other than the familiar gold, frankincense, and myrrh. This lack of interest in the gifts is rather odd and represents one of several departures of the *Revelation of the Magi* from common trends in ancient Christian exegesis of the Magi story. Other non-canonical traditions have the Magi giving the child a wide array of gifts; cf. the Irish *Leabhar Breac* infancy narrative 92.3 (an important witness to *Infancy Gospel X*), where they give a purple stone, a pearl, a garland, a linen sheet, a royal staff, and “other gifts, the like or equal of which has not been found on earth.” In some traditions the Magi even receive a gift from Christ in turn: in the *Arabic Infancy Gospel* 8:1–6, Christ gives them a band of cloth that does not burn in fire; in the *Legend of Aphroditianus*, the Magi take back to Persia a picture of the child and mother painted by a servant; in a tale narrated to Marco Polo in Iran, a stone that produces holy fire.

64. The *Revelation of the Magi* also mentions the unsightliness of Christ’s physical appearance at 14:5 and 28:2. Cf. the *Apocryphal Acts of the Apostle Peter* 20, which describes Christ as “beautiful and ugly, young and old.” The *Revelation of the Magi* and the *Acts of Peter* share an emphasis on the ability of Christ to shift his form between that of luminous divine being and an unsightly and humble human being. It is possible that these passages refer back to Is 53:2.

65. Sic. It is unclear whether the passive participle of the verb “to kill” by itself is intended to have the valence of “mortal,” if it foreshadows Christ’s later death (cf. the “sign of the cross” in 4:8), or if some other meaning is intended for this difficult reading.

66. The commencing of the ritual on this date could suggest an allusion to the celebration of Christmas on December 25, the date established by the Roman church in 537.

## Notes

Some Eastern Christian communities—in particular, the Jerusalem church—were resistant to this date until the fifth and sixth centuries, preferring the date of January 6. Yet the ritual's occurrence every month complicates this supposition, even if it is difficult to understand the significance of the twenty-fifth apart from the date of Christmas. Furthermore, the *Revelation of the Magi* has the Magi arrive in Jerusalem during the month of April, “the month of flowers” (17:1), and since they go to Bethlehem very soon after and witness the birth of Jesus in a cave, this would suggest the date of his birth sometime in April (though *birth* is not necessarily the best terminology for a transformation from star into a luminous child). In any case, the mention of the twenty-fifth of the month cannot be reliably used to argue for a post-Constantinian dating of the first-person section of the *Revelation of the Magi*.

67. This combination of trees occurring naturally within a single habitat is, from an ecological perspective, impossible, and thus is part of an idealized cultic landscape. The combination of a mountain, cave, spring, and sacred grove brings together some of the most characteristic features of sacred geography.

68. In ancient Jewish and Christian writings, especially pleasing smells often signify divinity and/or moral goodness. Syriac Christian writings are particularly noteworthy for their emphasis on this sometimes overlooked sense.

69. The *Revelation of the Magi* does not specify how much time has elapsed between the Magi's purification on the twenty-fifth of the month and their ascent of the mountain on the first day of the next month. If it follows a Roman calendar, the number of days in a given month would vary. Since this narrative is set in a semimythical country, however, it is very difficult to give precise durations for the different stages of the ritual.



## Notes

70. Cf. 3:8.

71. This passage, which seems to indicate that some people rejected the teaching of the Magi, is very difficult to understand. The *Revelation of the Magi* never again discusses these dissenters (but cf. 28:1) and here indicates only that their rejection has to do with the practice of silent prayer espoused by the Magi (cf. note at 1:2). Silent prayer was rather uncommon in ancient religions and often viewed with some suspicion, but this is the only mention of it in the *Revelation of the Magi* that has a negative connotation.

72. The next four chapters are presented as an excerpt from the books of revelation produced by Seth and entrusted to the Magi. Though this extended flashback might appear to derail the progression of the plot by breaking away from the Magi, it explains the ultimate origins of the Magi's knowledge and details the first appearance of the star. In addition, since it occurs immediately after the description of the Magi's monthly ritual and immediately prior to the appearance of the star during their ritual, it provides the impression of the passage of some time between the initiation of the present generation of Magi by their fathers and the fulfillment of the ancient prophecy.

73. Cf. Gn 4:25.

74. Cf. 11:7 and 17:2, which indicate that the star was visible only to those who were deemed worthy to see it.

75. Cf. Mk 3:24.

76. Cf. Gn 2:21–22.

77. Cf. Gn 2:23.

78. Similar to 1:2 and 2:1 above, the phrasing of this sentence seems to imply a play on words between *time* and *stumbling block*. However, as with the apparent connection between *Magi* and *silence*, it is not at all clear what similarity exists between these two words.

## Notes

79. Though the term *mysteries* is frequently used with reference to the central ritual of the Magi, it is not clear whether this statement is a directive only to Seth and only with reference to Eve, or whether it is understood to prohibit more broadly women's participation in the Magi's activities. While those who constitute the Magi's ranks are almost always gendered with masculine terms like *father* and *son*, the Magi also instruct their "families," of which women are certainly a part. Still, the handing down of tradition through the lineage of the Magi is predicated on transmission from father to son, with the son taking the father's place at his death, so the role of women is rather limited.

80. Cf. Gn 2:18.

81. Cf. Mk 1:11.

82. It is not clear precisely from where the ideas about Adam having priority before he was created and about the watchers loving him derive. This may be a distant echo of the tradition, found in the *Life of Adam and Eve* 14:1–3, that God instructed the angels to worship Adam.

83. Cf. Gn 4:10; Dn 4:35; Rom 9:20.

84. Cf. Gn 3:15.

85. Cf. Gn 3:14; Is 65:25; Mi 7:17; Rom 16:20.

86. It is not clear whether these individuals whose decline in the last days Adam predicts in 9:2–6 are the human race generally, the lineage of the Magi specifically, or perhaps some other group. But if the text means to imply that the Magi have fallen into apostasy, this is not suggested anywhere other than here.

87. The mention of blaspheming and "saying many things" stands in sharp contrast to the emphasis placed by the *Revelation of the Magi* on both the silent prayer of the Magi and the ineffability of the Father.

## Notes

88. These criticisms of the veneration of heavenly bodies are especially interesting to find in a text so devoted to the Magi, since a chief concern of a number of ancient Christian exegetes regarding Mt 2:1–12 was the potential of this text to be read as demonstrating the efficacy of astrology. Beyond this passing comment, the overall depiction of the Magi in the *Revelation of the Magi* as less like a band of astrologers and more like a doomsday cult (i.e., waiting for one pivotal otherworldly event, not continually interpreting the sky to discern the present and foretell the future) may very well address from a different angle some of these same concerns. For examples of this uneasiness, see: Tertullian (*On Idolatry* 9), in which he asserts that the Magi left behind the magical practice of astrology after their visit to Bethlehem, deducing this from the information that they returned to their homeland “by another way”; John Chrysostom, (*Homilies on Matthew* 6.1), where he laments that some Christians infer the acceptability of astrological practices from Matthew’s story.

89. Criticism of these sorts of acts of profligate living is quite widespread in ancient texts, so it is impossible to know whether these are directed at specific problems in a community or are simply stock phrases of moral exhortation. However, it is noteworthy that the *Revelation of the Magi*, unlike much early Syriac literature, does not have a strong ascetical agenda. The Magi do not engage in celibacy or other world-denying practices, nor is such a lifestyle advocated by Judas Thomas at the end of the *Revelation of the Magi*, unlike his counterpart in Acts of Thomas.

90. Cf. Gn 3:5. The speaker of these words is, of course, the serpent.

91. Cf. Is 29:16, 45:9, 64:8; Jer 18:4–6.

92. Cf. Jn 13:16.

## Notes

93. Cf. Gn 2:7.

94. This statement refers to the tradition of Christ descending into Hell in the time between his death and Resurrection, often called the “harrowing of Hell.” The specific intention in the *Revelation of the Magi*, to redeem Adam, is also referenced in a number of ancient Christian texts, but other incidents (such as the binding of the devil) find mention as well. The tradition has its canonical origins in Eph 4:9 and 1 Pt 3:19–20, 4:6.

95. Cf. Gn 2:7.

96. Cf. Gn 4:1–2.

97. Cf. Gn 4:4.

98. Cf. Gn 4:10–12.

99. Cf. Gn 4:26; also 3:2 above.

100. It seems that 11:1–2 should not be read as a “real-time” description of the star’s appearance, the account of which begins in 11:3. Instead, these two verses likely function as summary statements to indicate that the star appeared during this generation of Magi’s time, and that the visions that they saw at the time of the star’s coming were predicted by the books of revelation.

101. Several other early Christian texts describe the Magi’s star as inordinately bright. The earliest such description is Ignatius of Antioch’s *Epistle to the Ephesians* 19:2, where the star is brighter than all other stars, which form a circle around it. Somewhat later in the second century, in the *Protevangelium of James* 21:8, the Magi describe the star as being so bright that it makes all other stars disappear. There is no indication, however, in either of these texts that this celestial phenomenon is invisible to everyone except the Magi.

## Notes

102. The month of Nisan is equivalent to April, though it is strange to have such a culturally specific reference in a text situated, for the most part, in a locale that is almost other-worldly. However, the phrase “in the days of Nisan” can also be translated idiomatically as “in springtime.” In either case, see the note directly below.

103. I.e., “the moon is absorbed in the light of the sun.” This statement is odd because it places the phenomenon of a faint daytime moon at a specific time of the year—namely, Nisan/April (or possibly springtime). However, as is well known, the daytime moon is visible throughout the entire year, and not simply in April. The analogy itself—that the star is so bright that it makes the sun appear as faint as the daytime moon normally does—is quite clear, creative, and vivid, even if the reference to April is difficult to understand.

104. The phrase “the sons of our mysteries” (as opposed to “our sons” at 5:1) seems to indicate, along with 5:9 and 5:11, that the order of the Magi does not perpetuate strictly through biological succession (as 5:10 might imply) but is open to “converts.”

105. The tradition that the star of the Magi was visible only to them is a definite minority position in ancient Christian exegesis. It is, however, one of several striking agreements between the *Revelation of the Magi* and *Infancy Gospel X*. Because these two texts agree on what is such an unusual interpretation of the Star of Bethlehem, it is very likely that there is some sort of literary relationship between them.

106. Cf. Jn 1:51; Gn 28:12.

107. Cf. 4:2 and corresponding note.

108. Cf. 20:1.

109. Cf. 4:8. Latin and Irish witnesses to *Infancy Gospel X* also describe the birth of Christ as a mass of light that gradually dissipates until it assumes the form of an infant.

## Notes

110. Cf. Lk 24:36; Jn 20:19, 21, 26.

111. Cf. 19:1, 21:2, 25:1, 31:1.

112. Cf. Jn 1:14.

113. Cf. Jn 3:16.

114. Cf. Jn 19:30.

115. Cf. Phil 2:8.

116. Cf. Gal 4:4.

117. Cf. Rom 1:20, 2:1.

118. This idea that Christ can be both in the presence of the Father and on earth at the same time may be related to a variant reading in Jn 3:13, which states that the Son of Man, who has ascended into and descended from heaven, is (currently) in heaven. Regardless of the origin of the idea, however, the *Revelation of the Magi* is evidently very invested in the ability of Christ to appear in multiple locations and forms simultaneously.

119. Cf. Col 3:11; Gospel of Thomas 77.

120. This sentence contains an intriguing theological concept: that Christ is the underlying reality of all systems of religious belief in the world. Although other early Christian writings admit the possibility of revelation through non-Christian channels (e.g., Acts 14:15–17, 17:22–31), the *Revelation of the Magi* demonstrates a novel “theology of world religions,” the precise form of which is found nowhere else, to my knowledge, in ancient Christian sources.

121. Cf. Ez 3:9.

122. Cf. Gospel of Philip 57:28–58:10.

123. The idea that those involved in the killing of Christ have come to an evil end appears in numerous early Christian writings (e.g., 1 Thes 2:15; Mt 27:25).

## Notes

124. The final phrase of this sentence is rather difficult to understand. It may mean that there were letters that the Magi were to open only at the time of the star's coming, giving specific instructions for the gifts to be brought. However, the more likely sense is that the gifts, whatever they were, were housed in some kind of sealed container(s), here called "letters." This is the probable meaning, based upon the statement in 18:7 that the Magi had brought their treasures to Bethlehem "sealed."

125. The series of statements that follow demonstrate Christ's polymorphous ability, a tradition that appears in a number of other ancient Christian texts. This concept seems to derive from the account of Jesus's transfiguration (Mk 9:2–8) and from the Resurrection appearance stories, but it undergoes considerable development in the second and third centuries, where it appears in the Acts of John 88–94, the Acts of Thomas 143, and the Acts of Peter 20–21. In some traditions about the Magi, including the *Armenian Infancy Gospel* and a legend told to Marco Polo in Iran in the twelfth century, Jesus appeared to each of the three Magi in correspondence to their ages: as young, middle-aged, and old. In another impressive parallel to the *Revelation of the Magi*, the best Latin witness of *Infancy Gospel X* has the infant Jesus change his form as the shepherds are viewing. A unique aspect of the polymorphic vision in the *Revelation of the Magi*, not seen in other texts, is that its individual pieces in sequence tell the story of Christ's birth, growth, and death, culminating with his descent into Sheol and his heavenly ascent. A polymorphic appearance of Christ also occurs later in the *Revelation of the Magi*, this time for the inhabitants of Shir after they have eaten of the food brought back by the Magi (28:1–3).

126. Regarding Christ's ugliness, see note at 4:8.

127. Cf. Jn 1:29.

## Notes

128. Cf. 10:4 and corresponding note.
129. Cf. 12:3; Ps 24:7.
130. Cf. Ps 91:12.
131. Cf. Jn 14:16, 14:26, 15:26, 16:7; 1 Jn 2:1.
132. Cf. Mt 13:17; Lk 10:24.
133. Cf. Acts 9:3, 22:6, 26:13.
134. Cf. Mt 11:27; Lk 10:22.
135. Cf. Jn 1:18, 10:38. This verse of the *Revelation of the Magi* uses several terms—*singleness, thought, voice*—that are relatively rare in early Christian literature and have their closest parallels in the Gnostic Christian writings from Nag Hammadi (see also the frequent references to “error” at 13:3, 13:5, 14:8, 17:9, 18:1, 21:9, 21:10, 30:4, 32:2). Some scholars have considered the *Revelation of the Magi* to be a “Gnostic” text; however, despite this strange terminology, the *Revelation of the Magi* lacks any traces of the most common doctrines found in the Nag Hammadi literature, such as a negative evaluation of the material world or an evil creator (cf. 21:9).
136. Cf. Jn 1:3.
137. Cf. Rom 8:38–39; Col 1:16.
138. Cf. 2:2.
139. Cf. Mk 1:11, 9:7.
140. Cf. 1:5.
141. Cf. Col 1:15.
142. Cf. Jn 1:14, 1:18, 3:16, 3:18; 1 Jn 4:9.
143. Cf. Jn 3:19.
144. In the Syriac tradition, the terminology of “putting on a body” is a very typical description of the Incarnation.
145. Cf. Mk 16:17.



## Notes

146. Cf. Jn 14:6.

147. Cf. Jn 10:9.

148. Cf. Phil 2:9.

149. Cf. Jn 6:35, 48, 51. Also note that the pronoun *me* provides the first indication of who is speaking this discourse: the Father himself, as will become completely clear with the final words of the passage in 15:10.

150. Cf. Mk 4:14.

151. Cf. Jn 10:11.

152. Cf. Heb 4:14.

153. Cf. Jn 6:55.

154. Cf. Jn 15:1, 5.

155. The use of *encampment* here and at several places in the rest of the narrative is peculiar, since it does not suggest a relatively small group of travelers. It is a word used in the New Testament almost exclusively for large assemblies of people (e.g., Acts 21:34; Heb 11:34, 13:11). Because of this typical usage, this terminology in the *Revelation of the Magi* may reflect a more archaic belief that the group of the Magi numbered more than twelve (cf. the list of names in 2:3, which is possibly an independent accretion grafted onto the *Revelation of the Magi*). If this is indeed the case, then this would be another similarity between the *Revelation of the Magi* and *Infancy Gospel X*, whose witnesses all portray the Magi as a large group of people.

156. The ambiguity of this verb does not specify whether the group of the Magi is being upheld in the sense of “being sustained” or actually “carried” off the ground. Evidence for both interpretations appears in 16:6, as the Magi are relieved of their fatigue and cross rivers by foot.

157. Cf. Is 60:19; Rv 21:23, 22:5.

## Notes

158. A reference to the lack of fatigue experienced by the Magi also occurs in an Irish witness to *Infancy Gospel X*. It is also possible that this passage from the *Revelation of the Magi* alludes to Is 40:31.

159. I.e., the star.

160. Cf. 26:5, 27:9. This food that is generated by the star will later figure prominently in the conversion of the people of Shir, since it produces visions of Christ for those who eat it (28:1–4). While the multiplication of food has some parallels in early Christian literature (cf. Mk 6:32–44, 8:10; Jn 6:5–13; *Infancy Gospel of Thomas* 12), the ability of food to facilitate visionary experience is far more unusual. Several similar concepts are the eating of a scroll as a sign of prophetic commission in Ez 2:8–3:3 and Rv 10:8–10 and the eating of a heavenly honeycomb by Aseneth as a kind of proto-Eucharist in *Joseph and Aseneth* 16; but even in these cases, there is no indication that what is ingested produces a visionary experience.

161. Cf. Is 40:4.

162. Cf. Gn 3:15; Ps 91:13; Lk 10:19; Rom 16:20.

163. I.e., in April (Nisan; cf. 11:6). Clement of Alexandria also knows of Christians who state that Jesus was born in April (24–25 Pharmuti, equivalent to April 20–21); see *Miscellanies* 1.21. The information that the Magi arrived in “the month of flowers” also appears in Theodore bar Konai (*Minra* 7.17). Because of such similar language, it is very likely that Theodore was acquainted with the *Revelation of the Magi*. Moreover, Theodore was writing in central Arabia at roughly the same time that the *Chronicle of Zuqin* was produced, which indicates that the *Revelation of the Magi* was in fairly wide circulation at the end of the eighth century.

164. Cf. Mt 2:3.

## Notes

165. This statement by the inhabitants of Jerusalem and the explanatory comments of the Magi that follow are noteworthy on several levels. First of all, there is again a remarkable parallel with *Infancy Gospel X*, where *Joseph* (not the inhabitants of Jerusalem) regards the Magi as astrologers because they are constantly looking up at the sky. More precisely, in both texts the Magi are watching their guiding star, which neither the inhabitants of Jerusalem nor Joseph is able to see (cf. 11:7). Beyond this, however, there is a more problematic issue. The use of the term *Magianism* occurs only here in the *Revelation of the Magi*; their religious system is elsewhere called *mysteries*, *custom*, or *faith*. Moreover, this is also the only instance of the word *Magi* within the first-person-plural narration that makes up the bulk of the document, and its connotation is apparently negative. Because the inhabitants of Jerusalem refer to the actions of the visitors as “Magianism,” do not understand the mysteries of these visitors, and reckon these visitors to be “Magi,” the entire implication of this passage is that these visitors are not who the inhabitants of Jerusalem think they are, and are *not* Magi—a difficult conclusion given that the central figures of the narrative are obviously the Magi. Perhaps a solution lies in the earlier statements that the Magi are called by this name because of their silent prayer (1:2, 2:1), which may be intended in part to differentiate these figures from the more common connotation of Magi as astrologers.

166. Cf. 15:7 and accompanying note.

167. Cf. 13:10 and corresponding note.

168. Cf. Mt 2:4.

169. Cf. Mt 2:10.

170. The statement that the scribes did not believe that which was written in their sacred writings, when coupled with the

## Notes

Magi's reliance on their own books of prophecy, sharply contrasts the two groups and goes beyond the implicit critique already present in Matthew.

171. Perhaps this is an allusion to Gn 1:3.

172. It is possible to understand this sentence as an indictment of the Jewish people since the time of Herod: "They are (still) dwelling in darkness (as they have done) from the days of Herod. . . ."

173. Cf. Mt 2:8.

174. Cf. Mt 2:12.

175. Cf. Jn 8:12, 9:5.

176. The Syriac term used here can also mean a court, a space enclosed by a fence, or a sheepfold. I have chosen the translation "homestead" because of the immediate appearance of Mary and Joseph as the Magi are leaving the cave (22:2), an indication that they do not live far away from the cave.

177. Although in Mt 2:11 the Magi visit the infant Jesus in his parents' house, here the *Revelation of the Magi* places the birth in a cave, a locale mentioned in several other ancient sources. While Lk 2:7 has Jesus laid in a "manger" because there was no room in the "inn," many scholars believe that this verse is describing a very rudimentary shelter for travelers, not the sort of inn found, for example, in Luke's parable of the Good Samaritan (cf. Lk 10:34, which uses a different Greek word for "inn"). It is therefore possible that the primitive structure that Luke describes evolved into the belief that Jesus was born in a cave. The cave tradition also appears in the *Protevangelium of James* 18.1; the Syriac *Testament of Adam* 5:6; Justin Martyr *Dialogue with Trypho* 78; and a number of other early Christian writers.

## Notes

178. The sequence of events in 18:3–5 is practically identical to the initial manifestation of the star to the Magi atop the Mountain of Victories.

179. This is the first of several statements, which occur at various places in the narrative, indicating that the mysteries of the Magi have been accomplished or fulfilled (cf. 19:2, 21:4, 24:2, 31:1).

180. Cf. 11:4.

181. Cf. 12:3.

182. Cf. 12:4.

183. Cf. 12:5.

184. This is the only reference in the first-person-plural section of the *Revelation of the Magi* that implies that the Magi are kings. Cf. 1:2, 2:3–5.

185. Cf. Mt 6:13, though this part of the Lord's Prayer does not appear in the earliest Greek manuscripts.

186. Cf. Rom 14:11; Phil 2:10.

187. Cf. Mt 19:28–29; Mk 10:30; Lk 18:29–30.

188. Cf. 13:1, 21:1, 25:1, 31:1.

189. How the fathers of the Magi are able to see the light of the star is not clear, since 5:10 implies that their sons would be initiated into the Magi's mysteries only when their fathers had died; perhaps the text means only that they were *worthy* to see it, even if it did not appear in their lifetimes.

190. Cf. Mt 28:20.

191. Cf. the appearance of Judas Thomas in 29:1, but there is never any indication in the final portion of the *Revelation of the Magi* that more than one disciple preaches in the homeland of the Magi.

## Notes

192. Cf. Jn 17:5.

193. Cf. 13:9.

194. Cf. Mk 15:33.

195. Cf. Mt 27:51–52. This prediction of events, which in the New Testament occurs in conjunction with the death of Jesus, is problematic in that it is never again mentioned in the *Revelation of the Magi*. If the Judas Thomas episode is judged to be an interpolation, then it is possible that its insertion may have obliterated the fulfillment of this prophecy.

196. Cf. Mk 14:62, 16:19; Acts 7:55–56.

197. Cf. 12:4.

198. The Latin and Irish witnesses to *Infancy Gospel X* also state that the Christ child received praise from invisible heavenly beings at the moment of his birth.

199. Cf. Jn 1:3.

200. Cf. 2 Cor 1:20.

201. Cf. Col 1:16.

202. Cf. 2:2.

203. The Magi falling on the ground like dead men in 21:1 and the child putting his right hand on them in 21:2 very strongly resemble Rv 1:17.

204. Cf. 13:1, 19:1, 25:1, 31:1.

205. It is not clear what these “great things” to come are. It is possible that this refers back to the prophecy spoken by the child in 19:7–9 regarding the events at his death and his ascension to heaven.

206. I.e., Shir, where the light of the star first appeared.

207. Cf. 29:5.

## Notes

208. Cf. 27:10.

209. Cf. Col 1:15.

210. Cf. 1 Cor 1:24.

211. Cf. Jn 10:38; 14:11.

212. Cf. 13:10; Jn 5:46.

213. Cf. Gospel of Thomas 50.

214. Cf. Gospel of Thomas 12.

215. Cf. 30:5–6, 31:1. It is important to note that the Holy Spirit is feminine in gender here, as evidenced by the feminine form of the adjective *holy*. This usage, found in the second-century *Odes of Solomon* and the fourth-century writings of Ephrem and Aphrahat, indicates a probable date earlier than the fifth century for the *Revelation of the Magi*, since Syriac writers after this time generally understand the Holy Spirit as a masculine entity.

216. This statement about infants lacking any blemishes of sin is intriguing, since it disagrees markedly with the Augustinian conception of original sin, wherein infants, like all of humanity, share Adam's guilt (*On Merit and the Forgiveness of Sin, and the Baptism of Infants* 1.9.24). The assertion that infants lack sin occurs in a number of Greek Christian writers (cf. Aristides *Apology* 15, Syriac recension; Clement of Alexandria *Miscellanies* 4.25.160; Gregory of Nyssa *On Infants' Early Deaths*, passim).

217. I.e., the Father of majesty.

218. Cf. 32:2.

219. Cf. Rv 5:13.

220. The appearance of Mary and Joseph at this point in the narrative is quite abrupt, as the *Revelation of the Magi* does not mention them earlier. It is not clear whether they “went

## Notes

out” of the cave or the village of Bethlehem with the Magi. This episode is also remarkable for the way in which it uses the misunderstanding of Mary and Joseph as the first occasion for the Magi to act as witnesses for Christ by proclaiming his true omnipresent nature. In *Infancy Gospel X*, it is also the Magi who convey to Joseph and his son Simeon the significance of Christ’s birth.

**221.** The statement “the offspring of the voice of virgin hearing” (cf. also 24:3) seems to demonstrate a familiarity with the ancient Christian doctrine that Mary’s conception happened through auditory channels—i.e., through her ear. Although the doctrine becomes especially popular in the mid-fifth century and beyond, traces of it appear as early as the second-century *Protevangelium of James*. In its annunciation narrative, Gabriel tells Mary that she will conceive from God’s word (*Protevangelium of James* 11:5).

**222.** Cf. 28:2.

**223.** Cf. 4:8, 13:1.

**224.** Cf. Mk 14:9.

**225.** Cf. Mt 2:11.

**226.** Cf. Ascension of Isaiah 11:8–9.

**227.** Cf. Lk 1:42.

**228.** The beginning section of this sentence is problematic, since it would be expected that the child is no longer in Mary’s womb. This statement may suggest that Christ is always with Mary, as he is always with the Magi—an indication of Christ’s omnipresence.

**229.** I.e., “by the majesty of the Father of all.”

**230.** This statement of the Magi to Mary strongly reflects the interest in universal salvation through the polymorphism



## Notes

and omnipresence of Christ (cf. 13:10 and corresponding note).

**231.** It is unclear whether the Magi have accompanied Mary and Joseph to their house, since they are not mentioned again until 26:1. If they have not, then chapters 24 and 25 would be a rather jarring departure from the first-person narration that pervades the majority of the *Revelation of the Magi*. Since the location of the Bethlehem cave is described as a “homestead” (cf. 18:2 and corresponding note), this may indicate that there is very little space between the cave and the house of Mary and Joseph.

**232.** Instances of Jesus laughing in ancient Christian texts are quite rare; however, the recently published *Gospel of Judas* has Jesus laugh on several occasions at the misunderstandings of his disciples. *Infancy Gospel X* also depicts the newborn Jesus as laughing.

**233.** Cf. 22:2 and corresponding note.

**234.** Mary’s misunderstanding here is intriguing: she apparently thought that the gifts brought by the Magi were a sort of bribe that they offered to the divine child so that he would accompany them.

**235.** Cf. 13:1, 19:1, 21:2, 31:1.

**236.** Cf. 23:1; Lk 1:42.

**237.** Cf. Lk 1:48

**238.** Cf. Gn 3:24; Lk 2:35. In linking the instrument that guarded the Garden of Eden with that which is said to pierce Mary’s heart, the *Revelation of the Magi* resembles to a certain degree an interpretation found in several Syriac texts, wherein the spear that pierces Christ’s side in Jn 19:34 reverses the sword in Genesis.

**239.** Cf. Col 3:11; Gospel of Thomas 77.

## Notes

240. I.e., the sun.

241. It is not clear who “all your believers” are, with whom the Magi have been witnesses to the star. The only other people who have seen the star are Mary and Joseph; however, it may refer to the statements made by Christ and the Magi that he has adherents in every land (13:10; 17:5).

242. Cf. 16:5, 27:9.

243. Cf. 14:3.

244. Cf. 16:4 and accompanying note.

245. This is the first instance in the *Revelation of the Magi* of indirect discourse being used to summarize a speech, as opposed to the regular pattern of directly quoting lengthy speeches. The only other such occurrences of this are in 29:3–4, where the Magi tell the Apostle Thomas about their journey and Thomas in turn relates to them his experiences with the earthly Jesus. Note also that by 27:9, the indirect discourse has evidently switched to direct speech, as indicated by the presence of “you.” Because of this shift back and forth between indirect and direct speech and also the parallels of this section with the Thomas material, it is likely that this section reveals editorial tampering designed to integrate the first-person testimony of the Magi with the new third-person ending featuring the Apostle Thomas.

246. Sic. Cf. note at 12:3.

247. It is unclear precisely what the meaning of this sentence is.

248. Cf. 13:10.

249. Cf. note at 4:7.

250. Cf. 13:10.

251. This phrase may be meant as a critique of Judaism, since “the prophets” are also mentioned in 13:10.

## Notes

252. Cf. 26:1.

253. Cf. 16:5, 26:5.

254. Cf. note at 27:3.

255. Cf. 21:6.

256. Cf. Jn 1:9.

257. Cf. 23:4.

258. Cf. 5:11 for the only other indication that not all the people of Shir choose to participate in the mysteries of the Magi.

259. The visions of the people of Shir in 28:1–3 are related in the same basic form as those experienced by the Magi in 14:4–8. However, two features distinguish these visions from those of the Magi. First, these visions are facilitated simply by the eating of food, while those of the Magi resulted from the epiphany of Christ in the Cave of Treasures. Second, the visions of the Magi followed in sequence the order of events in Christ's life, whereas here the order is less secure and the account of Christ's life less complete.

260. Cf. 22:3.

261. Cf. 11:6.

262. Cf. 4:8 and accompanying note.

263. Cf. Jn 1:29, 36; Rv 5:6.

264. Although the phrase "tree of life" appears in 6:2, here another Syriac word is used for "tree" instead. While this Syriac word can also designate Eden's Tree of Life (as in Rv 22:2), in a number of New Testament texts it refers to the cross (cf. Acts 5:30; Gal 3:13).

265. Cf. Acts 2:1.

266. Cf. note at 28:6.

## Notes

267. Cf. 1:2. It is at this point that, for the first time since 2:6 or 3:6 (unless chapters 24 and 25 are an exception; see the note at 24:1), the narration is no longer in the first-person plural, but in the third person. This transition may have happened earlier, at 28:1, but the description of the Magi in the third person demonstrates unambiguously that they are no longer the narrators of the *Revelation of the Magi*.

268. I.e., the nobles, the poor, the women, and the children of Shir.

269. I.e., the Magi.

270. Cf. Acts 17:19.

271. This is the first use in the *Revelation of the Magi* of the title “Our Lord Jesus Christ,” a very widespread designation in Christian piety; its presence strongly suggests that a later Syriac writer tampered with the text. The portion of the text narrated by the Magi themselves (the overwhelming bulk of the *Revelation of the Magi*) never uses the name “Jesus” or “Christ” to describe the being whom the Magi encounter. In contrast, this terminology is used very frequently in the short Apostle Thomas section, where some combination of these designations occurs eighteen times. The sudden preference for this familiar Christian terminology is one of the strongest arguments (cf. also the switch from first-person to third-person narration in 28:4) in favor of the theory that the Apostle Thomas section is a later addition to the *Revelation of the Magi*. It is possible that whoever added the Apostle Thomas material was troubled by the fact that the first-person Magi narrative never explicitly integrates the Magi into the wider Christian Church.

272. Cf. Acts 2:47.

273. Judas Thomas is the same as the apostle known simply as “Thomas” in the Synoptic Gospels (cf. Mk 3:18; Mt 10:5; Lk

## Notes

6:15; also Acts 1:13) and as “Thomas who was called Didymus” in John’s Gospel (11:16, 20:24, 21:2). The Greek nickname “Didymus” means “twin,” and the Syriac name “Thomas” is also related to the Aramaic word for “twin.” The name “Judas Thomas” is found in two texts from Nag Hammadi (the *Gospel of Thomas* and the *Book of Thomas the Contender*), as well as in the Acts of Thomas. It appears that Judas Thomas was the chief apostolic figure in ancient Syriac-speaking Christianity, particularly in the environs of Edessa. In the Acts of Thomas, Judas Thomas is commissioned to preach the gospel in India, where he is eventually martyred, but the *Revelation of the Magi* either ignores or is not aware of this tradition in favor of placing him in the farthest reaches of the East. There are some later references to a mission of the Apostle Thomas in China, and it is possible that these traditions ultimately go back to the *Revelation of the Magi*.

274. Cf. 21:5.

275. Cf. Acts 9:19.

276. Cf. 27:3 and accompanying note.

277. Though the text changed to narration in the third person at 28:4, here it curiously breaks into the first-person plural yet again with “we are not able to narrate,” “appearing to us,” and “we were amazed.” However, the “we” in this case is certainly not the Magi, but instead the disciples of Christ, whose experience with the polymorphic Christ the Apostle Thomas is describing.

278. The mention of doubt in connection with Thomas may allude to Jn 20:24–29.

279. Cf. 21:5. Although in the earlier passage it was unclear precisely what the “seal” was, here it is obviously Christian baptism—terminology perhaps derived from Eph 1:13, 4:30.

280. The order represented here of anointing with oil first,

## Notes

baptism second (cf. 31:1), is a practice particular to Syriac Christianity and is attested in other ancient sources.

**281.** The prayer/hymn spoken here by the Apostle Thomas is unattested in any other ancient sources, but it appears to be quite archaic because of vocabulary not seen elsewhere in the *Revelation of the Magi* (“athletes,” “contest,” “partner of the firstborn,” etc.). These elements suggest that the prayer had an origin separate from the other sections of the *Revelation of the Magi*, most likely in a liturgical context. This hymn, particularly its invocations to “come” (cf. 30:7), finds its closest parallel in the prayers scattered throughout the Acts of Thomas. The similarity of this prayer to those of the Acts of Thomas and the failure to mention the Apostle Thomas’s well-known journey to India suggest that the Apostle Thomas section originated quite early in Syriac Christianity, even if it is only a secondary addition to the original *Revelation of the Magi*.

**282.** I.e., the oil.

**283.** Cf. Mt 28:19.

**284.** Cf. 13:1, 19:1, 21:2, 25:1.

**285.** Cf. 21:1.

**286.** Cf. Phil 2:19.

**287.** I.e., God the Father. This speech of the Apostle Thomas is ambiguous in whether or not it believes that Christ suffered. 31:6 states that Christ “endured” everything that the crucifiers did to him, but also that he was “exalted above all sufferings” and “a kinsperson of that one who does not suffer.” However, 31:7 again states that Christ “endured everything and . . . suffered everything,” which seems, on its face, to be a clear belief in the suffering of Christ.

**288.** Cf. Acts 2:47.

## Notes

289. Cf. Mt 28:19.

290. It is unclear whether the Apostle Thomas joins the Magi in their preaching, since 52:1–2 never states specifically who “they” are. For the *Opus Imperfectum in Matthaeum*, it seems that the Magi follow Thomas in a subservient role. The reference to the Holy Spirit being poured out could suggest that it is the Magi alone who preach, since they have just received it in their baptism, but this statement in no way definitively excludes Thomas.

291. Cf. 21:11.

292. This is the first and only reference to a final judgment of fire that appears in the *Revelation of the Magi*, and it is not clear from whom the Magi received this information. The concept of a fiery end of the world exists in a number of ancient sources (cf. 2 Pt 3:7, 10). One related text is the reference of Josephus (*Antiquities* 1.68–69) to the descendants of Seth who live in the land of Seiris and transmitted a revelation from Adam that two catastrophes, one of water and one of fire, would overtake the earth.

293. The use of *my* here is strange, if it is assumed that the Magi (and the Apostle Thomas?) are preaching together. It may indicate that the preachers are working separately in different parts of the land of Shir, but this is never stated explicitly.

294. Cf. 1:1 and corresponding note. This final verse almost certainly derives from the eighth-century composer of the *Chronicle of Zuqnin* and not from the copy of the *Revelation of the Magi* that he used.

295. Thomas Aquinas’s remarks on the Magi legend of the *Opus Imperfectum* appear in the third part of his *Summa*, question 36, article 5.

## Notes

296. It is not clear to me whether Calancha supposed, like Columbus, that the American continent was part of Asia, or whether he correctly recognized that it was a separate land-mass. Explorers of the New World were remarkably adept at making their discoveries “fit” the biblical descriptions of the world.

297. The “contentious house” is the house of Israel, as described in Ez 3:9.