

Brent Landau, *Revelation of the Magi: The Lost Tale of the Wise Men's Journey to Bethlehem*. New York: HarperOne, 2010. x + 157 pp; hardcover. \$22.99.

**KRISTIAN S. HEAL, BRIGHAM YOUNG UNIVERSITY**

This book presents an annotated English translation of a New Testament apocryphon. Landau's title, taken from the first words of the text's opening formula, is certainly more evocative than Witakowski's preferred *Story of the Magi*, which is based on the concluding formula, "the Story about the Magi and their gifts is concluded" (ܐܡܪܝܢܐ ܕܐܡܪܝܢܐ ܕܐܝܬ ܗܝܠܐ ܕܗܝܠܐ).<sup>1</sup> The introduction to the volume (1–34) is cast as a personal story of discovery, a useful rhetorical device for presenting abstruse material to a popular audience.<sup>2</sup> The conclusion (89–98) is followed by an appendix that gives a translation of the relevant portion of the related *Opus Imperfectum in Mattheum* (103–105). All in all, Brent Landau and his publisher have done an admirable job of turning a piece of philological research (Harvard ThD dissertation, 2008) into a book with broad and popular appeal.<sup>3</sup>

The *Revelation of the Magi* is one of the many sources that comprise the well known (at least to readers of this Journal) *Chronicle of Zuqnin*, misattributed for much of its recent history to

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<sup>1</sup> W. Witakowski, "The Magi in the Syriac Tradition," pages 809–43 in *Malphono w-Rabo d-Malphone: Studies in Honor of Sebastian P. Brock*, edited by George Kiraz. Piscataway: Gorgias Press, 2008: here citing from page 810.

<sup>2</sup> For example, in the introduction Landau relates how in his search for "early Christian legends of the Magi ... [he] happened upon an article that mentioned the *Revelation of the Magi*. [He] asked around and was surprised to find that none of [his] colleagues had ever heard of it" (7). That this may well say as much about the need for a Syriac specialist on the Harvard Divinity Faculty as it does about the obscurity of the text in question is not the issue. The strategy contributes to the successful creation of a compelling narrative.

<sup>3</sup> The thesis can be accessed at: <http://ou.academia.edu/BrentLandau/Papers>. A useful summary can be found in Brent Landau, "The *Revelation of the Magi* in the *Chronicle of Zuqnin*." *Apocrypha* 19 (2008): 182–201.

Dionysius of Tel-Mahre (d. 845). This important chronicle survives in a single manuscript, which was purchased for the Vatican Library in 1715 from Deir es-Suryan. Originally part of the Assemani collection, it is now found in the main Vatican Syriac fond as manuscript 162 (an opening of the manuscript adorns the endpapers of the Landau's volume).<sup>4</sup> The *Chronicle of Zuqnin* is readily divided into four periods or parts, and not unsurprisingly it is the latter two of these, covering the period 488–775 CE, that have received the most scholarly attention (notably from Witold Witakowski and Amir Harrak). The first period covered in the *Chronicle*, from creation to Constantine, is comprised of extracts from a number of literary sources, including the *Chronicle* of Eusebius, the *Chronicle of Edessa*, the *Life of Alexander the Great*, and the *Cave of Treasures*. Amongst these quite well known texts is found the *Revelation of the Magi* (fols. 17r–25r).

The first part of the *Chronicle of Zuqnin* was published by Otto Tullberg in 1851, and again in 1927 by Chabot (CSCO 91; Scrip Syr.43), with the Latin translation following in 1949 (CSCO 121; Scrip Syr. 66). Though the composite nature and several of the sources that comprise the first part of the *Chronicle* are mentioned in the standard histories of Syriac literature, it is not until de Urbina's *Patrologia Syriaca* (§151) that the text on the Magi is mentioned specifically, most probably thanks to Monnert de Villard's 1952 study that incorporated an Italian translation of the *Revelation of the Magi* by G. Levi Della Vida.<sup>5</sup>

Despite the secondary literature produced on this text in the past 60 years the *Revelation of the Magi* is still a very nice find for a scholar working in New Testament apocrypha, since it is entirely unnoticed in the standard handbooks of that field. Moreover, the text has a respectable claim to antiquity. The recent studies of Witakowski and Brock cautiously suggest that Monnert de Villard's early sixth century dating may be pushed back to the a fourth century, based largely on a single use of the feminine gender for the

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<sup>4</sup> The *Chronicle* is treated in BO II.98–116, with most attention being given to a summary of the fourth part, and is briefly described in Assemani's Vatican catalogue (I.iii.328–29).

<sup>5</sup> *Le leggende orientali sui magi evangelici*. Studi e Testi 163. Vatican City: Biblioteca Apostolica Orientalia, 1952.

Holy Spirit in Thomas's prayer over the baptismal oil.<sup>6</sup> Landau's own dissertation research suggests that the earliest strata of the work can claim a second or third century date—an assertion that certainly needs to be argued more rigorously if it is to receive universal acceptance.<sup>7</sup>

The text itself is of considerable interest. After some prefatory material (Chapters 1–2), introducing the Magi, their names, their peculiar form of silent devotion and their homeland (Shir), the text transitions into a first person narrative in which the Magi reveal that they are heirs to prophetic sources that were transmitted from Adam, through Seth and Noah (3–4). These texts, kept in the Cave of Treasures on the Mount of Victories (4:1),<sup>8</sup> prophesy of the appearance of a light, like a star, which will, sometime in the future, settle over the Cave of Treasures and lead those present to God incarnate. This tradition was passed down from generation to generation, partially through a series of rituals which are described in the text (5). Several chapters are then devoted to a long speech by Adam to his son Seth (6–10).

The marvelous, visionary appearance of the Star to the Magi, is described in some detail. A pillar of light, brighter than the noon-day sun, descended and entered the Cave of Treasures, then concentrates into a human form (Jesus Christ), who then instructs the Magi—though they each recount a different vision after the event (11–14). After the Father announces the Son (15), the Magi are led by the star to Jerusalem and then Bethlehem (16–18). The infant Jesus converses with the Magi, telling them he was the light-figure they saw in the cave.<sup>9</sup> An angelic theophany (20) is followed by the infant Jesus blessing the Magi (21). The Magi talk with Mary and Joseph (22–23), then Jesus talks with and blesses Mary (24–25).

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<sup>6</sup> Sebastian P. Brock, "An Archaic Syriac Prayer over Baptismal Oil," *Studia Patristica* 41 (2006): 3–12, esp.

<sup>7</sup> Landau, "Sages and the Star Child," 218. A *terminus ante quem* of the late fifth century was established by Monnert de Villard based on the dating of the Latin epitome found in *Opus Imperfectum in Matthaeum*.

<sup>8</sup> There is no literary connection with the sixth century text known as the *Cave of Treasures*.

<sup>9</sup> Landau finds of the fact that Christ is not specifically identified as the Magi's celestial guide until after his birth to be especially significant (28–34).

The Magi return home, guided by the omnipresent light of Christ, and led by miraculously replenishing supplies (26). Once home, the Magi tell of their journey and share what's left of their supplies, which induce visions for all who eat them (27–28). Finally, we are told of the ministry of Judas Thomas in the land of Shir, preaching (29), blessing the baptismal oil (30), then baptizing the Magi and commissioning them to preach (31).<sup>10</sup> The text concludes with the preaching of the Magi.

This publication is an earnest of things to come. Perhaps the most important contribution it makes is to show that the *Revelation of the Magi* deserves to be liberated from the relative obscurity of a composite Syriac chronicle and allowed to stand on its own terms.<sup>11</sup> The text certainly deserves closer study. In particular, it needs to be better situated within the context of early Syriac literature, not only with respect to the abundant corpus of Syriac apocrypha, Pseudepigrapha, and rewritten and dramatized biblical narratives, but also with respect to the works of the fourth, fifth and sixth century homilist that drank deeply from the early Syriac imaginative tradition (cf. the memre on the Magi by Jacob of Sarug and Isaac of Antioch, editions and translation of which are in preparation).<sup>12</sup> Further work needs to be done on situating the

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<sup>10</sup> I would argue that the generic use of the term ‘crucifiers’ for the Jews in this last section suggests a fifth century dating (31:6), since I have only found the term used generically of the Jews in fifth century texts, such as Ps. Narsai, On Joseph, II.52, 63. References to ܡܠܟܝ in the Ephrem corpus appear in Sermones III, II.445; III.209; Nachträge V.257; and Sermones in Hebdomadam Sanctum V.1105; VI.721, 1105; VII.341. However, none of these *memre* is considered to be genuine. This term is also used in the works attributed to Isaac of Antioch and Jacob of Serugh, as indicated by Murray (*Symbols of Church and Kingdom*, 41).

<sup>11</sup> Thus doing for this text what Martin (1876) and Wright (1882) did for the *Chronicle of Ps. Joshua the Stylite*, likewise extracted from the *Chronicle of Zuqnin*.

<sup>12</sup> Most of the relevant material is admirably surveyed on pages 111–117 in C. Jullien and F. Jullien, *Apôtres des confins. Processus missionnaires chrétiens dans l’empire iranien* (Res Orientales 15; Bures-sur-Yvette / Leuven: Peeters, 2002). See also, Muriel Debié, “Suivre l’étoile à Oxford, inédits sur la venue des Mages,” pages 111–133 in George A. Kiraz (ed.), *Malphono w-Rabo d-Malphone: Studies in Honor of Sebastian P. Brock*, Piscataway, NJ : Gorgias Press, 2008.

work within an Iranian context, not only in terms of distinctive Iranian elements, but also in terms of the literature of Iranian Christians.<sup>13</sup> Brock's interesting suggestions of Manichean influence also need to be fully explored.<sup>14</sup> Finally, serious consideration needs to be given to the dating of the text. Careful analysis of a variety of linguistic, thematic and text critical issues need to temper the natural desire to date a text as early as possible.<sup>15</sup>

I look forward to Landau's promised edition and translation of the *Revelation of the Magi* due to appear in the *Corpus Christianorum Series Apocryphorum*, which will doubtless prompt further work on this fascinating and important text.

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<sup>13</sup> Cf. G. Widengren, *Iranische-semitische Kultubegegnungen in parthischer Zeit*. Cologne, 1960: 71–83.

<sup>14</sup> Brock, "An Archaic Syriac Prayer", 12, esp. n. 26.

<sup>15</sup> I echo David G.K. Taylor's note of warning in his careful discussion of the dating of the Himyarite Martyr texts ("A Stylistic Comparison of the Syriac Himyarite Martyr Texts Attributed to Simeon of Beth Arsham," in *Le massacre de Najrân: Religion et politique en Arabie du Sud au VI<sup>e</sup> siècle*, edited by Joëlle Beucamp, Françoise Briquel-Chatonnet, and Christian Julien Robin. Paris, 2010).