

## READING AND DISCUSSION GUIDE FOR

# *Revelation of the Magi:*

The Lost Tale of the  
Wise Men's Journey to Bethlehem

by

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### DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. On pages 23 and 24, Landau suggests not only that the *Revelation of the Magi* was not written by the Magi themselves, but also that the entire biblical story of the Magi and their star was most likely fictitious. If he and other biblical scholars are correct that the Magi were not historical figures, what are the consequences of this

for religious belief? Does the story of the wise men and the Star of Bethlehem need to be historically accurate in order to be religiously true and/or meaningful? Why or why not?

2. On pages 28 through 34, Landau presents his theory that the earliest version of the *Revelation of the Magi* has a much broader understanding of Christ's revelation than is typical in Christian thought today. He writes: "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.'" (page 31). In your opinion, is viewing people of other religions as "anonymous Christians" an effective way of making Christianity more inclusive and tolerant? What might a Buddhist or a Muslim think about being called an "anonymous Christian"? How would you feel about being called an "anonymous Buddhist"?
3. One of the strangest parts of the *Revelation of the Magi* involves a sort of "food" created by the star that produces visions of Jesus Christ for the Magi and for the inhabitants of Shir (26:6–7 and 28:1–4). Do you think that the author of the *Revelation of the Magi* actually had visionary experiences that were brought on by eating a hallucinogenic substance? Or is this entire scenario simply occurring in the imagination of the author, with no connection to events in real life? Do

you think certain foods, drinks, or substances can facilitate religious experiences? Why or why not?

4. The *Revelation of the Magi* makes a startling claim about the identity of the Star of Bethlehem (13:1–4), an interpretation not found anywhere else in early Christian writings—that the Star of Bethlehem and Jesus are the same thing. Have you ever wondered about what the Star of Bethlehem might have been? Has this idea ever occurred to you?
5. On page 16, Landau suggests that one of the reasons that the *Revelation of the Magi* had not been translated into English until now is that academic biblical scholars have historically had a bias against apocryphal Christian writings (that is, early Christian writings that were not accepted into the New Testament), preferring to focus their study on the Bible itself. Is such a bias justified? Are canonical writings simply superior to apocryphal writings for reconstructing the history of early Christianity? Are New Testament writings more aesthetically pleasing from a literary perspective? Do New Testament writings have a more “adequate” understanding of Christ and his significance?
6. The *Revelation of the Magi* is just one of a number of apocryphal Christian writings that have only been discovered or published in recent years; others include the *Gospel of Judas*, the *Gospel of Thomas*, and the *Gospel of Mary*. If you have read any of these other writings, how did the *Revelation of the Magi* compare to them? Was it easier to understand than the others, or more difficult?

As a Christian, did you find any of these writings to be relevant at all to your personal religious or spiritual life? Why and/or why not?

7. Once you have read the *Revelation of the Magi*, try going back and reading the story from Matthew's Gospel again. Are there aspects of Matthew's story that you pay more attention to than you had previously? For example, had you ever wondered about what became of the Magi after they returned home, or how the Magi knew what the Star of Bethlehem meant? Do you think that you will be able to read Matthew's story "on its own terms," or is the *Revelation of the Magi* now intertwined with the canonical story for you? Do you think that the author of Matthew would have approved of the content of the *Revelation of the Magi*?
8. The Gospel of John, Chapter 1, claims that Christ has existed since the beginning of time. The Book of Acts, Chapter 9, indicates that Christ can appear to people outside the chronological boundaries of his life, death, and resurrection. The *Revelation of the Magi* agrees with both of these claims, placing the Magi's experience of Christ before the actual moment of his birth. Do you think the author of John's Gospel or the author of the Acts of the Apostles would agree with what is presented in the *Revelation of the Magi*? Why or why not?
9. On pages 21 and 22, Landau suggests that the story of the Apostle Thomas coming to Shir and baptizing the Magi was a later addition to the *Revelation of the Magi*. Did you find his theory to be persuasive? Do you think

you would have noticed the awkwardness of the Thomas episode if you had not read the Introduction? Even better, if you did read the translation first, did the Thomas episode stand out to you at all?

10. The revelations of Christ to the Magi, first in the Cave of Treasures (Chapter 13) and then in the Bethlehem cave (Chapters 19–21), are remarkably similar. Why do you think the author of the *Revelation of the Magi* might have written it this way? In your opinion, do the Magi learn or experience anything at Bethlehem that deepens their understanding of Christ beyond what they learned from him in the Cave of Treasures?
11. The description of the Magi's journey from the land of Shir to Bethlehem (Chapter 16) is remarkably imaginative, but rather difficult to visualize at some points. How would you describe their journey in your own words? Were they flying? How much time had elapsed—a few days, a few hours, a few seconds? If such a journey were to be depicted on film, what might it look like?
12. Having read the *Revelation of the Magi*, what sort of impression has the book made on you as a whole? Do you think it will enrich your celebration of the Christmas holiday, and if so, how? Has it changed the way in which you read and think about the Christmas story? Has your reading of the *Revelation of the Magi* perhaps even been spiritually significant for you? Has it changed your understanding of Christianity at all, and if so, how?