

## The Land of Shir as the Home of Matthew's Magi

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Several ancient authors refer to an idyllic land of "Seiris" or "Shir" in the distant east, most relevantly for this paper, Josephus (*Ant.* 1:68-71) and the work that is the subject of this paper, the apocryphal first-person account of the Matthean Magi found in the *Chronicle of Pseudo-Dionysius of Tel-Mahre* (also known as the *Chronicle of Zuqnin*; Codex Vaticanus Syriacus 162). In this account, which has been recently re-edited and translated as the *Revelation of the Magi* by Brent Christopher Landau (2008 diss.), the "land of Shir" is identified as the ancestral home of the Magi who brought gifts to the infant Jesus (Matt 2:1-12). The *Revelation of the Magi* embraces several elements of the tradition known by Josephus, including the descent of the inhabitants from the biblical Seth, an interest in astronomy, utopian conditions in Seiris/Shir, and the transmission of ancient esoteric knowledge through writing.

This paper explores the rationale underlying the conflation of the story of Matt 2:1-12 and the Shir/Seiris tradition in the *Revelation of the Magi*. Why did this legendary land present itself as a plausible geographical background for the Magi? I argue that the two traditions came together under the aegis of Balaam's star oracle in Num 24:17-19, a text that was connected to the Matthean Magi as far back as Origen, and which mentions not only a star from Jacob (כוכב מיעקב) and the descendants of Seth (כל בני שת), but also the land of Seir (שעיר), thus providing a link between the tradition known to Josephus to the story of the Magi. In his comprehensive treatment of the Seiris/Shir tradition, G. J. Reinink (1975) discounted on philological grounds the origin of the term in the biblical Seir (שעיר), ultimately pointing to a similar-sounding Chinese word for "silk." Regardless of whether this etymology is correct, it fails to explain the particular constellation of traditions in the "Revelation of the Magi," nor must the contrast between biblical Hebrew שעיר and Syriac שר rule out the associative logic proposed here, especially if the tradition was mediated through Greek transcription (e.g., Josephus' Σειρις).