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Miraculous Stories: Buddhist-Christian Parallels

Theme: Crossroads and by-paths in personal spirituality
An investigation by Piya Tan ©2009

1 Buddhist-Christian parallels

1.1 The earliest records we have of western awareness of Buddhism are found in the writings of the Christian theologian, **Clement (or Clemens) of Alexandria** (c 150-215 CE), who was fairly well acquainted with Indian thought.¹ He mentions “Sramanas (Σαρμάναι), and other Brahmins (Βραφμαναι),” and of the Buddha, he notes, “Among the Indians are those philosophers also who follow the precepts of Bouttas,² whom they honour as a god on account of his extraordinary sanctity.”³

Clement also notes that Bouttas is worshipped by his followers as if he were a god, and he tells us that certain Indians, called *Semnoi* (Skt *śramaṇa*; P *samaṇa*),⁴ worship a pyramid under which the bones of a God are kept—clearly a reference to stupas. He also mentions *Semnaí*, celibate female recluses (Skt **śramaṇī*). However, such terms are generally used for the non-brahminical religious, and could refer to either the Jains or the Buddhists.⁵ However, his mention of naked *Semnoi*, probably refers to the Jains.⁶ Clement also mentions a group of *Samanaioi* amongst the Bactrians.⁷

1.2 Scholars have long noticed conjunctions and parallels between Buddhism and Christianity, both in their founders and their teachings.⁸ In 1816, the historian **George Faber** in his book, *The Origin of Pagan Idolatry Ascertained from Historical Testimony*, writes, “There is so strong a resemblance between the characters of Jesus and of Buddha, that it cannot have been purely accidental.” (1816: 649)⁹

The German scholar, **Max Müller** (1823-1900), a pioneer of comparative religion, learning of the Buddhist/Christian borrowing claims, intended to prove the priority of the Jesus gospels over the Buddhist texts. However, later, in his *India: What it Can Teach Us*, he notes “[t]hat there are startling coincidences between Buddhism and Christianity cannot be denied, and it must likewise be admitted that Buddhism existed at least 400 years before Christianity. I go even further, and should feel extremely grateful if anybody would point out to me the historical channels through which Buddhism had influenced early Christianity.” (1883).

Rudolf Seydel of the University of Leipzig, in *The Gospel of Jesus in relation to the Buddha Legend* (1882), and again, in *The Buddha Legend and the Life of Jesus* (1897), noted around fifty similarities between Buddhist and Christian parables and teachings.

¹ E Benz, in *Abhandlungen der Akademie der Wissenschaften und der Literatur, Geistes- und sozialwissenschaftlichen Klasse* (Mainz, 1951) no 3, 1951: 185-192.

² Cf Persian *but*, “idol”: see Harold W Bailey, “The word ‘But’ in Iranian,” *Bulletin of the School of Oriental Studies* 6,2 1931: 279-283.

³ *Stromata (Miscellanies)*: see Stromateis 1.21+25. See also: <http://www.ccg.org/english/s/b3.html> (p293) & http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Buddhism_and_Christianity.

⁴ Interestingly, the Greek *semnós* has a meaning of “venerable.”

⁵ E Benz 1951: 181 f.

⁶ See Alain Christol, “Le nom des bouddhistes en grec,” *Lalies* 3, 1984: 39; Klaus Karttunen, *India and the Hellenistic World*, Studia Orientalia 83, Helsinki: Finnish Oriental Soc, 1997: 58.

⁷ *Stromateis* 1.75.71.4. **Bactria**, known as Bactriana in ancient Greek, or Bākhtar in Farsi, Bhalakh (بلخ) in Arabic and Indian languages, and 大夏 Dàxià in Chinese. It is a historical region of Greater India, located between the Hindu Kush and the Amu Darya (Oxus river). In later times, it became known as Tokharistan. The name of the region survives to present time in the name of Afghan province “Balkh.”

⁸ See *Buddhist Legends* [DhA tr of stories], tr EW Burlingame, 3 vols, Harvard: Harvard Univ Press, vol 1 1921: 9-14 & http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Buddhism_and_Christianity.

⁹ George S Faber, *The Origin of Pagan Idolatry Ascertained from Historical Testimony and Circumstantial Evidence*, 3 vols, London: F & C Rivington, 1816: [Go to online book.](#)

E Washburn Hopkins of Yale in his *History of Religions* (1918), even claims that “Finally, the life, temptation, miracles, parables, and even the disciples of Jesus have been derived directly from Buddhism.” (1918: 552, 556).

Literature professor, **Zacharias P Thundy**, in his *Buddha and Christ: Nativity Stories and Indian Traditions* (1993), concludes that there was a substantial amount of borrowing by Christianity from Buddhism. He prefers not to label Jesus either a Jew, Buddhist or a Buddhist-Jew, claiming that such distinctions are “fuzzy.” Thundy further claims a long tradition of interchange between east and west and shows that western fables, such as Aesop’s fables, and the story of Susanna (a virtuous woman accused of adultery) attached to the Book of Daniel,¹⁰ were originally Buddhist Jātakas.¹¹

1.3 Scholars have further suggested that the apocryphal Gospel of Thomas and the Nag Hammadi texts,¹² too, have Buddhist influences. **Elaine Pagels**,¹³ in her highly acclaimed *The Gnostic Gospels* (1979), and in *Beyond Belief* (2003),¹⁴ mentions such theories.

The American historian, **Jerry H Bentley** (b 1949), in his *Old World Encounters: Cross-cultural contacts and exchanges in pre-modern times* (1993), notes “the possibility that Buddhism influenced the early development of Christianity” and that scholars “have drawn attention to many parallels concerning the births, lives, doctrines, and deaths of the Buddha and Jesus” (1993). **Iqbal Singh**, in *Buddhism Omnibus*, similarly acknowledges the possibility of early interaction between the two religions and the influence of Buddhism upon the Christianity in its formative period.¹⁵

The Danish scholar, **Christian Lindtner**, holds the radical view that the four Gospels are a rehash of Buddhist teachings by missionaries in ancient Israel.¹⁶ In his *Geheimnisse um Jesus Christus* (2007), compares the Pali and Sanskrit Buddhist texts with the Greek gospels, and determines that the four Gospels were reformulated from older Buddhist texts based on gematria¹⁷ values, puns, and syllabic equivalences. Those who have scrutinized his work claim that his gematria values and syllabic equivalences are coin-

¹⁰ The Catholics and Eastern Orthodox churches include Susanna’s story as ch 13 of Daniel, but the Protestants regard the story as apocryphal.

¹¹ See <http://www.jesusbuddha.com/thundy.html>. Two interesting stories come to mind here: the rape of the nun Uppala,vaṇṇā (AA 1:345 f; DhA 5.10/2:48-51; ThīA 182-195) & the story of the nun Subhā (Thī 366-399; ThīA 250), SD 20.7.

¹² Nag Hammadi is an ancient city located on the west bank of the Nile in the Qena Governorate, about 80 km NW of Luxor, Upper Egypt. It is best known as the site where, in Dec 1945, local farmers found a sealed earthenware jar containing 13 leather-bound papyrus codices, together with pages torn from another book. The farmers burned one of the books and parts of a second (incl its cover), but the remaining 12 books (one missing its cover) and the loose pages survive. These writings, dating back to 2nd cent, comprise 52 mostly Gnostic tractates, believed to be a library hidden by monks from the nearby monastery of St Pachomius, when the possession of such banned writings was denounced as heresy. The contents of the Coptic-bound codices were written in Coptic, though the works were probably all translations from Greek. The most famous of these works is the *Gospel of Thomas*, of which the Nag Hammadi codices have the only complete copy. All the texts have been published since 1975: <http://www.nag-hammadi.com/>.

¹³ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Elaine_Pagels.

¹⁴ Here Pagels argues that the Thomas gospel at first fell victim to the needs of the early Christian community for solidarity in the face of persecution, then to emperor Constantine’s decree, who at the First Council of Nicaea (325), wanted an end to the sectarian strife and a universal Christian creed. She goes on to point out that in spite of it being left out of the Catholic canon, banned and sentenced to burn, many of the mystical elements have repeatedly appeared in the works of mystics like Jacob Boehme, Teresa of Avila and St John of the Cross. She concludes that the Thomas gospel gives us a rare glimpse into the diversity of beliefs in the early Christian community.

¹⁵ Iqbal Singh, S Radhakrishnan, Arvind Sharma, *The Buddhism Omnibus: Comprising Gautama Buddha, The Dhammapada, and The Philosophy of Religion*. NY: Oxford University Press USA, 1992.

¹⁶ See <http://jesusbuddha.com/CLT.html>.

¹⁷ **Gematria** or **gimatria** (Hebrew: גִּמְטְרִיָּה, *gēmaṭriyā*; Greek: γεωμετρία, *geōmetriā*) is a system of assigning numerical value to an alphabet. The word “gematria” is generally held to derive from Greek *geōmetriā*, “geometry,” which was used as a translation of *gēmaṭriyā*. It is found in English since the 17th century from translations of Giovanni Pico della Mirandola’s works. Although ostensibly derived from Greek, it is largely used in Jewish texts of Tanakh and Talmud, notably in those associated with the Kabbalah.

cidental and that his puns exist because the Greek and Sanskrit are from the same language family. Those in support of his work claim that his findings are unique and that similar finds could not be made in regard to any other seemingly unconnected literature.

Daniel Hopkins, in his book, *Father and Son, East is West* (2007), gives the Buddhist sources of Christianity and their influence on medieval myths, in which he claims that the Jesus gospels were highly allegorical and mysterious in order to hide the name of Jesus' father, which he claims was the Buddha's name.

Burkhard Scherer, Professor of Indo-Tibetan Studies at England's Canterbury Christ Church University, writes: "...it is very important to draw attention to the fact that there is [massive] Buddhist influence in the Gospels.... Since more than a hundred years, Buddhist influence in the Gospels has been known and acknowledged by scholars from both sides." And adds: "Just recently, **Duncan McDerret** published his excellent *The Bible and the Buddhists* (Sardini, Bornato [Italy] 2001).¹⁸ With McDerret, I am convinced that there are many Buddhist narratives in the Gospels."¹⁹

1.4 Any serious study of religious history would know that a religion, at least in its formative stage would be open to influences of the society and dominant teachings. We know, for example, that the Buddha often and skillfully countered brahminical teachings of his times, even giving new meanings to old terms and using them to propagate his own teachings. The greatest advantage in such a move is that the audience would more readily understand and accept his teachings, and indeed Buddhism grew into the world's first missionary religion.

Borrowings amongst religions means that either the borrowers see an advantage in it (such as using their as a skillful media for their messages), or that they are trying to rebut something they disagree with. The main advantage is in using a vocabulary or ideas that the intended audience is familiar with, but such borrowings are redefined by the borrowers. Indeed, one of the reasons that Buddhism had disappeared from India by the 12th century is that the brahminical theologians and philosophers were prodigiously borrowing and reinterpreting Buddhism, and that the Buddhists themselves did not respond effectively enough to the brahminical chameleonization. The brahmins had the upper hand again because they succeeded in inventing new cosmic stories, religious models and dogmas to hold the minds of others, while Buddhists remained silent, or did not speak loud enough, or were simply distracted.²⁰

Here we will look at a few dramatic parallels between Buddhist and Christian stories. I have only selected a few examples that parallel with canonical passages or are well known Buddhist stories. In such a comparative study, we should not read too much into these separate passages but try to understand what their original author/s intended (which may be more difficult in the Bible passages).

2 The nativity

One of the most remarkable parallel stories between early Buddhism and early Christianity is that of the natiivities of the Buddha and Christ. This beautiful Buddhist story of the Buddha's birth is found in **the Nālaka Sutta** (Sn 3.11/679-723), one of the discourses of the Sutta Nipāta, a very ancient collection. In fact, so ancient, that its commentary, the Niddesa, is included in the Canon itself (in the Fifth Collection or Khuddaka Nikāya). Unfortunately, the commentary only covers the Aṭṭhaka, vagga (Sn 766-975) (Nc = Nidd I), and the Pārāyaṇa, vagga (Sn 976-1149, end of Sn) and the Khagga, visāṇa Sutta (Sn 35-75). The Nalaka story (in reference to Kāḷa, devāla) is found in the Jātaka Commentary (J 1:54, 67, 88), and in early patristic poems like the Buddha, carita (Buc 1.54).

The main text of the Nālaka Sutta (Sn 699-723), however, is found in Asokan inscriptions, as part of what is called the *moneyyam uttamam padam* (Sn 700). The Buddhist parallel here is from the Introduction to the Nālaka Sutta, which was either omitted from the inscriptions or was incorporated later into the Sutta. Scholars generally agree that the Pali Canon was closed by Asoka's time (reigned 273-232 BCE),

¹⁸ Reviewed by TH Barrett, *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* (2002) **65,2** 2002 :397-487.

¹⁹ <http://www.jesusisbuddha.com/scherer.html>.

²⁰ See also **Lakkhaṇa S** (D 30) @ SD 5.2.

over 200 years before Christ. As such, even as a later interpolation, the nativity story predates Christ by at least two centuries.

There are two accounts of the birth of Jesus in the Bible: one in the Gospel of Matthew and the other in the Gospel of Luke. The Gospel of Mark, believed by most critics to be the earliest of the canonical gospels, is silent on the nativity; the Gospel of John, likewise, has no detailed account of the birth. Luke's account of Christ's Nativity is in fact unique. Where did a Gentile Christian historian like Luke obtain his facts, omitted even in the oldest of the Gospels, that of Mark?

Nalaka Sutta (Sn 3.11)

- 679** The seer Asita saw the Thirty-three Gods,
glad, cleanly clad, having honoured Indra,
holding their garments exulting greatly,
in their day resting-places.
- 680** Seeing the devas rejoicing and glad,
having shown respects, said this there:
“Why is this heavenly host exceedingly happy,
holding and waving their garments about?”
- 681** Even in the battle with the asuras,
when the gods won, the asuras lost,
there is no hair-raising such as this—
seeing what wonder do the gods rejoice?
- 682** They shout, they sing, they play music,
they slap their arms and dance—
I ask you, inhabitants of Meru's crest,
dispel my doubts quickly, sirs!”
- 683** “The Bodhisattva, peerless jewel, beyond compare,
is born in the world of men for their good and happiness,
in a village of the Sakyas in Lumbini country—
thus we are exultant, exceedingly happy!”

Luke 2:8-14

⁸ That night there were shepherds staying in the fields nearby, guarding their flocks of sheep.

⁹ Suddenly, an angel of the Lord appeared among them, and the radiance of the Lord's glory surrounded them. They were terrified, ¹⁰ but the angel reassured them. “Don't be afraid!” he said. “I bring you good news that will bring great joy to all people. ¹¹ The Savior—yes, the Messiah, the Lord—has been born today in Bethlehem, the city of David! ¹² And you will recognize him by this sign: You will find a baby wrapped snugly in strips of cloth, lying in a manger.”

¹³ Suddenly, the angel was joined by a vast host of others—the armies of heaven—praising God and saying,

¹⁴ “Glory to God in highest heaven, and peace on earth to those with whom God is pleased.”

(Cf Luke 2:25-35, New Living Translation)

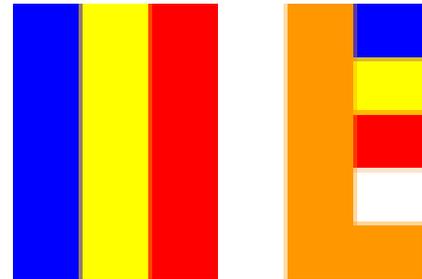
A possible, even very likely, explanation is that Luke was familiar with the Buddha story. Luke was a physician of Antioch, one of the western termini of the Silk Road, along which Buddhism often travelled northwards and westwards. Luke was a learned historian who obviously was acquainted with India and Buddhism, which had come to Antioch during Asoka's time (late 3rd century BCE).

3 The transfiguration and the Buddha's greatest miracles

3.1 THREE KINDS OF TRANSFIGURATION. Another remarkable parallel story is that of *the transfiguration*, that is, a dramatic change in appearance of a holy being (sometimes, also a holy object), usually attended by a great radiance. Its significance depends on the beliefs of the religion that relates the phenomenon.²¹ In fact, the Buddha transfigures himself in at least *three ways*.

3.1.1 The first kind of transfiguration. The most common kind of Buddha's transfiguration is that of his body emanating colourful radiance. The Majjhima Commentary says that when the Buddha reflects on the *paṭṭhāna*,²² his mind and body are so pure that he radiates **the Buddha aura** or six-coloured rays (*cha-b,baṇṇa raṁsī*), that is, the five colours, namely, blue, yellow, red, white, and orange, and clear radiance (*pabhassara*), and they burst forth from various parts of his body, radiating through all the worlds and heavens to the ends of the universe.²³ The Buddha, it is said, may emanate these colours whenever he wishes.²⁴ As such, he is known as *Aṅgi,rasa*, "the one whose body gives out rays of light." (V 1:25)²⁵

Blue here stands for confidence, *yellow* for holiness, *red* for wisdom, *white* for purity, *orange* for detachment, and *the clear radiance* represents awakening. From then on, the Buddha radiates these colours whenever he wishes to. These colours are incorporated into the international Buddhist flag (right), officially adopted at the meeting of the World Fellowship of Buddhists in Colombo, Sri Lanka, in 1950.²⁶



3.1.2 The second kind of transfiguration. The Commentaries give details of the Buddha's acts during the seven weeks after the awakening,²⁷ and describe another, even more famous, miracle of the Buddha, that is, **the twin wonder** (*yamaka pāṭihāriya*) [3.1.5], which could of course be classified as the second kind of transfiguration of the Buddha.²⁸ This wonder, it explains, is induced by the fire kasina and the water kasina. (DhA 3:241 f)

At the end of the first week, that is, the beginning of the second week, after the Great Awakening,²⁹ the Buddha, to dispel the doubt of the gods about his awakening, rises into the air and displays the twin

²¹ See E J Thomas, *The Life of Buddha as Legend and History*, 1949: 38-43.

²² Although some traditionalists would interpret this as referring to one of the Abhidhamma books (which entails some serious historical problems), I would rather take it as referring to the *synthetical* approach of reflecting on true reality, as exemplified in dependent arising. The other reflective approach is that of the *analytical* (*vibhaṅga*), as represented by such models as the five aggregates (*pañca-k,khandha*), etc.

²³ V 1:25; M 1:509, 511; MA 2:184 f; DhA 3:214; DhsA 13 f. No rays are emanated in this miracle, as it is different from the well known twin wonder (pace Endo 1997:154 n118).

²⁴ Such as during Mahā Kassapa's first meeting with the Buddha (**Cīvara S**, S 16.11/2:217-222 = SD 47.16; Intro to **Mahā Kaṇha J**, J 469/4:180).

²⁵ In western religious art, the halo of light a holy figure's head is called a "nimbus." The circle of light around the body is called a "mandorla" (lit "almond," from its shape in western religious art, but possibly related to the Skt *maṇḍala*). Such representations of holiness first appeared in Indian Buddhist art in the late 3rd cent CE. It is believed that the motif was brought to the east by Alexander's Greek invaders.

²⁶ **The international Buddhist flag** was designed in 1880 by the Colombo Committee, comprising monks Hikkaduwe Sri Sumangala Thera (Chairman) and Migettuwatte Gunananda Thera, and laymen Don Carolis Hewavitharana (father of Anagarika Dharmapala), Andiris Perera Dharmagunawardhana (maternal grandfather of Anagarika Dharmapala), William de Abrew, Charles A de Silva, Peter de Abrew, H William Fernando, and N S Fernando and Carolis Pujitha Gunawardena (Secretary). Col Henry Steele Olcott, an American journalist of the New York tribune and Theosophical Society pioneer, later made suggestions for modifying it, which were incorporated. It was first hoisted in 1885 in Sri Lanka.

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²⁸ On the Buddha's radiant rays, see Endo, *Buddha in Theravāda Buddhism*, 1997: 146-156.

²⁹ For the seven weeks after the Great Awakening, see **Dhamma and Abhidhamma**, SD 26.1(5).

wonder, where fine jets of fire and water shoot out from each of his pores, dancing around his body, forming a magnificent mandorla around himself. This miracle can only be performed by the Buddha³⁰ and he has performed it four times,³¹ that is,

- (1) “The 8th day miracle,” at the beginning of the second week (the 8th day) after the Great Awakening (as stated above), Bodh.gayā, to dispel the doubts of the gods about his awakening.³²
- (2) “The Kapila,vatthu miracle,” before his Sakya relatives, to dispel their lack of faith in him, during the 2nd year of the ministry (J 1:86-88);
- (3) “The Pāṭika,putta’s park miracle,” probably the one related in **the Pāṭika Sutta** (D 24), where after giving a discourse, the Buddha meditated on the fire-kasiṇa, rose up to the height of seven palm-trees, and emanated radiance for a further seven-palms length, blazing and exuding fragrance (D 24.2.13/3:27).
- (4) “The mango tree miracle,” at the foot of the Gaṇḍ’amba tree, which lasts for 16 days, during the 7th years of the ministry;³³ it is also said that the Buddha created a holographic double of himself that acts independently (in all the four postures, and also teaching the Dharma).³⁴

3.1.3 The third kind of transfiguration has the main element of great radiance, and occurs only twice in the Buddha’s life: the first, on the night of the Great Awakening and, the second, just before the Great Parinirvana, as attested in **the Mahā,parinibbāna Sutta**, where the Buddha says:

Such it is, Ānanda. There are two occasions, Ānanda, when the colour of the Tathāgata’s skin appears exceedingly clear and bright. What are the two?

- (1) On the night when the Tathāgata awakens to the supreme self-awakening, Ānanda, and
- (2) on the night when he attains to the remainderless nirvana-element at his final passing.

(D 9.4.37/2:134) = SD 9)

Interestingly, the Buddha’s transfiguration on the night of the awakening is not mentioned anywhere else in the Canon nor in the Commentaries. The commentary on the seven weeks after the Great Awakening [3.1.2] does not mention it at all.

This third kind of transfiguration is of special interest here because of it is very similar to the transfiguration of Jesus in the Bible, that is, the one of great radiance, as described above in the Mahā,parinibbāna Sutta. The pioneer Pali scholar, **TW Rhys Davids**, notes in his translation of the Mahā,parinibbāna Sutta,

We have here the commencement of the legend which afterwards grew into an account of an actual “transfiguration” of the Buddha. It is very curious that it should have taken place soon after the Buddha had announced to Ānanda his approaching death, and that in the Buddhist Sutta it should be connected so closely with that event; for a similar remark applies to the Transfiguration mentioned in the Gospels. (D:RD 2:146 n1) See AN Yang-Gyu 2003: 127 f.

It is said of Jesus Christ that “his garments became glistening, intensely white, as no fuller on earth could bleach them” (Matt 17:1-13; Mark 9:2-8; Luke 9:28-36; RSV). About a week after Jesus plainly told his disciples that he would suffer, be killed, and resurrect (Luke 9:22), he took Peter, James and John up a mountain to pray. While praying, his appearance changed into a glorified form, and his clothing was

³⁰ It is one of his 6 “unique knowledges” (*asādhāraṇa,ñāna*, Miln 106; DA 2:463, 3:874; SnA 1:264, 2:605; BA 27, 133, 178, 185, 236, 298; UA 335; ItA 1:7, 130; CA 7; PmA 1:56; DhA 295; Nāma.rūpa,pariccheda 123).

³¹ Miln 106, 349; AA 1:101, 126, 174; J 1:77; ApA 82, 118; DhA 31, 35. See DPPN sv (682 f).

³² VA 5:957; AA 2:184; UA 52; BA 8, 289; J 1:77; DhA 13.

³³ V 3:332; VA 1:88 f; Vism 390; DA 1:57; SA 1:103; DhA 14.2/3:213-216; J 1:193, 4:263-265; ThīA 195, 197; BA 298; PvA 137; cf Mvst:J 1:120; performed by Maṅgala Buddha (BA 146), the 22nd Buddha before our Buddha or 3rd Buddha in B. All the Buddha are able to perform the twin wonder (SnA 2:408; BA 297); they all perform a twin wonder at Sāvathī (DA 1:173; MA 2:200; AA 1:98).

³⁴ DhA 14.12/3:214-216, where it is also explained that the Buddha used various kasiṇa meditations (on the earth, water, fire, wind, and colours) (also DA 1:57; SnA 36).

dazzling white. Moses and Elijah appeared and talked with Jesus about his death that would soon take place.

Peter, not knowing what he was saying and being very fearful, offered to put up three booths or shelters for them. This is undoubtedly a reference to the booths that were used to celebrate the Feast of Tabernacles,³⁵ when the Israelites dwelt in booths for 7 days (Lev 23:34-42). Peter was expressing a wish to stay there, when a cloud enveloped them, and a voice was heard. The cloud lifted, Moses and Elijah had disappeared, and Jesus was alone with his disciples who were still very much afraid. Jesus warned them not to tell anyone what they had seen until after his resurrection.

Another parallel between the Buddhist and Christian stories is that of *doubt*. Peter, James and John do not know what is going on, just as Ānanda earlier fails to invite the Buddha to remain in the world for his full life-span. However, at least here Ānanda exults at the Buddha's transfiguration. The Buddha announces to Ānanda that he (the Buddha) will be passing away during the last watch that day. Like Ānanda, Christ's apostles too were unsure of what to do over their teacher's impending passing.

Mahā,parinibbāna Sutta (D 16)

4.37 Then not long after Pukkusa Malla,putta had left, the venerable Ānanda arranged the pair of gold-coloured ready-to-wear robes on the Blessed One, and as he did so, it appeared to have lost its radiance.

Then the venerable Ānanda said this to the Blessed One:

“It is wonderful, bhante! It is marvellous, bhante! How exceedingly clear [pure] and bright, bhante, is the colour of the Tathāgata's skin! Bhante, when this pair of gold-coloured ready-to-wear robes [134] is placed on the Blessed One's body, it appears to have lost its radiance!”

“Such it is, Ānanda. There are two occasions, Ānanda, when the colour of the Tathāgata's skin appears exceedingly clear and bright. What are the two? On the night when the Tathāgata awakens to the supreme self-awakening, Ānanda, and on the night when he attains to the remainderless nirvana-element at his final passing.

4.38 Ānanda, in the last watch tonight, the Tathāgata's parinirvana will occur between the twin sal trees in the sal grove of the Mallas in Upavattana [Upavattana Wood] near Kusinārā. Come, Ānanda, let us go to the Kakutthā river.”

“Yes, bhante,” the venerable Ānanda replied in assent to the Blessed One.

Pukkusa brings a pair of gold-coloured robes, burnished and ready for wear,
When the Teacher dons it, his gold-hued skin shines forth bright.

(D 16.4.37-38/2:133 f)

Mark 9:2-8

2 After six days Jesus took Peter, James and John with him and led them up a high mountain, where they were all alone. There he was transfigured before them. **3** His clothes became dazzling white, whiter than anyone in the world could bleach them. **4** And there appeared before them Elijah and Moses, who were talking with Jesus.

5 Peter said to Jesus, “Rabbi, it is good for us to be here. Let us put up three shelters—one for you, one for Moses and one for Elijah.” **6** (He did not know what to say, they were so frightened.)

7 Then a cloud appeared and enveloped them, and a voice came from the cloud: “This is my Son, whom I love. Listen to him!”

8 Suddenly, when they looked around, they no longer saw anyone with them except Jesus.

(See also Matt 17:1-13; Luke 9:28-36;
New Living Translation)

³⁵ It is essentially a week-long harvest festival celebrating the “booths” or huts in which the Israelites rested after the Exodus. Traditionally, it was a period when the Israelites would bring their offerings and firstlings to the Temple in Jerusalem and enjoy a feast.

Just as the Buddha's first transfiguration marks his first nirvana, his awakening, and presence in our world, so too this second transfiguration marks his final nirvana, his total exit from samsara. The transfiguration may also be taken as the Buddha's way of reminding us that even the holiest of beings are impermanent: as the teaching is so is the teacher.

Another interesting point to note is that in the case of the Buddha, it is *his whole body* that radiates brightly, but only Christ's garments were dazzling brightly. Furthermore, the Buddha's transfiguration or its story go back some 500 years before the biblical story.

3.2 THE BUDDHA'S GREATEST MIRACLES. Here we shall examine the Buddha's "greatest" miracles, that is, those psychic displays and spiritual revelations that are unparalleled in religious history or stories. However, these *greatest* miracles should not be confused with the *highest* and the *final* miracles of the Buddha, which we shall turn to at the end of this study. [6]

3.2.1 The Buddha is "above all rules."³⁶

The Devorahaṇa Vatthu (DhA 14.2), after relating the story of Piṇḍola Bhāra,dvāja,³⁷ goes on to recount the Buddha's performance of "the mango tree miracle," followed by his *ascension* to the heaven of the Thirty-three where he spends the rains retreat, and ending with his *descent* at Sankassa. Following Piṇḍola's public display of psychic power, the Buddha laid down a rule forbidding such a display.³⁸ The other sectarians, hearing of this, take it that the Buddha and his monastics would not perform any miracles publicly, and boasted that they, too, have such powers and would only show them against the Buddha.

The Buddha takes up the challenge, announcing that he will perform a miracle in four months' time. The Buddha explains that just as no one may have the pleasure of eating the fruits of a royal garden except the king, even so the Buddha has made the rules for the monks, but he is above them. The sectarians are distraught.

When the time is near, and the sectarians discover that the Buddha is going to perform a miracle under a mango tree, they uproot all the mango plants in the area. It happens that Gaṇḍa the royal gardener finds a ripe juicy mango in his garden and gives it to the Buddha.

Having taken the mango, the Buddha instructs Gaṇḍa to plant the seed, and it at once miraculously grows into an adult plant heavy with ripe sweet mangoes. The Buddha then creates a jewelled walk in the air across the sky,³⁹ and a large crowd begins to gather to watch. Various disciples—the female lay disciple Gharāṇī, Culla Anātha,piṇḍika, the 7-year-old female novice Cirā, Cunda Samaṇ'uddesa ("the novice"), the nun Uppala,vanṇā, and the elder Moggallāna—offered to perform miracles themselves so as

³⁶ This subtitle is based on the Comy, where the Buddha is recorded as answering rajah Bimbisāra, "Maharajah, I have not laid down the training rule for myself, but it is laid down for my disciples" (*nāham mahārāja attano sikkhāpadam paññāsesim, tam mam'eva sāvakanam paññattan ti*, DhA 3:204). Its significance is obvious: the Buddha does not need any training-rule, as he is fully awakened, and using an analogy, he explains that just as no one may partake of the fruits of the royal garden, except the king, even so he makes the laws but is above them. This sentiment is, of course, curious as it is not found in the Suttas: we could question if this does not go against the Buddha's well known statement, "As I say, so I do; as I do, so I say" (*yathā,vādī tathā,kārī, yathā,kārī tathā,vādī*) (D 2:224, 229, 3:135; M 1:108, 109; A 2:24; It 122; Sn 357 (Nigrodha,kappa); J 326/3:89). Considering the context, we can say that the commentarial apologists are justified in their sentiment, as they are answering the challenge of non-Buddhists in relation to miracles. There is another important point to note: since Bimbisāra is still alive, the story refers to an early period of the ministry, probably before the institutional Pāṭimokkha was introduced, ie during the first 20 years. Another point to consider is that, even without the monastic rules, the Buddha and the arhats would by nature, never commit a disciplinary breach. It is also significant that this is not an issue discussed in Miln, which however state that "while an arhat is incapable of deliberately transgressing what is blamable by the world, he would never unknowingly fall into a defilement that is blamable by regulation (ie the Vinaya) (*loka,vajjam abhabbo khīṇāsavo tam ajjhācaritum, yam kilesam paṇṇatti,vajjam tam ajānanto āpajjeyya*, Miln 267), and adds that he may not know everything (like a person's name), but he knows liberation (Miln 268). See **Piṇḍola Bhāra,dvāja S** (S 35.127), SD 27.6a (3.1.3).

³⁷ See **Piṇḍola Bhāra,dvāja S** (S 35.127), SD 27.6a.

³⁸ Cv 5.8 = V 2:110-112 = SD 27.2 (2.2).

³⁹ Just as in the 3rd week after the Great Awakening: see **Dhamma and Abhidhamma**, SD 26.1(5).

not to trouble the Buddha. The Buddha declines all the offers. Then he relates the Kaṇha Usabha Jātaka (J 29/1:193-196) and the Nandi,visāla Jātaka (J 28/1:191-193) to impress on them that this is his task. (DhA 3:199-213)

3.2.2 The twin wonder. On the appointed day, that is, the full moon of Āsālhā, the Buddha performs the twin wonder⁴⁰ as previously announced. Going into fire kasina, he has *fire* issuing forth from the upper half of his body; getting into water kasina, he has *water* issuing forth from the lower half. Then he reverses the process. Then from the front, there is a stream of water; and from the back, a stream of water. Then the process is reversed.

Fire and water proceed from his eyes, his ears, his nostrils, his shoulders, his hands, his sides. His feet, his finger-tips. From every pore fire and water issue forth. They are all of six colours: blue, yellow, red, white, and orange, and clear radiance (*pabhassara*).⁴¹ As he assumes one posture, his holographic form assumes another. This is all done through dhyana. While walking up and down the jeweled walk with his holographic clone, he teaches the Dharma to the multitude from time to time.

As the multitude applauds, the Buddha looks into their hearts, and in sixteen ways, sees their dispositions, and gives teachings suitable for each of them. So quick is the Buddha's mind! Since no one else has his kind of mind, he uses his double as in a question-and-answer session, and in between they each took different postures. As a result 200 million beings win the fruit of streamwinning. (DhA 14.2.2d/3:213-216)

3.2.3 The Buddha's ascension. At the conclusion of the miracle-work, the Buddha, following the tradition of all Buddhas, ascended to the heaven of the Thirty-three (Tāva,tiṃsa) to spend the rains-retreat for that year. There Shakra and his heavenly host attend to the Buddha, while he teaches them the Abhidhamma. The elders Moggallāna and Anuruddha, both famed for their great psychic powers, inform the multitude of the Buddha's activities in heaven.⁴² While Culla Anātha,piṇḍika provides food for the multitude, Moggallāna answers their questions.

At meal-time, the Buddha's holographic double would continue teaching while he himself would go to Uttara,kuru (northern continent) to collect alms and rinsing his mouth in the water of lake Anotatta high in the Himalayas, he would then have his meal in a great pavilion. Sāriputta waits on the Buddha, and is briefed by the Buddha on the teaching progress. Returning to the world, he relays the teachings to the multitude.

In an interesting aside, 500 youths, witnessing the twin wonder, decide to go forth under Sāriputta. It is said that in Kassapa Buddha's time, they were bats living in a cave where two monks were reciting the Abhidhamma. So enthralled were they by their chanting, although not knowing its meaning, they passed away into the heavens, and after that were reborn in Sāvattihī. (DhA 14.2.2e/3:216-223)

3.2.4 The Buddha's descension and epiphany. At the end of the rains retreat, the Buddha descends from Tāva,tiṃsa, and lands at the city gate of Saṅkassa, some 30 yojanas⁴³ away from Sāvattihī, for the Invitation ceremony (*pavāraṇā*).⁴⁴ Thereupon Sakra creates three stairways, one of gold, one of jewels, and one of silver. While the top of the stairway rests on Mt Sumeru, its foot stands against the city gate. The right stairway of gold is for the devas; the left, of silver, for Mahā Brahmā; and the middle, of jewels, for the Buddha.

⁴⁰ Def in detail at Pm 1.592-594/1:125 f (ch 70); also described at DA 1:57; DhA 14.2/3:213-216; J 4:263-267; BA 31 f; ItA 1:129; cf KhpA 132. Pm is the only canonical text to mention the twin wonder. PvA 137 says it is performed, beginning on the Āsālhā full moon day. See DhA:B 3:35 n; DPPN sv (682 f).

⁴¹ MA 2:184 f; DhA 3:214; DhA 13 f.

⁴² The Commentary says that the Buddha has chosen to spend retreat in Tāvatiṃsa so that his erstwhile mother, the deva Mahā Māyā could come down from Tusita heaven and listen to his Abhidhamma teachings, and so other lesser devas would also benefit. See **Dhamma and Abhidhamma**, SD 26.1(6.2+3).

⁴³ A *yojana* is about 7 mi or 11.2 km; 30 yojanas is 210 mi = 338 km.

⁴⁴ **Invitation** (*pavāraṇā*) is a simple monastic practice when a junior monastic "invites" (*pavāreti*) a senior to point out one's misconduct during the rains-retreat. The Pavāraṇā replaces the usual Pāṭimokkha recital and is the last day of the retreat: on the following dawn the retreat is fulfilled (V 1:155, 160, 2:32; D 2:220; S 8.7/1:190-192; DA 1:241; J 1:29, 82, 193; Vism 391; SnA 57; VvA 67; PvA 140).

At the start of **the descension**, or descent of the gods (*dev'orohaṇa*),⁴⁵ standing on Mt Sumeru, the Buddha performs the twin wonder [3.1.5]. He looks up and has a clear view of the nine Brahmā worlds. He looks down and has a clear view as far as the Avīci hell. Then he looks around at the four quarters, and has a clear view of countless thousands of worlds. The gods look upon humans, and humans upon the gods. That day, everyone who look upon the Buddha wish to become one, too.

The various gods in great splendour accompanied the Buddha in the descension at Sankassa. As soon as the Teacher stands on firm ground, he gives teachings appropriate to the worldlings and the various kinds of saints present. Sāriputta wins special praise from the Buddha for being able to answer a question that no one else (except the Buddha) could answer.

In all the four quarters, stand the gods and humans; the zenith, the brahmas; the nadir, nagas and suparnas. This a glorious assembly is known by Buddhists as the day of the Buddha's "**revelation of the worlds**" (*loka,vivarāṇa*).⁴⁶

Such a glorious **epiphany** is a vision that inspires artists, poets and the creative-minded. Most significantly, it is a vision that helps those who are faith-inclined in the visualization of universal good and joy, unprecedented in any religion. This visualization is a good support for a contemplation of the gods (*devatānussati*), which in turn, forms the basis for other more advanced practices such as the cultivation of lovingkindness and the mindfulness of the breath.

4 Water miracles

4.1 WATERY CHANGE. The Buddha and the early saints are as a rule depicted as being in harmony with the environment. The meditations on the elements (earth, water, fire, wind and space) are well known and easy to practise. Yet with sustained practice, these meditations bring about great power for us to totally harmonize with the physical world for the benefit of the spirit.

Sometime before the Buddha's transfiguration, on the last day of his life [3.1], there is *the miracle of the clearing of the waters*. The Buddha, being tired, rests from his journey and asks Ānanda to go down to a nearby stream to fetch some drinking-water. Ānanda, noticing that at least 500 carts had passed over it, so that its waters should be muddy, proposes that they move on just a little farther to the Kakutṭhā river, which has clear clean water.

Thrice Ānanda protests, but thrice the Buddha tells him to go down to the muddy stream. Finally, Ānanda does as he is told, and when he reaches the stream, as **the Mahā,parinibbāna Sutta** (D 16) records, a miracle occurs:

Then the shallow stream over which at least five hundred carts had crossed, its waters flowing murky and dirty, disturbed by the wheels, *flowed clear, bright and clean, even as the venerable Ānanda approached it.*

Then this occurred to the venerable Ānanda:

"How wonderful! How marvellous! Great is the Tathāgata's power, great is his glory! This shallow stream over which at least five hundred carts had crossed, its waters flowing murky and dirty, disturbed by the wheels, now flows clear, bright and clean, even as I approach it!"

Carrying the bowl of water, he approached the Blessed One, and said this to him:

"How wonderful, bhante! How marvellous, bhante! Great is the Tathāgata's power, great is his glory! This shallow stream, bhante, over which at least five hundred carts had crossed, its waters flowing murky and dirty, disturbed by the wheels, now flows clear, bright and clean even as I approach it! Let the Blessed One drink this water, let the Sugata [Wellfarer] drink this water."

Then the Blessed One drank the water. (D 16.4.24-25/2:129) = SD 9

⁴⁵ The full story is called **Dev'orohaṇa Vatthu** (DhA 14.2/3:193-230; J 483/4:263-267; SA 1:120, 3:161,6 [in long cpd], 224; Divy 12.143-166; see also Cv 5.8 = V 2:110-112). The Descension (*dev'orohaṇa*) is alluded to at Miln 349, 350.

⁴⁶ V 1:50; MA 5:38 f; J 4:266; Vism 12.78/392

Those familiar with the biblical miracles, would be reminded of a similar miracle of Jesus, in fact, his first miracle (John 2.11), that is, how at a wedding at Cana, on the sea of Galilee, Jesus was said to have changed water into wine (John 2.1-11). This miracle is not reported in another of the other Synoptic Gospels or anywhere is in the Bible. It is also possible, however, that this water-into-wine had their roots in Dionysian religion.⁴⁷

4.2 PARTING OF THE WATERS. We have read about how the Buddha, and the rajah Kappina⁴⁸ and his entourage, cross the waters unaided.⁴⁹ There is another, more remarkable story of the Buddha parting the waters. This is the most famous canonical story of the Buddha's stilling the waters, and is recorded as occurring at the time of **the Uruvelā Wonders**,⁵⁰ that is, the occasion of the conversion of Uruvelā Kassapa. The Vinaya account goes thus:

Now at that time, a great untimely rain fell, and a great flood arose. The Blessed One was staying in a place flooded with the waters. Then it occurred to the Blessed One:

“What now, if I were to make the waters recede all around, and then pace up and down in the midst on the dirt-covered ground?”⁵¹

Then the Blessed One, having made the waters recede all around, paced up and down in the midst on the dirt-covered ground.

Now, the matted-hair ascetic Uruvela Kassapa, thinking, “Let not the great ascetic be washed away by the waters!” went with a boat and some matted-hair ascetics to where the Blessed One was.

The matted-hair ascetic Uruvela Kassapa saw the Blessed One who, having made the waters recede all around, was pacing up and down in the midst on the dirt-covered ground. Seeing him, the matted-hair ascetic Uruvela Kassapa said this:

“Is that really you, great ascetic?”

“I am he (*ayam aham asmi*), Kassapa.”

The Blessed One then rose into the air and settled down in the boat. Then it occurred to the matted-hair ascetic Uruvela Kassapa:

“Of great power indeed is the great ascetic, of great might! Even the water does not carry him away; but still he is not as holy (*araha*) as I am.”⁵² (Mv 1.20.16 = V 1:32) = SD 63.3

Those familiar with the Torah and Old Testament story of Moses' parting of the sea of reed (the Red Sea) would notice some sort of close parallel between it and the Buddha's parting of the waters. According to the Torah account (that is, the traditional record of ancient Jewish history or ethnic myth), Pharaoh, the ruler of Egypt, freed the 600,000 Israelites. When they were nearing Baalzephon, on the Sea of Reeds (around where the city of Suez is today),⁵³ Pharaoh had a change of heart and decided to stop them. He sent his chariots against them, and Moses (on God's instruction) parted of the Sea of Reeds, so that the Israelites could cross safely. By the time Pharaoh's soldiers arrived, they had safely crossed over, and Moses closed back the sea so that horses and soldiers drowned. (Exodus 13:17-14:28)

One plausible theory is that the Israelites crossed over the swamp waters at low tide, and by the time they reached safety, the tide returned, drowning their pursuers. Like all ancient ethnic stories, such stories are treasured by the Jews, for it strengthens their cultural identity. In other words, it does not really matter

⁴⁷ See eg Martin Hengel, *Studies in Early Christology*, 2005:331.

⁴⁸ His capital is caled Kukkuṭa, vatī, which is prob also the name of his country.

⁴⁹ See **Miracles**, SD 27.5a (5.1.7).

⁵⁰ See **Uruvelā Pāṭihāriya** (Mv 1.15-21 = V 1:24-35), SD 63.2.

⁵¹ *Yannūnāham samantā udakam ussāretvā majjhe reṇuhātāya bhūmiyā caṅkameyyan'ti.*

⁵² This is one of a series of great psychic displays of the Buddha, all of which fail to convert Uruvela Kassapa, that is, until the Buddha reads Uruvela Kassapa's mind and declares that he is not awakened despite his assumption: see **Uruvela Pāṭihāriya** (Mv 1.20.156 = V 1:32), SD 63.2 & also **Miracles**, SD 27.5a (7.1).

⁵³ The general agreement is that the crossing was in the Sea of Reeds near present-day Suez, just north of the headwaters of the Gulf of Aqaba.

whether the sea-crossing happened in all the colours and drama of ancient story-tellers. They have at least a great symbolic meaning of their believers, that is, God is on our side.⁵⁴

The Buddha parted the waters using the earth kasina, so that earth appears where there was water. Moses—actually God—parted the seas of reeds so that the children of Israel could cross over to safety from the Pharaoh’s soldiers in chariots, who later drowned, horses and humans. The Uruvela water-parting story is a vision of a very peaceful being in total harmony with a harsh natural environment—right in the midst of a raging flood! No one was drowned, nor anyone harmed. There was no political statement, no god glorified. The saint is ever at peace with nature and others.

4.3 WALKING OVER WATER. We have mentioned how Puṇṇa of Sunaparanta,⁵⁵ comes to the assistance of his sea-going brother when the latter’s ship is caught in a heavy mid-ocean storm.⁵⁶ In fact, the early Indian sea-goers who came to Southeast Asia often brought along with them a special image of the standing Buddha in “water-stilling” gesture (that is, with both hands raised in a *abhaya,mudra*, the gesture of fearlessness).

Two other water-walking stories have been mentioned as examples of deep faith, in the sense of great joy and confidence in the Buddha. The first is about **the rajah Kappina** (DhA 6.4) and the second is from **the Silānisaṃsa Jātaka** (J 190).⁵⁷ In the first account, it is said that **the rajah Kappina**, in his great eagerness to meet the Buddha, performs an act of truth, and rides over not just one, but *three* rivers, without his or his entourage even wetting their horses’ hoofs.⁵⁸

The introduction to **the Silānisaṃsa Jātaka** (J 190) relates how a lay follower, out of great faith in the Buddha, walks across the river waters as if on dry land. However, while mid-stream he loses focus and begins to sink. Immediately he regains his focus, and continues untroubled. When he finally meets the Buddha and speaks of his experience, the Buddha says that on other occasions, too, many sea-travellers who were shipwrecked were saved on account of their faith in the Three Jewels, and then relates the Silānisaṃsa Jātaka about how a faithful follower, reflecting on the Three Jewels is rescued by a magical ship.⁵⁹

Scholars and students of comparative religion might find here an interesting parallel in the biblical story of Peter meeting Jesus on the waters of lake Gennesaret (sea of Galilee). Mark’s account of this event is the oldest: “About three o’clock in the morning Jesus came toward them, walking on the water. He intended to go past them, but when they saw him walking on the water, they cried out in terror, thinking he was a ghost. They were all terrified when they saw him.” (Mark 6:48-50). Matthew begins with a similar report, but radically differs in what follows: he reports that Peter, too, walks on the water towards Jesus, but lacking faith, he begins to sink, and unlike Mark, reports the reaction of those in the boat, thus: “And when they climbed into the boat, the wind died down. Then those who were in the boat worshiped him, saying, ‘Truly you are the Son of God.’” (Matt 14:32 f). The differences in the accounts are interesting in that they reflect differing perceptions of Christ by these synoptic Gospel writers.

John’s account is the shortest and only says that the others “they were willing to take him into the boat, and immediately the boat reached the shore where they were heading” (John 6:21). Chrysostom (c 347-407), in his ancient commentary, says: “This implies that they were on the point of arriving at the land, he entered the ship. Peter then having come down from the ship went to Jesus, not rejoicing so much

⁵⁴ See eg http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Exodus_Decoded for a critical review.

⁵⁵ His canonical story is found in **Puṇṇ’ovāda S** (M 145/3:267-270 ≠ **Puṇṇa S** (S 35.88/4:60-63), SD 20.15.

⁵⁶ See **Miracles**, SD 17.5a (5.1).

⁵⁷ See **Miracles**, SD 17.5a (5.1.7).

⁵⁸ DhA 6.4/2:120 f. See **Miracles**, SD 17.5a (5.1.7).

⁵⁹ J 190/2:111. The story also relates how he “transfers” his merit to a fellow survivor so that the latter, too, could be saved. (Such an idea of “merit transfer” became popular in the commentarial period and after.) See **Tiro,kuḍḍa S** (Kh 7) + SD 2.7 (5).

in walking on the water as in coming to him” (*The Gospel of Matthew*, Homily 50.2).⁶⁰ In other words, the water was not very deep. But all this must be read with the eyes of faith for the story to have its effect.

5 The feeding of the multitude

5.1 THE MISERLY SETH OF SAKKĀRA. Another pair of remarkably parallel stories between Buddhism and Christianity is their account of the feeding of the multitude. The Buddhist story, **the Macchariya Kosiya Setṭhi Vatthu** (DhA 4.5),⁶¹ is also repeated in the Introduction to **the Illisa Jātaka** (J 78/1:345-349). This is a long and most humorous story—a rare classic in its simplicity, humanity and spirituality. Briefly, the story goes like this:

The miserly seth, Kosiya, lives in the market town of Sakkāra, 45 leagues⁶² away from Sāvattḥī, where the Buddha is staying. He is so miserly that he would not use or give a drop of oil from the tip of a grass-blade. So his wealth brought no joy to his family, and remained unused like a ghost-haunted pool.⁶³

One day, the miserly seth sees a half-starved countryman eating a round fried cake filled with sour gruel, and he yearned for it. However, fearing to use his wealth, he remains suffering in silence. His wife, finding him lying on his bed, hugging it glumly, interrogates him into confessing his yearning. His wife declares they have wealth enough to cook the stuffed cake for the whole town, but the seth bargains it down to cooking it only for himself. And this must be done in secret on the seventh floor of his mansion so as not to attract any attention. After he has securely bolted the door of every floor, his wife begins to cook.

Now by this time, the Buddha notices that the couple is ready for conversion, and sends Moggallāna to admonish them. Moggallāna *appears mid-air* just outside the seventh-floor window—which simply terrified the miserly seth.

“It is for fear of such persons that I have come up to this place!” sputtering with anger, like salt and sugar thrown in fire. Stand in the air if you like, I would give you nothing even if you paced up and down till you made a path in the air, if you wish.” Moggallāna does just that.

“Pace as you like, I would give you nothing even if you sat in meditation!” Moggallāna does so.

“Sit as you like, I would give you nothing even if you stood on the window-sill!” And he does so.

“Stand there as you like, I would give you nothing even if you belched forth smoke!” And he belched forth smoke, so that it smarts the miserly seth’s eyes, but he understandably refrains from saying, “Even if you burst into flames, I would give you nothing.”

He finally tells his wife to give Moggallāna one cake. His wife put a little bit of pastry into the oil, but *it grew into a large cake*, overflowing the vessel!

“Use just a little dough on the tip of a spoon,” he commands his wife. But, no matter how little pastry his wife uses, the cake simply becomes bigger!

“Just give him one cake then, and be rid of him,” says the frustrated miserly seth. But the cakes are all stuck together. No matter how much husband and wife tug and pull at the mass of cakes, none would come off.⁶⁴

⁶⁰ J-P Migne (ed), *Patrologiae cursus completus*. Series Graeca (166 vols Paris: Migne, 1857-1886), 58:506; P Schaff et al (eds), *A Select Library of the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church*, Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature, 1887-1894 (2 ser, 14 vols each), 1 10: 311.

⁶¹ “The story of the miserly seth, Kosiya” DhA 4.5/1:367-376.

⁶² “Leagues” (*yojana*). A *yojana* is the yoke of an Indian plough (J 6:38, 42). As distance, it is as far as can be covered by a yoke of oxen (about 7 mi or 1.6 km) (DhA 1:108, 2:13). Thus, 45 leagues would be about 507 km or 315 mi.

⁶³ Cf **Aputtaka S 1** (S 3.19/1:89-91), SD 22,4 & **Aputtaka S 2** (S 3.20/1:91-93), SD 22.5.

⁶⁴ Cf Russian folktale of the Giant Turnip: One day, a farmer found a giant turnip in his garden. He called upon his wife to help him pull the turnip out, but they failed. He then asked his granddaughter for help. The granddaughter was unable to help and asked the family dog for help. The dog had no luck and asked the family cat who in turn asked a mouse to help. At last, with them mouse’s help, they pulled the turnip out. The tale shows families who unite

As the miser struggles, sweat pours out of his body, and he loses his craving. “Let him have the whole basket of them!”

It is then that Moggallāna admonishes the couple in the Dharma, and soon faith arises in their hearts. Moggallāna then tells them the Buddha awaits them at Sāvattthī for their offering of fried cakes. And he *teleports* them to the Jeta,vana in Sāvattthī.

There, the seth and his wife offer everyone a fried cake each, followed by milk in ghee, and honey and jagghery [unrefined brown sugar]. But even after everyone, including scrap-eaters, have eaten their fill, *there is still no end of the cakes!* The remainder has to be disposed of in a cave near the monastery gate, and it is known as “Cake Cave” to this day!

After praising Moggallāna for his conversion skill, the Buddha utters this Dhammapada verse:

Just as a bee is to a flower, harming neither its hue nor scent,
Having taken the nectar, flies off—even so, should the sage wander in a village. (Dh 49)

5.2 CHRIST FEEDS THE MULTITUDE. In the Bible, the story of the feeding of the multitude actually happens *before* the stilling of the waters. Here it is listed later because I see it as a great compassionate act to feed so many hungry people. Miracle or not, all the water-walking and water-stilling would not satiate one’s hunger. Man does not live by faith alone; for, first he must be able to sustain himself with proper food, so that a healthy body can support a healthy mind.

Hunger is the greatest of diseases. *Jighacchā paramā rogā.* (Dh 203)

Health is the highest gain. *Ārogya,paramā lābhā.* (Dh 204)

The New Living Translation Bible recounts the various forms of the story of Christ’s feeding of the multitude as follows:

12 Late in the afternoon the twelve disciples came to him and said, “Send the crowds away to the nearby villages and farms, so they can find food and lodging for the night. There is nothing to eat here in this remote place.”

13 But Jesus said, “You feed them.”

“But we have only five loaves of bread and two fish,” they answered. “Or are you expecting us to go and buy enough food for this whole crowd?” **14** For there were about 5,000 men there.

Jesus replied, “Tell them to sit down in groups of about fifty each.” **15** So the people all sat down. **16** Jesus took the five loaves and two fish, looked up toward heaven, and blessed them. Then, breaking the loaves into pieces, he kept giving the bread and fish to the disciples so they could distribute it to the people. **17** They all ate as much as they wanted, and afterward, the disciples picked up twelve baskets of leftovers!

(Luke 9:12-17; cf Matt 14:15-21; Mark 6:35-54; John 6:5-14)

5 Jesus soon saw a huge crowd of people coming to look for him. Turning to Philip, he asked, “Where can we buy bread to feed all these people?” **6** He was testing Philip, for he already knew what he was going to do.

7 Philip replied, “Even if we worked for months [200 denarii, *ESV*], we wouldn’t have enough money to feed them!”

8 Then Andrew, Simon Peter’s brother, spoke up. **9** “There’s a young boy here with five barley loaves and two fish. But what good is that with this huge crowd?”

10 “Tell everyone to sit down,” Jesus said. So they all sat down on the grassy slopes. (The men alone numbered about 5,000.) **11** Then Jesus took the loaves, gave thanks to God, and distributed them to the people. Afterward he did the same with the fish. And they all ate as much as

and work together can overcome any obstacle no matter how difficult. The tale was first published in 1863 in the anthology *Russian Folk Tales*, ed & publ by Aleksandr Afanas'ev: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Russian_Folk_Tales.

they wanted. 12 After everyone was full, Jesus told his disciples, “Now gather the leftovers, so that nothing is wasted.” 13 So they picked up the pieces and filled twelve baskets with scraps left by the people who had eaten from the five barley loaves.

14 When the people saw him do this miraculous sign, they exclaimed, “Surely, he is the Prophet we have been expecting!” (John 6:5-14; cf Matt 14:15-21; Mark 6:35-54; Luke 9:12-17)

The miracle story of feeding the multitude is so popular that it is the only one that is found in all the four Gospels. The two more interesting versions are shown above. Luke’s account appears to be the simplest. The other accounts are more developed, especially John. Only in John, we see Christ testing Philip, who reacts with doubt.

Among the scholars who support the loan theory—that the Gospel writer, especially Luke, borrowed the story from Buddhism—is **Richard Garbe** (*Indien und das Christentum*, Tübingen, 1914, ch 1; translated in *Monist* 24 1914: 488-491).⁶⁵ Buddhism is mentioned in texts of the ancient Persian (modern Iranian) religion, Zoroastrianism. The Yasht (21 sets of mythological hymns about Mithra, Tishtriya, etc) refers to controversies with the Buddha’s disciples (Yasht 13:16)⁶⁶ who probably reached Persia in the 2nd century BCE.

The Gentile evangelist **Luke** (late 1st cent CE), a physician of Antioch,⁶⁷ probably had access to the Buddha story. Antioch was the cradle of Gentile Christianity and of Christian missionary enterprise. So significant was the church at Antioch that the council at Jerusalem (536 CE) decided to free Gentile Christians of the burden of the Jewish law (Acts 15).⁶⁸ It was an important link on the Silk Road along which Buddhism often travelled from Indian to Europe and the Far East.

The fact that Christianity is likely to have incorporated Buddhist stories and elements does not make it any lesser a religion. All successful religions survive and grow by adapting themselves to new environment and new challenges. Local elements are often absorbed and assimilated so that the religion becomes a permanent and significant pattern in the local social fabric.

The spiritual weakness, even falsehood, of a religion is proportionate to its refusal to acknowledge its real sources and borrowings, or worse, to colonize the literary, cultural and religious wealth of others, to vampirize away the lifeblood of the host system until it is weakened, or better, dies away. This institutional dishonesty or denial will ultimately be its own undoing as history and science reveal the truth to the future. The truth will out.⁶⁹

5.3 RELIGION AND SPIRITUALITY. No society is ever totally and purely infused by a single religion. A single religion may appear to dominate but there are other beliefs and undercurrents that hold and sway the masses, such currents themselves ebb and swell according to the needs and views of the different classes that compose the society. In such a milieu, religions become disguised political systems, each seeking full power to dominate its followers, if not society itself. Only when *religion* renounces this power mode, does it become *spirituality*.

The founder of the world’s great faiths started off as selfless spiritual teachers, caring for their own communities, never intending to start a religion, at least, not what we see of them today. Of Christ’s original commission, for example, the Bible says:

⁶⁵ See eg Roy C Amore, *Two Masters, One Message*, 1978: 103 f. This book is a good intro study of the Buddhist influence on early Christianity.

⁶⁶ “Through their brightness and glory a man is born who is a chief in assemblies and meetings, who listens well to the (holy) words, whom Wisdom holds dear, and who returns a victor from discussions with Gaotema, the heretic. Through their brightness and glory the sun goes his way; through their brightness and glory the moon goes her way; through their brightness and glory the stars go their way.” (Tr James Darmesteter, *Sacred Books of the East*, American ed, 1898.) Digital ed (1995): <http://www.avesta.org/ka/yt13sbe.htm>.

⁶⁷ See Eusebius, *Church History* III.4.6.

⁶⁸ See DhA:B 1921: 8-14 for other parallels & refs.

⁶⁹ See eg http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Buddhism_and_Christianity & ZP Thundy on some Skt sources of the Gospel narratives: <http://jesusisbuddha.com/thundy.html>.

5 Jesus sent out the twelve apostles with these instructions: “Don’t go to the Gentiles [non-Jews] or the Samaritans, **6** but only to the people of Israel—God’s lost sheep.” (Matt 10:5-6)⁷⁰

Any Buddhist, familiar with the early Buddhist teachings would find these admonitions of Christ to his apostles familiar of the early monastics:

9 “Don’t take any money in your money belts—no gold, silver, or even copper coins.¹⁰ Don’t carry a traveler’s bag with a change of clothes and sandals or even a walking stick.⁷¹ Don’t hesitate to accept hospitality, because those who work deserve to be fed.”
(Matt 10:9-10; Mark 6:8; Luke 9:3)

3 “Now go, and remember that I am sending you out as lambs among wolves. **4** Don’t take any money with you, nor a traveler’s bag, nor an extra pair of sandals. And don’t stop to greet anyone on the road.⁷²

5 “Whenever you enter someone’s home, first say, ‘May God’s peace be on this house.’ **6** If those who live there are peaceful, the blessing will stand; if they are not, the blessing will return to you. **7** Don’t move around from home to home. Stay in one place, eating and drinking what they provide. Don’t hesitate to accept hospitality, because those who work deserve their pay.”
(Luke 10:4)

From the start, the Buddhist monastics are economically “insecure” but spiritually secure renunciants who have given up the ways of the world so as to benefit it. The early monastics have nothing to do with money and wealth.⁷³

The Buddha driving a Mercedes or wearing a Rolex watch or using money is unimaginable. Christ sitting on the papal throne in the Vatican, or standing before a mega-church congregation, is simply unbiblical. Mohammed would never condone suicide bombings of the innocent, or even the guilty. The ancient rishis would never approve of the Hindutva politicians trying to Hinduize Buddhism so that it is no more a free faith.

The great spiritual teachers all speak in enlightening parables and of wondrous miracles to inspire their followers to good and truth. The Buddha lives a simple life, teaching people of all classes, and accepting them as disciples, and these great teachers walk humbly with their God. Do these great teachers demand that we make an external show of piety and offer sacrifices to some divine being?

No,⁷⁴ O people, the Lord has told you what is good, | and this is what he requires of you:
to do what is right, to love mercy, | and to walk humbly with your God. (Micah 6:5)⁷⁵

6 THE FINAL MIRACLE

6.1 THE BUDDHA LIVES IN THE DHARMA. The life and death of the respective teachers of the world religions often make interesting and rewarding study.⁷⁶ For Buddhists (at least those who follow the early Buddhist canon), the Buddha, after his awakening, lived a full 45 years of indefatigable ministry for the

⁷⁰ Cf “and were forbidden of the Holy Ghost to preach the word in Asia.” (Acts 16:6 KJV)

⁷¹ But cf Mark: “He told them to take nothing for their journey *except a walking stick*—no food, no traveler’s bag, no money. *He allowed them to wear sandals* but not to take a change of clothes. (Mark 6:8-9)

⁷² Obviously, the street and door-to-door evangelists either do not know such salient passages or have a selective bowdlerized view of the Bible!

⁷³ See **Money and Monastics**, SD 4.19.

⁷⁴ That is, *no* to external sacrifices and offerings to God, or merely to worship him. (Micah 6:6-7; cf Matt 12:3)

⁷⁵ Cf Brahmā’s advice to Brahma,deva’s mother: see **Brahma,deva S** (S 6.3/1:141), SD 12.4

⁷⁶ On a different level, there is a comparative study of the deaths of the Buddha and of Socrates: see Matthew Dillon, “Dialogues with Death: The last days of Socrates and the Buddha,” *Philosophy East and West* 50,4 Oct 2000: 525-558. <http://ccbs.ntu.edu.tw/FULLTEXT/JR-PHIL/ew99057.htm>

benefit of all beings, as the “teacher of gods and humans” (*satthā deva, manussānam*). His is an all-inclusive ministry, including non-human beings and animals.⁷⁷

The Satta Vassa Sutta (S 4.24) recounts how Māra the evil one (the devil himself, a God-believer might say) pursues the Buddha throughout his years of spiritual quest for awakening, at the end of which, even inviting him to pass away since the Buddha has attained nirvana.⁷⁸ The Buddha decides to *live on* until the spiritual community is complete. **The Rajja Sutta** (S 4.20/1:116 f) records that Māra even offers the Buddha *world sovereignty*, since the Buddha, as the master of the four spiritual powers (*iddhi, pāda*), has the capacity to do so; but the Buddha turns it down.⁷⁹

Even after the Buddha’s passing, we know that even though the Teacher may be dead, *the Teaching still lives*. In **the Mahā Parinibbāna Sutta** (D 16) the Buddha is recorded as unequivocally declaring:

Then the Blessed One addressed the venerable Ānanda:

“Ānanda, it may be that you would think:

‘Gone is the Teacher’s word! We have no teacher.’

It should not be seen thus, Ānanda, for the Dharma and the Vinaya [the Teaching and the Discipline] that I have taught and explained to you, will, at my passing, be your teacher.

(D 16.6.1/2:153) = SD 9

6.2 DEATH DENIAL. It is interesting to see that both the post-Buddha Buddhists and the post-Jesus Christians deified their respective teachers, refusing to accept the fact that their teachers had died. But the less awakened followers went through a long phase of denial after their great teachers have died. The best explanation for such a deification is that in both cases the posthumous faithful could not accept their lord’s death: they went through a prolonged *death denial*. Indeed, we might say that they are many who are still in denial of the deaths of their respective lords.

A serious psychological problem of not letting go of the dead is that we continue to live with a *mental construct* of that person we adore. This is an important explanation for the rise of sectarianism: different sects, groups and individuals, have different reasons and needs for a superhuman source of present succor and after-life security. So we create Buddha and God in our own image.

The Gārava Sutta (S 6.2) relates how the newly-awakened Buddha declares that the Dharma is his teacher, worthy of his reverence.⁸⁰ The term *satthā* (teacher) is here redefined: while the Buddha lives, *he* is teacher; after his passing, the role is found in *the Dharma and Vinaya*. With the Buddha’s passing, Buddhism ceases to be a *cult* (where the teacher or leader is the final authority) and becomes a *spiritual method* or *teaching-centred path*. In this sense, it may be said that **the Mahā,parinibbāna Sutta** (D 16) is the Buddha’s last will and testament to his spiritual heirs.

On the other hand, while the religious and faith-inclined accept that the Buddha’s authority and presence have been *spiritually* transferred to the Dharma and Vinaya, they also perceive that he is “*physical-ly*” transferred into his relics, the stupa and the Buddha image.⁸¹ The Buddha has been deified.

For those who follow pre-sectarian Buddhism or the oral teachings of the Pali Canon, the Buddha has attained final nirvana: *he is dead*.⁸² They know too that arhats have no difficulties whatsoever with the Buddha’s passing, as the arhats have a direct experience of true reality. For such Buddhists, the Buddha’s final miracle is that he *lived* for us—and for a full 45 years of public ministry, and died at the ripe old age of 80, after the community of monks, nuns, laymen and laywomen—that is, the community of noble saints—had been fully established.⁸³

⁷⁷ For the benefits that animals gain from associating with the Buddha, see eg **Animals Go To Heaven**, SD 55.3.

⁷⁸ S 4.24/1:122-124 = SD 36.5.

⁷⁹ See **Miracles**, SD 27.5a (4.3).

⁸⁰ S 6.2/1:138-140 = SD 12.2.

⁸¹ See Ray 1994: 348-352, 364. On **Gopaka Moggallāna S** (M 108), see foll §6.2 n.

⁸² This is of course speaking in worldly terms. On the ultimate level, in Dharma language, the Buddha cannot be said to living or dead, or both or neither: see **Nivāpa S** (M 25.10/1:157 f); **Cūḷa Māluṅkya,putta S** (M 63.2-3/1:-426-428); **Aggi Vaccha,gotta S** (M 72.9-12/1:483 f, 72.20/1:487 f).

⁸³ For further discussion on the Buddha’s death, see **Mahā,parinibbāna S** (D 16), SD 9 (9).

7 SIGNIFICANCE OF RELIGIOUS PARALLELS

7.1 The miraculous spirit. The Buddha story is full of miracles and wonders. Although such accounts might be viewed by the faithful as glorifying the Buddha and the early saints, their true purpose is as psychological aids to spiritual practice, especially for the faith-inclined. And yet, most informed Buddhists would tell you that they believe such miracles and wonders actually occurred, at least in the Buddha's time. They justify their belief in that the ancient texts are full of descriptions and instruction on how to meditate to gain such powers, or explain how the more superhuman displays occur.

These wondrous events and stories, whether you accept them as historical or as fictitious, remind us that they always serve as a guide and inspiration in our spiritual lives. It is not important to a practising Buddhist whether these accounts are true or not—indeed, how much of religious beliefs can really be proven to be historically accurate or real?—for, they are teachings whose truth is to be teased out. They are beautiful signboards of the beauty and joy that await those whose minds are still and clear.

7.2 Repackaging. No world religion has successfully survived, much less prospered, by maintaining only the original tenets of its founder, without allowing space for their interpretation and adaptation in a world that is constantly changing in attitudes, growing in knowledge, and more liberated in social terms. Traditional religion is most successful in a situation where social mores and schooling are well controlled by a certain class, especially the powerful or the religious; but this influence commensurately diminishes with the rise of education and contact with the open world.

While not watering down the original religious tenets, much less disposing them altogether (as in the case of the “new religions,” for example), a legitimate and viable spiritual system must rely on some dynamic mechanism that allows these original tenets to remain meaningful and effective under new circumstances and respond successfully to challenges which were absent in the days of the religious founder. Often such mechanisms are found in the religion's teachings and stories themselves, as handed down through the ages.

7.3 Religious licence. In the Christian religions, this living mechanism is often the Johannine *logos* (“the Word”), as stated in the opening of the Gospel of John: “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God; all things were made through him, and without him was not anything made that was made.” (John 1:1-3). Many see this as evidence that there is a syncretism between Christology and Platonism. Platonism was a basic understanding of the operation of the cosmos, which saw the material world in a dualistic fashion, separated from a transcendent God, but communicated with by the *logos* (thought, wisdom, creativity).⁸⁴ The point is that during the early centuries, the Christians employed Platonic philosophy, dominant in their times, to express their notion of Christ's divinity.

John 1:1 is primarily taken by mainstream Christians to mean that Christ is both God and man at the same time. But it is the phrase, “without him was not anything made that was made” that interests us here. Simply put, Christians invariably take it to mean that God created everything, and everything, as such, *belongs* to God. Implicitly, then, on a more mundane level, God's stewards on earth—the God-using powers through the ages—regard themselves as essentially having the right to *take* (that is, convert, conquer, or condemn) other realms and peoples without compunction. This is an important root, even excuse, for western colonialism towards the rest of the heathen world: “Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth.” (Gen 1:28)⁸⁵

⁸⁴ Edwin Yamauchi, *Pre-Christian Gnosticism: A Survey of the Proposed Evidence*, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1973: 15. In simple terms, Platonism thought of the spiritual as good and the physical as evil, an idea rejected by most Christians, who during the first six councils, from the First Council of Nicaea (325) to the Third Council of Constantinople (680-681) defined Jesus Christ as fully God and fully human. (*New Advent Catholic Encyclopedia: “The 21 Ecumenical Councils”*)

⁸⁵ This also explains why the born-again US President, George Bush (Jan 2001-Jan 2009), rejected all attempts at a sustainable world ecology, putting his religion (Christianity) before human-centred governance. Such a dominant and religiously naïve attitude also encouraged the rise of tribal feelings, highlighted by the unilateral US invasion of

On a theological level, John 1:1 licenses the Christians to use (that is, colonize) whatever outside ideas and practices they see as useful for the glorification of the Church and God. Since everything is under God, all religions are under him (whether they like it or not). As such, through the Christian centuries, Christians have appropriated, *with compunction*, whatever they see as glorifying their God. Numerous ideas and stories from other religions were freely taken and added to the Christ story and Christian teachings.

7.4 For whose good? By “without compunction,” I mean no contempt, but that was how the ancient and mediaeval Christians generally felt. As with the religiously inclined in most cultures, whenever they have new religious encounters, such as the report of saintly activities, these would be piously welcomed. (Not a few Buddhists today, for example, are admirers of Mother Theresa, even if they have never heard of Buddhaghosa.) Understandably, the Buddha story almost naturally blended in with the catholic hagiography as **St Josaphat**.⁸⁶ Many of the Buddhist miracle stories were attributed to Christ himself. Christ’s apostles did not leave any defined set of scriptures (except for sections of the Old Testament). The early Christian Church fathers wrote epistles to their followers, and these epistles were “inspired” by their religious feelings for God, but

The idea of a complete and clear-cut canon of the New Testament existing from the beginning, that is from Apostolic times, has no foundation in history. The Canon of the New Testament, like that of the Old, is the result of a development, of a process at once stimulated by disputes with doubters, both within and without the Church, and retarded by certain obscurities and natural hesitations, and which did not reach its final term until the dogmatic definition of the Tridentine Council.

<http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/03274a.htm>

In other words, while there was a good measure of debate in the Early Church over the New Testament canon, the major writings were accepted by almost all Christians only by the middle of the second century.⁸⁷

On the broader social level today, ecumenical Christians believe that all religions are created by God, or at least, God allowed their existence, and which are meant to glorify him. With the blessings of Vatican II (1962-65)⁸⁸ and similar ecumenical openness, Christians of our times find it meaningful, even necessary, to have dialogues with other religions, which after all, are there because of God’s providence. If those religions fail to glorify God, it is their own inherent weakness, which Christian witnessing could perhaps, even must, correct either diplomatically or directly.

7.5 Explicit and implicit teachings. Even more potent than an ancient religion’s historical texts and tales are its general attitude and readiness for adaptation and assimilation to enrich the planting, growth and fruiting of the founder’s original vision—or more mundanely, that of putting old wine in attractive and user-friendly new bottles. In Buddhism, this dynamic mechanism is found in the doctrine of the two teachings, as stated in **the Neyy’attha Nī’tattha Sutta** (the Discourse on the Explicit and the Implicit Meanings) by way of a caveat:

Iraq (falsely accused to having “weapons of mass destruction”), which in turn fuelled worldwide Muslim terrorist and bombing activities against US interests.

⁸⁶ Josaphat was a corruption of the orig Joasaph, which is again corrupted fr the Middle Persian *Budasif* (*Budsaif* = *Bodhisattva*). He (“the Buddha”) is even credited with the “second conversion” of India to Christianity, after the country had relapsed to “paganism” following the mission of the Apostle Thomas. Both Barlaam and Josaphat were remembered in the roll of saints recognized by the Roman Catholic Church, with the festival day of 27 November. See **Mahā,parinibbāna S** (D 16), SD 9 (8).

⁸⁷ *The Cambridge History of the Bible*, vol 1 (eds) PR Ackroyd & CF Evans, Cambridge University Press, 1970: 308.

⁸⁸ More fully, **the Second Ecumenical Council of the Vatican**, was the 20th century Ecumenical Council of the Roman Catholic Church. It opened under Pope John XXIII in 1962 and closed under Pope Paul VI in 1965. The general idea was to make Roman Catholic church efforts more relevant to the times, incl having a more open approach to other religions.

Bhikshus, there are these two who misrepresent the Tathagata. What are the two?

(1) Those who explain the Sutta teaching whose sense is explicit to be implicit. [Those who explain the Sutta teaching that has been drawn out (*nīta*) as one to be drawn out (*neyya*).]

(2) Those who explain the Sutta teaching whose sense is implicit to be explicit. [Those who explain the Sutta teaching that is to be drawn out (*neyya*) as one that has been drawn out (*nīta*).]

These, bhikshus, are the two who misrepresent the Tathagata.

Bhikshus, there are these two who do not misrepresent the Tathagata. What are the two?

(1) Those who explain the Sutta teaching whose sense is *explicit* as explicit [whose sense has been drawn out].

(2) Those who explain the Sutta teaching whose sense is *implicit* as implicit [whose sense is to be drawn out].

These, bhikshus, are the two who do not misrepresent the Tathagata.

(A 2.3.4-5/1:60) = SD 2.6b

This passage basically advises us to know the difference between *the content* and *the packaging* of a Dharma teaching. Dharma teachers often speak in two basic ways: they relay *facts* and tell *stories*. When we mistake the one for the other—that is, the medium for the message—we will be caught in the rut of confusion and false views.

I think we can further relate these “two teachings” to “the Dharma, good in the beginning, good in the middle, good in the end, both in the spirit and in the letter” (*ādi, kalyāṇam majjhe, kalyāṇam pariyosāna, - kalyāṇam sāttham savyañjanam*),⁸⁹ in this way:

The phrase “**in the spirit**” (*sāttham*) refers to teachings whose meaning is already drawn out (*nī't-attha*), that is, the teaching is *expressed directly*, without much interpretation, that is, relating directly to the basic teachings. The phrase “**in the letter**” (*savyañjanam*) refers to teachings whose meaning needs to be drawn out (*neyy'attha*), that is, it is given *on a word level*, through imageries, stories or in some indirect manner, so that it still has to be related to the basic teachings.

The key approach to Dharma teachings here is to constantly ask ourselves such questions as:

- What does this teaching or passage mean?
- How does this relate to other Sutta passages?
- How is this meaningful or applicable to me?
- Do I really try to understand its true meaning, or am I projecting my views onto it?

The last question works best with deeper Sutta-understanding, self-awareness and the desire to grow spiritually. There is no right answer here, but progressive steps in self-knowing. In this sense, all our attempts at answering such question will be right—so long as we want to take that step forward.⁹⁰

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[For Biblio, see **Miracles** = SD 27.5a.]

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⁸⁹ V 1:21 = S 4.5/1:105 f; Mvst 3:415 f.

⁹⁰ On *neyy'attha* and *nī'tattha*, see also **Piṇḍola Bhāra, dvāja S** (S 35.127), SD 27.6a (5).