Buddhist texts, classed as hīnayāna or mahāyāna, make use of Greek, Jewish, and Christian material. In view of principles adumbrated in the Lotus Sūtra (i) that all scriptures come from the Buddha, and (ii) that the preacher, all things to all people, will accommodate himself to «heretical» views, the appearance of non-Buddhist material in Buddhist texts alarms no one. It stimulates the questions how much foreign material attracted the Buddhist eye, and why. Mutual borrowings seem to have provided cosmetic enhancement, but some Christian authorities deny the possibility of biblical material owing anything to non-Christian sources.

Whether New Testament texts could owe anything to Buddhist inspiration has been ventilated for a century and a half. It is known that Jews were employed in the Persian, Seleucid (and one may add Parthian) empires, and Jewish Christians will have inherited their opportunities and their rewards. Such contacts encouraged confabulation. Dr Christian Lindtner propounds an unexpected explanation for parallels, viz. that Matthew and others copied Buddhist texts almost verbatim. Indian readers take kindly to the idea that Christian texts owed something to Indian originals, but few Western Buddhologists have been convinced.

Lindtner points out that the very old Buddhist simile for rarity, that a blind turtle should put its neck through a hole in a yoke thrown into the ocean by someone, has a parallel in the saying of Christ that a rich man can enter the Kingdom as readily as a camel, or may it be a

3 Saddharmapuṇḍarīka (SDP) VIII.6–7; Leon Hurvitz, Scripture of the Lotus Blossom of the Fine Dharma (New York: Columbia UP, 1976), 160.
5 Derrett, Bible, 97–99.
6 Derrett, Bible, 19–23.
9 Lindtner, 36–39.
cable?, may pass through the eye of a needle. That a rich man can indeed reach heaven, through a technique like that of Dhānañjāni’s conversion by Sāriputta, suggests that the New Testament story did indeed reach Buddhist ears. But there is no actual Jewish saying closer than that alleged Buddhist quasi-parallel. One may try to discard Lindtner’s discovery on the ground that a needle does not resemble a yoke, nor a turtle a camel.

More fruitful are parallels where verbal similarity, or thematic likeness, especially where the receiving culture does not anticipate the material, call for an explanation of the similarity if borrowing is not to be entertained. We have an example by no means as problematical as the turtle/camel saying and it does not lend itself to the «cosmetic» explanation.

The Epistle of James is notoriously eccentric. The essentials of the Christian faith are not emphasised, or are wanting. It uses an international idiom. One passage most naturally fits not merely an oriental but even an Indian environment. Its date is as uncertain as its provenance. It could reflect early Christianity and its attribution to James the brother of Jesus, often rejected, may not be altogether misleading.

Now at 4:13–17 we find an independent passage belonging to the genre of Wisdom, which could be disregarded as a commonplace.

Now a word with all who say, «Today or the next day we will go off to such and such a town and spend a year there trading and making money,» Yet you have no idea what tomorrow will bring. What is your life, after all? You are no more than a mist, seen for a little while and then disappearing. What you ought to say is «If it be the Lord’s will, we shall live to do so and so.»

15 Derrett, «Mishnâh» (n. 1 above).
20 Cf. Oesterley, 405.

None refer specifically to long-distance trading. However, James 4:13–17 obviously belongs to a Jewish environment. The date of the Epistle may be A.D. 100–140, at any rate after 125 according to some. It is older than the Dhammapada Commentary, which has been placed in the fifth century, incorporating materials of uncertain ages. 27

The Dhammapada Commentary on Dhp. 286 contains the following: 28

A merchant called Great Wealth undertook a long journey for trade and found a river in flood. He thought, «I have come a long distance and if I go back again I shall be delayed; right here will I dwell during the rains, during the winter and summer, doing my work and selling those cloths.» The Buddha said to Ananda, «Not realizing that the end of his life is near, he has made up his mind to dwell right here during this entire year for the purpose of selling his goods ... Only seven days longer will he live and then he will fall into the mouth of a fish.» The Buddha utters a stanza recommending that one should do what should be done this very day; who knows but what on the morrow death may bring? ... The Buddha tells the merchant that he has only seven days left ... «Disciple, a wise man should never allow himself to think, «Right here will I dwell during the rain, during the winter and summer. I will do this work and I will do that work.» Rather should a man meditate on the end of his own life.»

This applies Dhp. 286. 29 There is no protection against death (Dhp. 288). The Buddhist understands the hint in the theme river-crossing. Only with the aid of the Buddha’s teaching may one cross the flood; but one will cross it. No reference to God’s will is appropriate in a Buddhist text. Meanwhile post-Christian Jewish legends illustrate the folly of assuming plans will work out without God’s approval. In one instance the bridegroom asserted he would enjoy his bride more. 30


16 But instead you boast (cf. LXX Prov. 27:1) and brag, and all such boasting is wrong. 23 What it comes to is that anyone who knows the right thing to do and does not do it is a sinner. 24

This passage consists with a corpus of Jewish teaching that death is certain and plans which do not take account of God’s will are futile. Some of these warnings are couched in parables of imagination and pathos. 25 None refer specifically to long-distance trading.


24 Verse 17 may be an addition, but it fits. On sins of omission see Matthew 23:23; 25:41–48.


agrees with ‘James’ not only in spirit but also in small particulars. Why should Buddhists use a foreign work to illustrate a commonplace? If ‘James’ was, as some have suspected, a Hellenistic work in the genre Wisdom with a strong Jewish aroma it would attract the attention of Buddhists who had a special interest in long-distance plans of merchants, and their stock. The presence of this parable in such a text would only strengthen a message as international as it was robust. Alternatively Buddhists and Jews may have used a common source, in which case the Buddhist testimony would throw light on ‘James’ composition — but we cannot (as yet) be sure what happened.

No question arises here of a missionary enterprise directed to converting peoples adhering to any or no religion. Nor am I suggesting that there has been an interpolation in ‘James’.30 31