

An Ancient Buddhist Representation of Psalm 82

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The exegesis of Ps 82:1, where Yahweh stands (Is 3:13–15) amongst the gods, presents difficulties. Now, unafraid of a polytheistic «survival»,¹ one takes the words ‘*dat-’el* to mean «assembly of gods»: v. 6 ‘*elohim* determines this.² Previously it was hesitantly rendered «judges».³ The psalm is a diatribe (cf. Dt 1:17) against corrupt judges and ignorance (v. 5b). Earlier «gods» (v. 6) *could* mean the Israelites of Ex 19:8; 24:3,⁷ or prophets (Jn 10:35), hardly hominids (Gen 6:2–6). A Buddhist version may help. Found in a text of the fourth to fifth century,⁵

the story probably goes back further. First we study the background.

Buddha and the gods

The Buddha is «teacher of gods and men», both being impermanent, as at Ps 82:7. He lectured gods in a heavenly sphere (see below).⁶ His discovery of the origin and end of suffering was unknown at his Enlightenment. The gods Brahmā and Indra, later his supporters,⁷ wished him to preach.⁸ From the second century BCE onwards Buddhists understood that pre-Enlightenment gods must hear the Law (*dhamma*). These included the Buddha’s mother, now a goddess.⁹ The picture of the Buddha’s going to heaven to teach the gods developed into the

¹ Ex 18:11; 1 Chr 16:22; Ps 95:3, 96:4–5, 97:7, 9, 135:5.

² Dt 6:14, 10:7, 32:16. Arthur Weiser, *The Psalms* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1962) 556–559 at 558 n.1. Hans-Joachim Kraus, *Theology of the Psalms* (Minneapolis: Fortress P., 1992), 48. the «gods» are Yahweh’s attendants. See Ps 81:1, 6 LXX. The Syr. says «angels», «gods».

³ Targum of Psalms agrees (rabbis). Marvin E. Tate, *Psalms 51–100* (Dallas: Word books, 1990), 328–347, esp. 340–1. The old «human» interpretations are unsound. Some compromise is possible (p. 341). It is not a synagogue (*contra* Mekilta de R. Ishmael, *Bahōdeš* 11, 48–50, trans. Jacob Z. Lauterbach (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Soc. of America, 1976, original edn. 1933), vol. 2, 287).

⁴ Sifre on Deuteronomy §§306, 320, trans. Reuven Hammer (New Haven & London: Yale UP., 1986) 307, 329.

⁵ Hajime Nakamura, *Indian Buddhism* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1989), 52.

⁶ Milinda-pañha, 20, trans. Isobel B. Horner, *Milinda’s Questions* (London: Luzac, 1969), vol. 1, 26. Saddharma-puṇḍarīka XVIII.21, trans. Hendrik Kern, *Saddharma-puṇḍarīka or the Lotus of the True Law* (SBE 21; Oxford: Clarendon P. 1884, reprinted New York: Dover Publications, 1963), 342. Did the king of the gods, Indra, do the same: *Saddharma-puṇḍarīka* XVIII, trans. Kern, *ibid.*?

⁷ David L. Snellgrove, *The Image of the Buddha* (Paris & Tokyo: Unesco, 1978), reliquaries at 62–3.

⁸ *Saddharma-puṇḍarīka* II.114, trans. Kern, 55.

⁹ *Divyāvadāna* (ed. Edward B. Cowell and Robert A. Neil, Cambridge UP., 1886, reprinted Amsterdam: Oriental P., 1970), 394, 401. The lecture to *devatās* is at *Milinda-pañha* 349, 350, trans. Horner, vol. 2, 204 n.1.

popular and widespread¹⁰ idea that when he was pressed to return to earth, Indra made and planted three attached ladders for him to do so, ceremoniously attended by grateful gods. So he descended with Brahmā carrying a fly-whisk on the Buddha's right and Indra a parasol on his left (both insignia of royalty). Whence came the ladder?

Gen 28:12–17 offers an answer.¹¹ Jacob's ladder fixed in the soil — a ladder with rungs,¹² not apparently a ramp — with Yahweh standing firmly (*niṣṣāv*) upon it,¹³ provides, as dream-and-response, proof of a new beginning for Jewry.¹⁴ One need not be distracted by folk-

lore.¹⁵ Jacob discovered the gate of heaven (v. 17g),¹⁶ while Yahweh pronounced his fate. The picture of the moving angels (in Buddhist style *devatās*, «gods» or «godlings») while Yahweh stands still symbolises the only route between men and God (Philo. *Somn. I*, 3.141–142) offering a sight of heaven (Jn 1:51, cf. 3:13, 14:6). Experts explaining bible to Buddhists, the Buddha's ladder produced a literary,¹⁷ sculptural and pictorial¹⁸ efflorescence in all Buddhist lands. The ladder was said to have been kept beneath the ground at the grove, or gate, of Sankisa (Skt. *Sāṃkāśya*)¹⁹ where, when it perished, patrons of tourism²⁰ built a substitute.²¹

¹⁰ Buddhaghosa, *Visuddhi-magga* XII.77–79, trans. Ñāṇamoli, *The Path of Purification*, 3rd edn. (Kandy: Buddhist Publication Soc., 1995), 429–430. Dhammapada Commentary. text (ed. Harry C. Norman) iii. 219–266, trans. Eugene W. Burlingame, *Buddhist Legends: Dhammapada Commentary* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1921, reprinted London: Pali Text Society, 1979), pt.3 (Harvard Oriental Series 30), 49–54. Jampa Losang Panglung, *Die Erzählstoffe des Mūlasarvāśivāda-vinaya analysiert auf Grund der Tibetischen Überlieferung* (Tokyo: Reiyukai Library, 1981), 192–3. Snellgrove, *Image*, p11.9, 227, 238, pp. 30, 303, 310. Robert E. Fisher, *Buddhist Art and Architecture* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1996), ill. 160, p. 180 (18th century?). Kevin Trainor (ed.) *Buddhism* (London: Duncan Baird, 2004), 122. J. Duncan M. Derrett, «The Buddhist dimension of John», 182–210 in *Numen* 51/2 (2004), 189–190. The subject is (for our purposes) exhaustively and perfectly covered in Dieter Schlingloff, *Ajanta. Handbuch der Malereien. Erzählende Wandmalereien*, vol. 1. *Interpretation* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2000), nos. 84–85 *Devāvatāra*, pp. 476–487; vol. 2. *Supplement* (drawings), 95–99 (eighteen examples!).

¹¹ Cf. Wisd 10:10–11; Targums to Gen 28:12; Pirke de Rabbi Eliezer 35, trans. Gerald Friedlander, *Pirke de Rabbi Eliezer* (London, 1916, reprinted New York: Sepher-Hermon P. 1981), 265.

¹² Babylonian Talmud, Mishnah. *Baba Bathra* III.6 (two kinds of runged ladders).

¹³ LXX; Philo, *Somn. I*, 3 (*epēstērikto*); Targ. Onqelos; Samaritan; Syr.; Vulg. (*innixum scalae*). 'Alayw is ambiguous, since *sullām* is masculine. Some translators render 'alayw «by him», as some thought the Buddha, descended, preached to the people near the ladder (Bandaranayeke cited by Schlingloff, *Ajanta* p. 483.

Ps 82 and the Mūlasarvāśivāda-vinaya (MSV)

For gods to be convened (Is 48:14, Jl 3:11; Zeph. 3:8), as Zeus, overseer of justice, convened the Olympians (Homer, *Il.* 20, 4–20, 142), the cooperation of Brahmā and Indra was needful. According to a passage in the MSV cited by Lindtner,²² the Buddha convened the gods in the heaven of the Thirty-three in a special hall, from which, with exceptions, humans were exclu-

¹⁴ On the interpretation of dreams: Bert J. Koet, «Trustworthy dreams?» in *Persuasion and Dissuasion in Early Christianity, Ancient Judaism and Hellenism* (ed. Pieter van der Horst *et al.* (Leuven: Peeters, 2003), 87–107.

¹⁵ James G. Frazer, *Folk-lore in the Old Testament*, Abridged edn. (London: Macmillan, 1923), 223, 228–230. Cf. Homer, *Od.* I. 330–1.

¹⁶ The sanctuary, the place of prayer, founded beneath the throne of glory: Targ. Jon., Gen 28:17.

¹⁷ Schlingloff, *Ajanta*, vol. 1 (above, n.10).

¹⁸ See notes 7 and 10 above.

¹⁹ Fa-hian, *Fo-kwō-ki* (400 CE), ch. 17, trans. Samuel Beal, *Si-yu-ki. Buddhist Records of the Western World* (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trübner; reprinted New York: Paragon, 1968), xix–xli; Hiuen Tsiang, *Ta-T'ang Si-yu-ki* (646 CE), book 4 (Kie-pitha [Kapitha]), trans. Beal, 202–203. Compare Home, *Odyssey* I, 330–331.

²⁰ Cunningham cited by Schlingloff, *Ajanta*, vol. 1, 483.

²¹ Beal, *Si-yu-ki*, 203.

ded.²³ Royal applications to attend were rejected. The lecture may have contained (cf. Ps 82:1 *yišpot*) the Buddha's Law entire. The scenario of Ps 82 reveals Yahweh (cf. Ps 68:5) lecturing «gods» (the «gods many» of 1 Cor 8:5), whose influence could not be denied, in spite of their ignorance (cf. Ps 82:5; 1 Kgs 3:9). *Devatās* confirm human understanding of the Buddha's teaching. And they are not «gods of nations» in the Jewish sense²⁴ nor the Seleucid or Ptolomaic *theoi*.

Conclusion

Jewish and Judaeo-Christian works may contain Buddhist material.²⁵ Evidence for biblical and non-biblical Jewish material in Buddhist texts accumulates.²⁶ Greeks found Greek names for Indian gods.²⁷ So Buddhists found Buddhist truths hiding in Jewish ethnic propositions. Heracles lurks behind Indra or Vajrapāṇi, and Yahweh cannot outdo the Buddha.

²² Christian Lindtner, *Geheimnisse um Jesus Christus. Das Neue Testament ist Buddhas Testament* (Süderbrarup: Lühe Verlag, 2005), 138–9. Note *devaparišadi* equals 'adat-'ēl. I do not refer to Lindtner's work for its argument.

²³ MSV, *Sanghabheda-vastu*, Gilgit MS (ed. Raniero Gnoli, Rome 1977–78), vol. 1, 187–196. Lindtner, *Geheimnisse*, 138; Panglung, *Erzählstoffe*, 90–1.

²⁴ Dt 32:8LXX; Dan 10:13, 20:20; Job 4:18; Sir 17:17.

²⁵ J. Duncan M. Derrett, *The Bible and the Buddhists* (Bornato in Franciacorta: Sardini, 2000), 45–57.

There was biblical apparatus to explain Ps 82.²⁸ Even gods needed to be re-trained, and their gratitude is no less than human students'.

It may be we have a spiralling movement here. The ladder dreamed of by Jacob inspired Buddhists: they developed a heavenly conference, itself no stranger to Jewish ideas of the «heavenly court», then the marvellous triple ladder appears, as in the MSV, an icon of the Buddha's power to convince, a theme prominent in Buddhist texts of all ages.

Could Christians have learned nothing from such confabulations?

²⁶ Cf. Derrett, *Bible*, 57–67. the same, «Angels Jewish and angels Buddhist.» 73–92 in *Indologica Taurinensia* 26 (2000); the same, «Mishnah, 'Avôt 5.13 in early Buddhism.» 79–87 in *B.S.O.A.S.* 67/1 (2004); the same, «Versatility, angels and space: the meaning of Buddhist and non-Buddhist parallels.» 231–242 in *J.R.A.S.*, 3rd ser., 16/3 (2006), 232–233, 237–239. The psalms were known by heart; for recent proof see Yigael Yadin, *Bar-Kokhba* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1971), 113–114.

²⁷ Strabo, *Geog.* 15.7–9 (C.687–8); Acts 14:11–12; Arrian, *Anab.* IV.28, 2–4; V.1.1,5; V.26.5; *Ind.* 1.4–7; 5.8–9; 7.4–9; 8.7–10. Cf. Ausonius, 48.4.

²⁸ Dt 1:16–17; Ps 58(57); Ps 72; Mic 7:3; Ps 14.

