

The Epistle of James and the Dhammapada Commentary

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Buddhist texts, classed as *hīnayāna* or *mahāyāna*, make use of Greek, Jewish,¹ and Christian material.² In view of principles adumbrated in the Lotus Sūtra (i) that all scriptures come from the Buddha,³ and (ii) that the preacher, all things to all people, will accommodate himself to «heretical» views,⁴ 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,⁵ 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.⁶ It is known⁷ 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 propounds⁸ 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 out⁹ 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,¹⁰ 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

¹ J. Duncan M. Derrett, «Mishnāh, 'Avōt 5:13 in early Buddhism», 79–87 in *B.S.O.A.S.* 67 (2004). The same, «Angels Jewish and angels Buddhist», 73–92 in *Indologica Taurinensia* 26 (2000).

² J. Duncan M. Derrett, *The Bible and the Buddhists* (Bornato in Franciacorta: Sardini, 2000), 57–67.

³ Saddharmapuṇḍarīka (SDP) VIII.6–7; Leon Hurvitz, *Scripture of the Lotus Blossom of the Fine Dharma* (New York: Columbia UP, 1976), 160.

⁴ SCP XV, trans. Hendrik Kern, *Saddharmapuṇḍarīka or the Lotus of the True Law* (SBE 21; Oxford: Clarendon P, 1884 reprinted New York: Dover Publications, 1963), 301–2.

⁵ Derrett, *Bible*, 97–99.

⁶ Derrett, *Bible*, 19–23.

⁷ Philo, *Vita Mosis* II.20 (Loeb Classical Library, *Philo* VI, 458–459). Graham Shipley, *The Greek World after Alexander* (London: Routledge, 2000), 296 (references).

⁸ For example «A new Buddhist-Christian parable», 27–55 in *Exactitude, Festschrift for Robert Faurisson* (ed. Robert H. Countess, Chr. Lindtner & Germar Rudolph; Chicago: Theses and Dissertations P, 2003). He claims (47) that the New Testament is «propaganda for Mahāyāna».

⁹ Lindtner, 36–39.

¹⁰ Sources listed by Lindtner, 37 include *Therīgāthā* 500, trans. Caroline A.F. Rhys Davids, *Psalms of the Early Buddhists*, I. *Psalms of the Sisters* (London: Pali Text Society, 1909), 173; *Majjhima-nikāya* iii. 169, trans. Isobel B. Horner, iii. 214–15; *Samyutta-nikāya* v. 455. Frank L. Woodward, v. 383; SDP 463, trans. Kern, 423.

able?,¹¹ 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,¹² suggests that the New Testament story¹³ did indeed reach Buddhist ears. But there is no actual Jewish saying¹⁴ 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,¹⁵ 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.¹⁶ The essentials of the Christian faith are not emphasised, or are wanting. It uses an

¹¹ Matthew 19:24; Mark 10:25; Luke 18:25. «Cable» is a conjecture (noticed by Lindtner, 39) supported by no manuscript. Erick F.F. Bishop, *Jesus of Palestine* (London: Lutterworth P, 1955), 201–202.

¹² J. Duncan M. Derrett, «Unregarded Buddhist-Christian parallels», 91–110 in *Archiv orientální 73* (2005), 98–99.

¹³ See J. Duncan M. Derrett, «A camel through the eye of a needle», 36–40 in Derrett, *Studies in the New Testament V* (Leiden: Brill, 1989). Qur'an 7:40 uses the simile to mean «never». But «camel» is related to the Hebrew root *gāmāl*, «to treat», and «camel» suggests loads of wealth (2 Kings 8:9).

¹⁴ Third- and fourth-century sayings (the elephant) in the same area: Hermann Strack and Paul Billerbeck, *Kommentar zum Neuen Testament aus Talmud und Midrasch I. Das Evangelium nach Matthäus* (Munich: Beck, 1926, reprinted 1961), 828.

¹⁵ Derrett, «Mishnāh» (n. 1 above).

¹⁶ A thorough treatment of the Epistle is that of Christian Burchard, *Der Jakobusbrief* (Tübingen: Mohr, 2000), 182–189; but one may consult James H. Ropes, *Epistle of St James* (ICC; Edinburgh: Clark, 1941), 276–282; Peter H. Davids, *The Epistle of James* (Exeter: Paternoster P, 1982), 171–174; Ralph F. Martin, *James* (Waco: Word Books, 1988), 165–171; Luke T. Johnson, *The Letter of James* (AB; New York: Doubleday, 1995), 291–298; Robert W. Wall, *Community of the Wise. The Letter of James* (Valley Forge, PA: Trinity P, 1997), 218–222.

international idiom. One passage most naturally fits not merely an oriental but even an Indian environment.¹⁷ Its date is as uncertain as its provenance.¹⁸ It could reflect early Christianity and its attribution to James the brother of Jesus, often rejected,¹⁹ may not be altogether misleading.²⁰ Now at 4:13–17 we find an independent passage belonging to the genre of Wisdom, which could be disregarded as a commonplace.

¹³Now 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.> ¹⁴Yet you have no idea what tomorrow will bring. What is your life, after all? You are no more than a mist,²¹ seen for a little while and then disappearing. ¹⁵What you ought to say is <If it be the Lord's will,²² we shall live to do so and so.>

¹⁷ James 3:6. Therīgāthā 61 (200), trans. Caroline A.F. Rhys Davids, *Psalms*, 101. Sophie Laws, *Epistle of James* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1981), 151; Gananath Obeyesekere in *Karma and Rebirth in Classical Indian Traditions* (ed. Wendy D. O'Flaherty; Berkeley: University of California P, 1980), 152; Elmar R. Gruber & Holger Kersten, *The Original Jesus* (Shaftesbury: Element, 1995), 92–93; J. Duncan M. Derrett, «An Indian metaphor in St John», 271–286 in *J.R.A.S.*, 3rd ser., 9 (1999), 276–277; Burchard, *Jakobusbrief*, 144–145, cites Marc Philonenko, «Un écho de la prédiction d'Asoka dans l'Épître de Jacques», 254–265 in *Ex Orbe Religionum. Fests. G. Widengren* (ed. Jan Bergman and Kaarina Drynjeff; SHR 21–22; Leiden: Brill, 1972), vol. 1. Verg., *Aen.* 6.748 is not entirely parallel.

¹⁸ Adolf Jülicher, *Introduction to the New Testament* (London: Smith, Elder, 1904), 215–229, esp. 217; William E. Oesterley, «The General Epistle of James», 385–417 in *Expositor's Greek Testament IV* (ed. W. Robertson Nicoll; London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1910); James Moffatt, *Introduction to the Literature of the New Testament*, 3rd edn. (Edinburgh: Clark, 1920), 456–475 (bibliography); Werner G. Kümmel, *Introduction to the New Testament* (London: S.C.M., 1966), 284–291; Donald Guthrie, *New Testament Introduction* (London: Inter-Varsity P, 1974), 736–771; Howard C. Kee, *Understanding the New Testament*, 4th edn. (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1983), 322–328 («James» as a Hellenistic work).

¹⁹ John A.T. Robinson, *Redating the New Testament* (London: Oxford UP, 1976), a work which astonished its original audience.

²⁰ Cf. Oesterley, 405.

¹⁶But instead you boast (cf. LXX Prov. 27:1) and brag, and all such boasting is wrong.²³ ¹⁷What 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. 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.²⁶ It is older than the *Dhammapada Commentary*, which has been placed in the fifth century, incorporating materials of uncertain ages.²⁷

²¹ Cf. Job 7:9, 8:9; Psalms 102:11, 144:4. Syriac Apocalypse of Baruch 82:3 (A.F.J. Klijn, «2 Baruch»), 615–652 in *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha I* (ed. James H. Charlesworth; London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1983), 649. 2 Baruch belongs to the first or second decade of the second century (Klijn, 617).

²² A commonplace of Jews and Greeks. Acts 18:21; Aristophanes, *Pluto* 1188. Cf. Euripides at Plutarch, *Moralia* 107C; Dio Chrysostom 16, 8; Seneca, *ep. morales* 101, 4–5.

²³ Davids, *James*, 173. Psalms 10:3, 49:6, 51:1, 94:4; Romans 1:20; 2 Timothy 3:2. Cf. Galatians 6:14. Strack and Billerbeck, *Kommentar*, III, 541.

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

²⁵ Midrash Rabbah, *Deuteronomy IX.1*, trans. Joseph Rabinowitz, 3rd edn. (London & New York: Soncino P, 1983), 156–157. Joannis Wetstenius, *Novum Testamentum I* (Amsterdam, 1751), on v. 14. Strack and Billerbeck, I, 148. See also Babylonian Talmud, *Gittin*, 68b; Strack and Billerbeck, *Kommentar IV/1*, 511, lines 17–18; 512, lines 8–10; *Midrash Rabbah*, Ecclesiastes III. 2 §3, trans. Louis Rabinowitz (London & New York: Soncino P, 1983), 72–79. Strack and Billerbeck, I, 148. The medieval *Alphabet of Ben Sira* (See *Encyclopedia Judaica* IV, Jerusalem 1972, 548–550; Hermann Strack and Günter Stemberger, *Einleitung in Talmud und Midrash*, 7th edn., Munich: Beck, 1982, 307–308) as translated by Strack and Billerbeck, III, 758 on 4:15 (repeating material in Christianus Schoettgenius, *Horae Hebraicae*, Dresden & Leipzig: Hekelius, 1733, 1030–1).

²⁶ Mofatt, *Introduction*, 471; Kümmel, *Introduction*, 291 (no later than A.D. 100).

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 Ānanda, «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 whether God agreed or not, and he did not reach the bride-chamber.

It is obvious that the passage in the *Dhammapada Commentary*, going beyond Dhp. 286,

²⁷ Eugene W. Burlingame, trans. *Buddhist Legends: Dhammapada Commentary* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1921, reprinted London: Pali Text Society, 1979), pt.1, (Harvard Oriental Series 28), §8, 57–60.

²⁸ Dhp. comm. XX.10, text (ed. Harry C. Norman), iii, 419–431, trans. Burlingame, *Buddhist Legends*, pt.3 (Harvard Oriental Series 30), 164–165.

²⁹ «Here will I live in the rainy season, here in the autumn and in the summer; thus muses the fool. He realizes not the danger (of death).» Text and translation at Narada Thera, *The Dhammapada*, 4th edn. (Dehiwela, Sri Lanka: Buddhist Cultural Centre, 2000), 233–234.

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.³⁰ Nor am I suggesting that there has been an *interpolation* in <James>.³¹

³⁰ Cf. J. Duncan M. Derrett, «The Buddhist dimension of John», 182–210 in *Numen* 51 (2004), 205–206.

³¹ Cf. Robert M. Price, «Apocryphal apparitions», 69–104 in *The Empty Tomb* (ed. Robert M. Price and Jeffery J. Lowder; Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 2005), 70–71, 92.

