The exegesis of Ps 82:1, where Yahweh stands (Is 3:13-15) amongst the gods, presents difficulties. Now, unafraid of a polytheistic «survival», one takes the words «dat-ēl» to mean «assembly of gods»: v. 6 ‘elohîm determines this. Previously it was hesitantly rendered «judges». 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; 24:3,7,4 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, 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). His discovery of the origin and end of suffering was unknown at his Enlightenment. The gods Brahmā and Indra, later his supporters, wished him to preach. 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. The picture of the Buddha’s going to heaven to teach the gods developed into the story the text probably goes back further. First we study the background.

References:

1 Ex 18:11; 1 Chr 16:22; Ps 95:3, 96:4-5, 97:7,9, 135:5.
5 Hajime Nakamura, Indian Buddhism (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1989), 52.
popular and widespread idea that when he was pressed to return to earth, Indra made and planned three attached ladders for him to do so, ceremoniously attended by grateful gods. So he descended with Brahma 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. Jacob's ladder fixed in the soil - a ladder with rungs, not apparently a ramp — with Yahweh standing firmly (nissâv) upon it, provides, as dream-and-response, proof of a new beginning for Jewry. One need not be distracted by folklore. Jacob discovered the gate of heaven (v. 17g), while Yahweh pronounced his fate. The picture of the moving angels (in Buddhist style devatâs, «gods» or «godlings») while Yahweh stands still symbolises the only route between men and God (Phil. Sonm. 1. 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, sculptural and pictorial efflorescence in all Buddhist lands. The ladder was said to have been kept beneath the ground at the grove, or gate, of Sankisa (Skt. Sâmkaśyâ) where, when it perished, patrons of tourism built a substitute.

Ps 82 and the Mulasarvâstivâda-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, II. 20, 4-20, 142), the cooperation of Brahma and Indra was needful. According to a passage in the MSV cited by Lindtner, the Buddha convened the gods in the heaven of the Thirty-three in a special hall, from which, with exceptions, humans were excluded.


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

13 LXX; Philo, Sonm. I. 3 (pepestêrikto); Targ. Onqelos; Samaritan; Syr.; Vulg. (innixum scalæ). ‘Alayw is ambiguous, since sullâm 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.


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.


21 Beal, Si-yu-ki, 203.
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ded.23 Royal applications to attend were rejected. The lecture may have contained (cf. Ps 82:1 yīšpot) 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 Vajrapāni, and Yahweh cannot outdo the Buddha.

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