

Buddhistische und neutestamentliche Erzählungen

Georg Faber

*The Princeton Theological Review* 13:115-119. [1915]

This treatise investigates the hypothesis first advocated by Rudolf Scydel and more recently renewed in a considerably moderated form by the Dutch scholar van den Bergh van Eysinga, that the Gospel-narratives were influenced by Buddhistic stories. The author adopts the three methodological principles laid down by Clemen for this kind of investigation, viz. (1) that to warrant the assumption of a foreign source for any New Testament material it must be shown that such material cannot by any possibility be explained from, indigenous primitive Christian ideas; (2) that the presence of ideas derived from a foreign source within the milieu whence they are supposed to have come should be clearly demonstrated; (3) that it should be made intelligible how an actual transmigration could have taken place. With this third requirement in mind the author first takes a thorough survey of the intercommunications that have existed in historical times between India and the nearer Orient and Occident up to the date of composition of the New Testament narratives. In the contact with the Babylonian civilization which is proven to have existed from the seventh century B.C. onward, India appears to have played a purely receptive part. Through the Persian occupation of the Indus valley the possibility of India influencing the West was undoubtedly given, but no proofs can be furnished that such a result actually followed. Even the expeditions of Alexander the Great are declared to have remained of small importance for the intercourse between India and the West. As concerns Buddhism in particular this was not at the time existent in Taxila, which was the center of all Brahmanic Indian learning and where the campaign of Alexander reached its limit. The region where Buddhism at that time flourished lay far to the East. After the death of Alexander a Greek embassy from the Seleucidian ruler was established at the court of Chandragypta at Pataliputra, but Megasthenes, the first ambassador, does not so much as mention the name of the Buddhists in his "Indica". While the Orientals showed in various ways their interest in Greek ideas, the West seems to have been entirely engrossed in its material relations with India. The first likelihood of the absorption of Buddhistic ideas arose through the intercourse established with the Indian court by Ptolemy Philadelphus of Egypt. This has a special bearing on the subject of enquiry, because in the commerce thus created Jews of Alexandria cannot have failed to participate. It was just at this time also that the ruler of Pataliputra became hospitable to the influence of Buddhism, which had meanwhile found its great Apostle in Asoka and developed an intense missionary propaganda. Notwithstanding all this the author thinks that at this juncture there is no sufficient ground to assume the entrance of Buddhistic legend or doctrine into the West, because Asoka's interest was centered upon the propagation of the practical rules of Buddhistic piety, and even in this latter respect his missionary efforts are claimed to have made no impression. More value is attached to the campaigns of Antiochus the Great, who also, it will be remembered, had considerable dealings with the Jews in the Western part of his dominions. Of the greatest importance, however, were the (re-) discovery of the Southwest Monsoon, shortly before the opening of the Christian era and the acquisition of Egypt by the Romans, both of which gave a new vigorous life to the trade between the West and India, and assured the extensive participation of Jews in this commercial movement. But as this trade lay almost entirely in the hands of the westerners the author draws the conclusion that in whatever movement of religious ideas took place India was the receptive party. While not denying the possibility of the opposite he is only inclined to assume during this period the migration of Christian stories to Southern India. He also gives credence to the ancient accounts of the activity of

“the Apostle Thomas” i.e. some early Christian missionary in Northwestern India. The much later stories about a similar work attributed to Thomas in Southern India he holds to be entirely without historical foundation.

From the above survey it will be seen that in Dr. Faber’s opinion successive historical situations were more favorable for an influence exerted from the West upon the East, from Christianity upon Buddhism, than for the reverse. Still the possibility of the latter is not denied. Whether it is more than a possibility the author proceeds to test by a careful inquiry into ten subjects in regard to which Buddhistic influence upon the New Testament representation has been alleged. These are: (1) the supernatural birth; (2) the prophecy of Simeon regarding the infant Jesus; (3) the visit of the boy Jesus to the temple at the age of twelve; (4) the baptism of Jesus; (5) the temptation; (6) the blessing pronounced by a woman upon the mother of Jesus; (7) the mite of the widow; (8) Peter’s walking on the sea; (9) the Samaritan woman; (10) the eschatological world-conflagration. In close adherence to the first two canons above laid down the author shows that the idea of the supernatural birth is fully explainable from Old Testament representations even as to its very form of expression, and that on the other hand Buddhism does not actually teach a virgin-birth of the Buddha. As to the parallel between Simeon in the temple and the prophecy of Asita concerning the infant Buddha, it is pointed out that the resemblances are superficial and so far outweighed by the difference that all interdependence must be denied, and on both sides the differently oriented stories can be explained each from its own milieu to full satisfaction. The boy Jesus in the temple conversing with the Rabbis is again *toto genere* different from the young Buddha falling into a trance under the rose-apple tree, and the search of his parents for the former bears no particular similarity to the summons of the Buddha’s father to find and fetch his absent son. The slight trace of Buddhistic influence which van den Bergh van Eysinga has discovered in the synoptical narrative of the baptism of Jesus depends on an arbitrary combination of part of the text of Matthew with the well-known fragment of the Gospel according to the Hebrews in which Jesus admits the possibility of ignorance in regard to his own sinlessness. Even if the combination could be allowed it is clear that Matt. 3:15 does not fit into the situation thus created, because it implies the most absolute consciousness of sinlessness. Thus all the parallelism with the story of the carrying of the infant Buddha to the temple and his expression on that occasion of superiority to all the gods, and resolve to conform nevertheless to the custom of the world, disappears. The temptation of the Buddha by Mara is essentially a temptation to abandon the life of asceticism. Insofar it differs fundamentally, from the principle at stake in the temptation of Jesus, and the six external resemblances adduced prove on closer investigation either unreal or valueless for historical comparison. The beatification of the mother of Jesus (Luke 11:27) is compared to a similar blessing reported to have been publicly pronounced on the relations of the Buddha by a rich young woman. There is, however, nothing unusual in this mode of expressing admiration for some extraordinary person, for which other parallels can be easily adduced, nor does the coincidence in the outward concrete circumstances under which it takes place or the way in which in both cases it is received compel us to assume historical dependence of one on the other. The story of the widow’s mite likewise illustrates a widely-spread idea, at the coincident appearance of which in Buddhistic lore no one need wonder. That in both instances two pieces of money figure in the transaction might at first seem to prove interdependence, but this is only apparently so, because the “two mills” (lepta), represent in the Gospel-narrative, not two separate pieces of money, but one quadrans, the smallest piece of coin at that time in circulation. Hence Bengel’s ingenious explanation that the introduction of the number two serves to enhance the completeness of the

sacrifice of the woman, because she could have kept one, no less than the (unfounded) assumption of Plummer that it was not lawful to offer less than two seems to be beside the point. The very fact that the number two is thus naturally explained in the Gospel-situation and finds no explanation in the Buddhistic narrative leads the author to assume in this case an influence from the former upon the latter. The next parallelism concerns Peter's walking upon the sea. It is related of a Buddhist lay-brother that in a trance he began to cross a river walking upon the water, but that in the middle of the stream, when his thoughts were deflected from their trance concentration, he began to sink. Surely, faith as illustrated in the Gospel-account and the trance condition as illustrated in the Buddhistic story are states too dissimilar to allow any connection between the two narratives. The story of the Samaritan woman is found paralleled in the account of the meeting of Ananda, the favorite disciple of the Buddha, with a maiden from the despised caste of the Candala. The maiden on being asked for a drink of water warns Ananda of the defilement he incurs by coming in contact with her. Here again, it will be perceived, there is a very real difference between the motive which in each case underlies the situation, caste-distinction in the one case, national and religious antipathy in the other. Finally the eschatological world-conflagration (2 Pet. 3:10) is rather unlike the fiery destruction of the present world-cycle predicted in the Buddhistic tradition as coming after 100,000 years. The latter rests on the idea of a ceaseless rotation of birth and death to which every world-order is subject. On the other hand the last day with its world-crisis of the Christian eschatology is absolute and incapable of repetition. And the admonition which is appended in each account to the prediction shows equally great difference. On the one side it consists of the demand for holiness and perfection, that the Christian may not perish with the collapsing world but have his part in the world to come; on the other side it is a call to the exercise of the Buddhistic virtues of piety, sympathy, equanimity, reverence, etc., a call which moreover, sustains no perceptible casual relation on Buddhistic premises to the predicted world-catastrophe. Hence at this point again Dr. Faber is led to surmise that a specific Christian idea has strayed into a Buddhistic context.

If we may place reliance on the careful reasoning and the cautious conclusions of this treatise the originality of the Gospel-narrative is in no immediate danger from the hypothesis of Buddhistic provenience.