



**BUDDHA, JESUS
AND MUHAMMAD**

A COMPARATIVE STUDY

PAUL GWYNNE



WILEY Blackwell

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and Muhammad

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Editorial Offices

350 Main Street, Malden, MA 02148-5020, USA
9600 Garsington Road, Oxford, OX4 2DQ, UK
The Atrium, Southern Gate, Chichester, West Sussex, PO19 8SQ, UK

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For Noel, Colin and their families.

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PREFACE

Toward the end of the popular 1971 musical *Jesus Christ Superstar*, there is a song in which Judas interrogates a condemned Jesus about his personal motives and self-understanding. In the second verse Judas asks:

Tell me what you think about your friends at the top.
Now who d'you think besides yourself was the pick of the crop?
Buddha was he where it's at, is he where you are?
Could Muhammad move a mountain or was that just PR?

Lyricist Tim Rice's choice of Buddha and Muhammad as peers of Jesus "at the top" is instructive. In the popular imagination, these three are commonly seen to be the most prominent figures in religious history, and this perception is not without reason or solid grounding. In terms of hard statistics, they stand at the head of three major religious traditions, which together boast approximately 3.5 billion adherents – approximately half of the entire human race today. Moreover, it is not only about sheer numbers but also about extent in space and time. Buddhism, Christianity and Islam have been missionary movements from the very beginning and, consequently, their membership is now spread across the continents and islands of the world. They are truly global religions, having penetrated and changed thousands of local and regional cultures. In addition, the influence of Buddha, Jesus and Muhammad stretches back centuries, indeed millennia, to the times in which they lived. Countless generations of human beings have found their inspiration, shaped their behavior, and oriented their lives according to the words and deeds of these three men. Their powerful and widespread influence cuts across both geography and history. Therefore, it is no coincidence that they are often also included in more general lists (covering all domains of human enterprise and activity) of the most influential persons who have ever lived.

This book is an attempt to look at these three crucial lives, not in splendid isolation, but in a comparative manner. Needless to say, there already exists an enormous volume of biographical studies on Buddha, Jesus and Muhammad, dating from the earliest times to the current day. In the past century alone, hundreds of attempts

have been made to revisit, reexamine and reinterpret their stories, often inspired by fresh discoveries in the fields of archaeology and ancient history or new developments in philosophy and theology. The sheer number of these biographies makes genuinely original contributions more and more difficult. Yet somewhat surprisingly, there have been very few works of an explicitly comparative nature. While the individual stories of Buddha, Jesus and Muhammad have been told and retold innumerable times, on very few occasions have they been told side-by-side. When a comparative study of the founders has been produced, invariably it involves a comparison of Jesus with either Buddha or Muhammad but rarely all three.¹ Some focus on their teachings or spirituality rather than the full life story.² Others are tendentious in nature, intent on demonstrating the superiority of Christianity and its founder over the main rivals.³ Exceptions to the twofold comparison are F.H. Hilliard's 1956 book entitled *The Buddha, the Prophet and the Christ*, and the more recent publication, *Rivers of Paradise*, which featured five key religious figures: Moses, Confucius, Buddha, Jesus and Muhammad.⁴ While Hilliard explicitly acknowledged his Christian bias, the *Rivers of Paradise* project was more objective, involving multiple authors from respective religious traditions. However, it was inherently restricted by its highly specific theme: namely, the extent to which each of the five figures conformed to Max Weber's definition of a "prophet". Such a dearth of literature in this area suggests that there is a serious scholarly gap that needs to be filled.

In order to achieve our aim, we have adopted a threefold approach: phenomenological, comparative and thematic. First, a phenomenological methodology will be used. Although absolute impartiality is an unrealistic ideal in any discipline, nevertheless, it is possible to set aside ideological concerns and to strive for a reasonable level of objectivity. Consequently, this book is not primarily concerned with the veracity or credibility of the claims of each founder or their religious tradition. Nor is it aimed at demonstrating the ascendancy or preeminence of one vis-à-vis the others, as was often the case in earlier forms of comparative religion. In this sense, our study is more interested in observation and description than judgment and proof. While it certainly seeks to compare the three figures in a fruitful manner, it does not seek to compare one of them "favorably" against the others. For this reason, the book may disappoint some Buddhists, Christians and Muslims who are convinced that their religious hero stands indisputably head and shoulders above the other two, and that any comparison should bear this out.

Second, the book will unpack the elements of each story within a comparative framework. In other words, the three lives are set alongside each other and that juxtaposition, by its very nature, casts different shades of light on them. This is the peculiar contribution of the comparative method. It highlights aspects that are easily taken for granted or entirely missed otherwise. It reveals both common elements and truly distinctive features. Thus, as the comparison unveils areas of similarity and difference, it simultaneously places the subject more firmly within its proper context and reinforces its undeniable uniqueness. Hopefully, this comparison will uncover hitherto unsuspected or underestimated links between Buddha, Jesus and Muhammad, but at the same time identify what makes each of them stand alone as an incomparable individual. Thus, it is important to ensure that genuine likenesses and differences are protected. It must navigate its way between the Scylla of artificial

similarity and the Charybdis of utter uniqueness. As a result, this book may disappoint those whose tenet is that all religious founders are essentially the same, as well as those whose tenet is that these three have nothing in common.

Third, in order to facilitate the comparative methodology, the chapters are structured according to a series of 10 common themes. The list of these themes is far from exhaustive, since there are many other possibilities that could have been included. However, in the author's opinion, these 10 themes emerge as the most salient features of the three stories and thus they serve as a useful framework for the comparative aim of the project. The effect is that each story gradually unfolds as in a traditional biography, but this occurs in thematic blocks that cut across the three stories each time, providing an interesting and revealing cross-section. A brief summary of the main similarities and differences concerning the theme in question is then provided at the end of each chapter.

Our exploration begins with a look at the literary sources for the traditional portraits of Buddha, Jesus and Muhammad. This is given greater complexity because they all lived in the ancient past and there is a considerable gap between their death and the emergence of written biographical documents. The second chapter turns to their historical contexts. It briefly describes and compares the geographical, social, political and religious settings in which they lived. Traditions concerning their conception, birth, youth and entry into adulthood are then compared and contrasted in Chapter 3. In the following two chapters, we examine the turning point that marked the commencement of their public religious careers and the essential message that they wished to communicate to their contemporaries. Chapter 6 looks at the miraculous element in their adult life stories, tracing not only the different types of wonder said to have occurred, but also the religious context and theological significance given to these events. Chapter 7 examines the earliest group of followers, comparing their membership, backgrounds and motives as well as the guidelines and lifestyle proposed by the founder for the ordering of community life. A related theme taken up in Chapter 8 is the founder's attitude toward women in general and the various relationships they had with women in particular, including family, friends and followers. Chapter 9 explores the political dimension of their message and actions, comparing their engagement or nonengagement in the political arena as well as the ramifications that followed in each case. The final chapter examines the timing and the manner of their death, as well as the consequences and the theological meanings attached to the event. It concludes with a brief consideration of the way in which each religious tradition has developed its own definitions of the identity and status of the founder.

Most of these themes are common elements in the stories of any important religious figure but not necessarily in the same manner and to the same degree in each case. Some themes will apply in very similar ways across all three figures, thus reinforcing the genuine commonality between them. For example, the preliminary issues of sources and context are equally relevant, as are the themes of message and identity. Yet other themes will be more pertinent for one founder than for others, thus reminding us of the fundamental uniqueness of each. For example, the traditional biographies devote much more time exploring the Buddha's journey to enlightenment, the amazing political career of Muhammad and the premature, violent death

of Jesus. We need to keep an eye out for such spikes on the graph, since they act as important markers of individuality.

As a comparative study of the life stories of the three subjects, one of the first questions to ask is: which story? One on hand, there is no such thing as “the” story of Buddha, Jesus or Muhammad. There are only multiple versions: canonical and noncanonical; classical and modern; sentimentally devotional and hard-nosed historical; ultraconservative and liberal; ecumenical, sectarian and secular. Like all biographies, each version is inevitably shaped and colored by the presuppositions and mindset of the biographer, whether he or she is writing in the first century or the twenty-first century. The effect is most felt in Buddhism due to its lack of a single canon – a point emphatically made by Richard Cohen in the *Rivers of Paradise* project.⁵ On the other hand, there is a widely accepted general outline of the main events and features of each life, and this constitutes the main material for this comparative study. This general outline can be gleaned and collated from the range of contemporary scholarly biographies, which themselves rest on scriptural and traditional sources. For example, despite Cohen’s misgivings, he goes on to consider the story of Siddhattha Gotama within the framework of the Ten Deeds that a Buddha must perform before entering nirvana. Thus, this book may also disappoint those who seek the so-called historical Buddha, Jesus or Muhammad behind the strata of traditional interpretations and embellishments. Such a quest is noble and worthwhile, but it is not our primary purpose. What we are comparing are the widely accepted life stories of the three persons as presented within each faith tradition and filtered through the lens of contemporary scholarship.

It is also necessary to say a brief word about the term “founder”, which is being used as the collective noun to describe and gather together the three subjects. The etymological source of the term is the forging of an object from raw metal as in a foundry. It is usually applied to a person who establishes an organization or institution, especially in the context of business and commerce. Hence, a religious founder is presumed to be the one who intentionally initiates a new form of spiritual organization with its own particular purpose and structure. The danger here is that the term may not accurately describe the relationship between Buddha, Jesus and Muhammad, and the complex religious communities that arose as a result of their lives and teachings. In fact, ascertaining the degree to which each of these men truly “founded” a religion, in the tight sense of the term, is part of the task of this study. However, the term can be used in a looser sense, namely as an acknowledgement of a basic connection between the person in question and the broad religious traditions that followed. It simply refers to the claim that Buddhism, Christianity and Islam all stemmed from a single human life.

A similar note should be made about the choice of the term “Buddha” in the title of this work. The proper name of the person in question is Siddhattha Gotama and one could argue that this should be the preferred term if the focus is on the story of the individual himself rather than on theological designations. After all, “the Buddha” is a word meaning “Enlightened One”, a title that tells us something about the religious status and identity of Siddhattha Gotama, just as “the Christ” and “the Prophet” are titles that tell us something about the religious status and identity of Jesus of Nazareth and Muhammad ibn ‘Abdullah, respectively. However, as borne

out by Tim Rice's lyrics above, "Buddha" has become the preferred means by which this particular person is denoted in the popular forum. Hence, the choice is a totally practical one, and for this work, we will use "Siddhattha" for the period of his life prior to his Enlightenment and "the Buddha" thereafter.

The earlier discussion raises a final issue concerning the anticipated readers of this book. As noted earlier, this is not an attempt to investigate further the historical Buddha, Jesus or Muhammad. Rather it is a comparative exercise aimed at tracing the spectrum of similarities and differences between the three most important religious figures in human history. Consequently, the author hopes that it will be germane to those engaged in formal or informal interfaith dialogue. In an era of globalization, it is perhaps more imperative than ever to build bridges of mutual understanding and respect between the great religious traditions, which have been all too frequently divided by prejudice, suspicion and ignorance. Similarly, this study should prove useful for students in religious studies courses, especially those with a strong comparative dimension. Finally, the book has also been written for the educated lay person who is interested in discovering a little more about these three exceptional persons and the ways in which their individual life stories both intersect and diverge.

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Notes

- 1 See F.E. Peters (2011) *Jesus & Muhammad. Parallel Tracks. Parallel Lives*; William E. Phipps (1999) *Muhammad and Jesus: A Comparison of the Prophets and Their Teachings*; Richard Henry Drummond (1995) *A Broader Vision: Perspectives on the Buddha and the Christ*.
- 2 See Roy Amore (1978) *Two Masters, One Message*; Denise & John Carmody (1996) *In the Path of the Masters: Understanding the Spirituality of Buddha, Confucius, Jesus, and Muhammad*; Joey Green ed. (2002) *Jesus and Muhammad: The Parallel Sayings*; Marcus Borg & Jack Kornfield (2004) *Jesus and Buddha. The Parallel Sayings*.
- 3 See Mark Gabriel (2004) *Jesus and Muhammad: Profound Differences and Surprising Similarities*.
- 4 F.H. Hilliard (1956) *The Buddha, the Prophet and the Christ*; David Freedman & Michael McClymond eds. (2000) *The Rivers of Paradise: Moses, Buddha, Confucius, Jesus, and Muhammad as Religious Founders*.
- 5 Cohen 126.

NOTES

The following versions of scriptural texts have been used with permission:

Tipitaka. The Pali Canon. Access to Insight: Readings in Theravada Buddhism, ed. John Bullitt. Available online at <http://www.accesstoinsight.org/tipitaka/index.html>.

The Holy Bible: New Revised Standard Version with Apocrypha. New York: Oxford University Press (1991). Copyright 1989, Division of Christian Education of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the United States of America. Used by permission. All rights reserved. Available online at <http://www.devotions.net/bible/00bible.htm>.

The Holy Koran, translated by Mohammed H. Shakir. New York: Tahrike Tarsile Qur'an Inc., 1983. Available online at <http://quod.lib.umich.edu/k/koran/>.

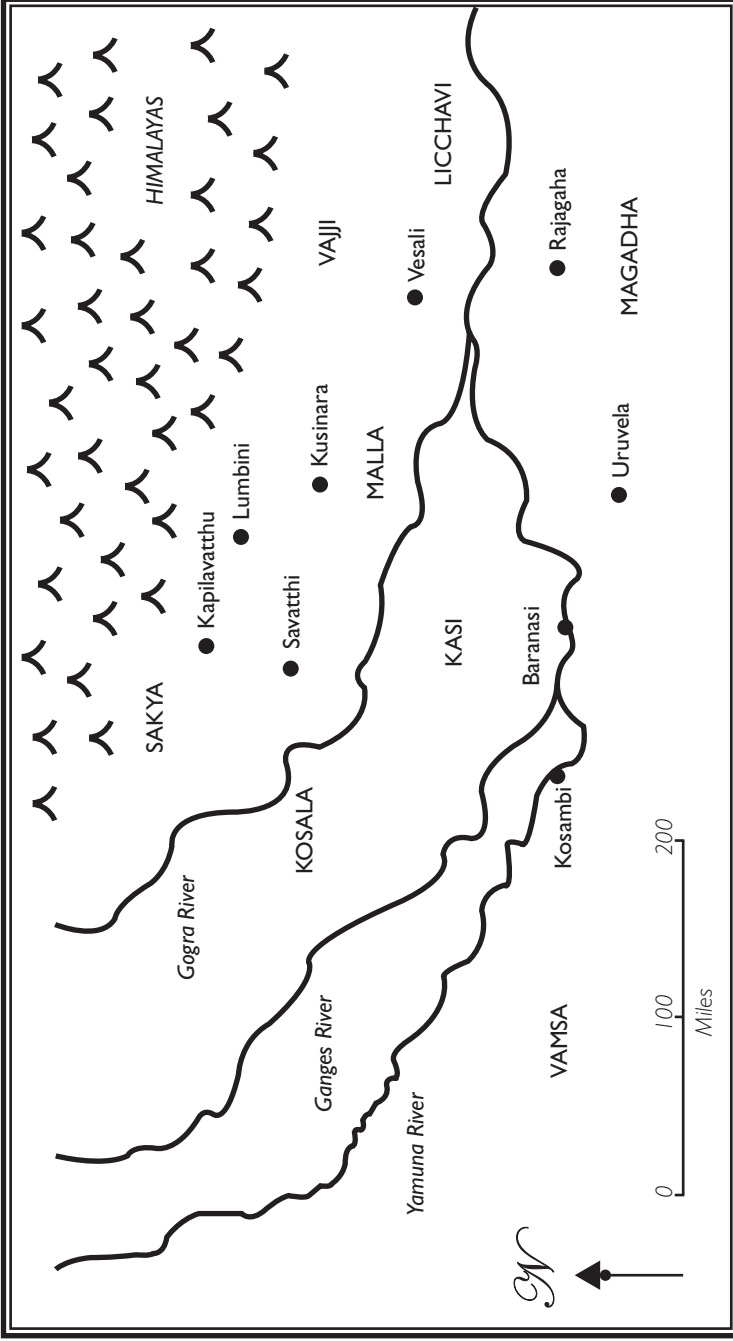
Maps by Sally Host.

Foreign Terms

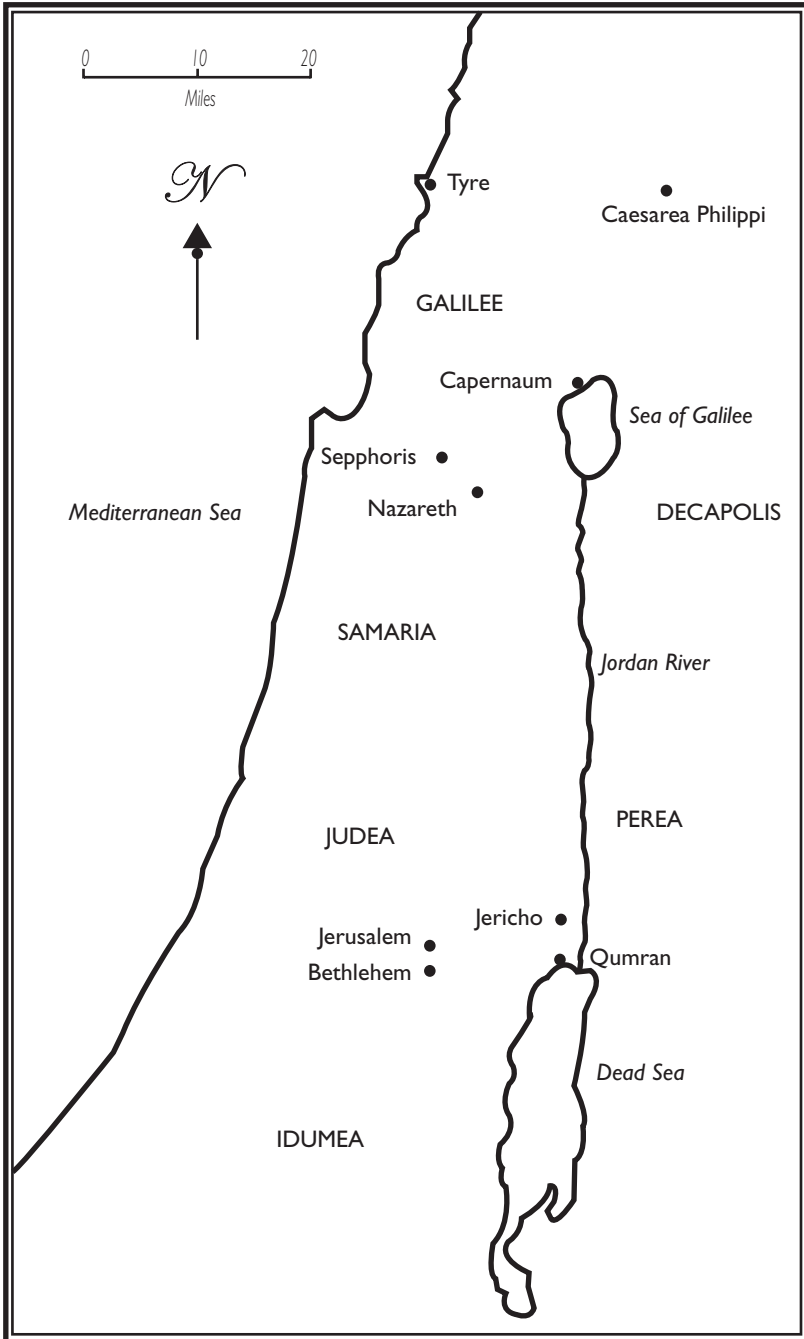
Diacritical marks have been avoided. Rough and smooth breathings have been included for Arabic words.

The anglicized spelling of most transliterated terms has followed *The Oxford Dictionary of World Religions* (2000, edited by John Bowker).

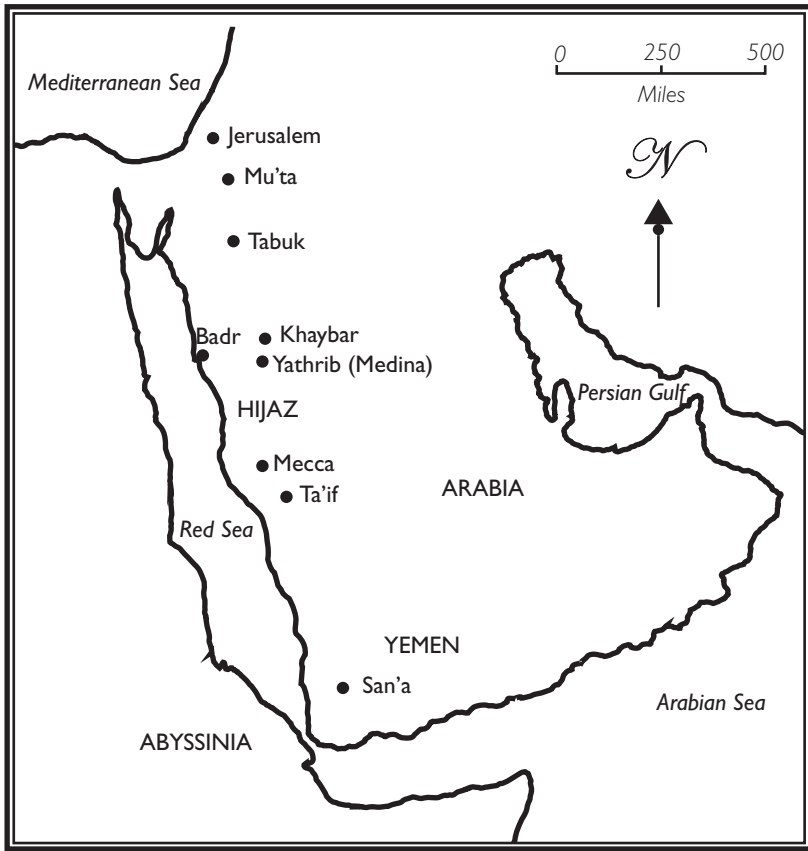
The Pali (rather than Sanskrit) version has been used for most Buddhist terms. See *Buddhist Dictionary of Pali Proper Names* at http://www.palikanon.com/english/pali_names/dic_idx.html.



Map 1 Sixth-century BCE Northern India



Map 2 First-century CE Palestine



Map 3 Seventh-century CE Arabia

Chapter 1

SOURCES

We start our journey with an obvious fact, yet one that is far from trivial. It is simply this: all three founders lived and died long ago. It is approximately two and a half millennia since Siddhattha Gotama wandered the Ganges Plain and 2,000 years since Jesus first taught in Galilee, placing them both firmly in the period of classical antiquity. The most recent of the three, Muhammad, died in 632 CE, which puts him at the cusp of late antiquity and the early Middle Ages. Their lives and their worlds are separated from ours by a vast temporal gulf that renders them figures of ancient rather than modern history. There are many implications that arise from this fact but one of the most relevant is the question of information. A common problem for anyone studying ancient times is the frequent paucity of material, combined with its fragmentary nature and questions about its historical accuracy. Frequently, we just do not have much reliable data to go on, and this is the case for the three founders as well. This raises a series of initial questions. What are the key texts that have generated the standard versions of the lives of the Buddha, Jesus and Muhammad? When were they composed and by whom? To what degree are they consistent with each other? How do contemporary scholars – both inside and outside each religious tradition – assess their reliability and worth?

The Delay in Writing

The Buddha is said to have lived to be 80 years of age, and by the time of his death, his new spiritual movement had been established for over four decades, yet there is virtually no early information about him from nonreligious sources. The traditional story has been constructed almost entirely from Buddhist writings that, understandably, were written from a specifically religious viewpoint. That is not to say that these sources are bereft of historical information but the first point to acknowledge is that, for better or worse, the main sources for the life of the Buddha are texts authored

by persons who were his committed followers and viewed him through the lens of faith.

The second point that should be noted is the date of these texts. Even the earliest of them are separated from the Buddha by several centuries. If the first generations of Buddhists felt a strong compulsion to create a biography of the founder for posterity, then there is no convincing evidence that such a work ever existed.¹ One reason often proffered for the lack of an early written biography is the claim that the story of the Buddha is ultimately irrelevant. It is the message and not the man that matters. In fact, focusing on the man can easily distract one from the message. As the founder of the Lin-Chi tradition once summed up: “If you meet the Buddha, kill the Buddha”.² In time, however, Buddhists began to feel the need to tell the story of the master as well as to pass on his eternal wisdom. It is as if his teaching about ultimate liberation could not be entirely divorced from his experience of seeking liberation. The Buddha’s own arduous quest for escape from the enslaving wheel of rebirth was seen as a powerful demonstration of the truth of his message and a unique example of its practicality. To see the teacher was to see the teaching.³

Although precise dates are elusive, scholars have identified several broad phases in the gradual development of a complete written biography of the Buddha. The first of these is the oral phase. As far as we know, the Buddha and his earliest companions did not actually write anything. There was a culture in which the master’s doctrines were memorized and passed on orally. Accounts of the First Buddhist Council, which occurred soon after the Buddha’s death, reflect the importance of this oral stage. Its main business was to establish an authentic collection of the Buddha’s teachings and monastic guidelines, and it was the excellent memory of two monks that provided the material. The Buddha’s cousin and personal assistant, Ananda, recited the sermons that he had witnessed firsthand, while Upali provided an account of the rules of community life that the Buddha had commended to his followers. For the next four centuries, that twofold collection of discourses and regulations was memorized and handed down from generation to generation within the monasteries of the new religious movement as it slowly expanded across Southern and Eastern Asia.

The second phase is marked by the emergence of written texts, in particular the Pali Canon, which dates back to the reign of the Sri Lankan regent Vattagamini during the first century BCE. Theravada Buddhism recognizes its contents as authoritative and definitive, thus ascribing it canonical status. These are its holiest scriptures. The Pali Canon consists of three subdivisions known as the Three Baskets (Tipitaka). The first of these is the Basket of Discipline (Vinaya Pitaka), which contains the Buddha’s instructions concerning monastic life. It is believed that its many rules and regulations, which provide a comprehensive blueprint for monks and nuns, can be traced back to the contribution of Upali at the First Council. While it is primarily concerned with the ordering of the monastic community, the Vinaya Pitaka also contains snippets from the Buddha’s life. Frequently, a rule or set of rules are preceded by a brief anecdote, which presents the original setting in which he delivered that particular teaching. In a similar fashion, the contents of the second basket, the Basket of Threads (Sutta Pitaka), are believed to be the sermons of the Buddha and other early disciples as recalled by Ananda at the First Council. Typically, each sermon is prefaced by Ananda’s claim: “Thus on one occasion I heard the Buddha say. . .”

Like the first basket, the Sutta Pitaka focuses on doctrine rather than biography, but the sermons recorded here also contain fleeting references to episodes during the founder's life. In addition, it includes the Jataka Tales, which tell of the Buddha's previous reincarnations and his gradual spiritual progress over many lifetimes. The third basket, the Abhidhamma Pitaka (Basket of Higher Learning), is very different from the first two and is considered to be a later work. It consists of a more developed philosophical interpretation of time, mind and matter. As such, it has little or no information concerning the life of the historical Buddha.

As one of the oldest extant writings in Buddhism, the Pali Canon naturally enjoys pride of place among the many texts that provide information regarding the Buddha's story. Although scholars point out that later Chinese and Tibetan translations from older Sanskrit sources contain strands of material that possibly predate the Pali Canon, the Three Baskets remains "the single most useful source" for constructing the life of the Enlightened One.⁴ However, there are still limitations concerning its biographical material. First, Pali was not the native tongue of the Buddha or his contemporaries, although it is a close cousin. Second, although the Canon claims to be the Buddha's own words, the texts often betray a typically Theravadan viewpoint.⁵ Third, despite speculation about the possibility that some of the oral tradition behind the texts can be traced back to an early phase, the fact remains that the written texts are centuries removed from the Buddha. To a great extent, the best that we possess is how the Buddha's disciples viewed him 400 years after his death. Fourth, even if the original material is much older than the texts themselves, the nature of the biographical information is very piecemeal. In this second phase, we may have written texts but we still do not yet have a complete and proper narrative. The bits and pieces of the Buddha's story are there as in a collage, but they primarily serve a didactic purpose, as the preface for a particular teaching or the context of a specific sermon.⁶ There is no overall life story but only episodic fragments embedded in sermons to illustrate some practice.⁷

It is only in the third phase that a more complete picture of the Buddha's life is put into written form. Between the first century BCE and the second century CE, there appeared a number of important biographies, which reworked the fragmentary pieces from the oral and canonical phases into the standard story line. Eventually, Buddhism felt the need for more than just a disparate collection of the master's teachings. It required a new form of literature that traced the life journey of its founder more thoroughly, especially the key milestones along the way. One reason for this shift was the geographical expansion of the new religion across diverse national and cultural borders. The first "lives" of the Buddha were part of the overall missionary outreach, aimed at demonstrating the universal relevance of the man and his message. Another reason was the establishment of pilgrimage sites, each of which was said to be the location of an important episode in his life. The earliest three works that describe those great events in detail are the Mahavastu, the Lalitavistara and the Buddhacarita.

The Mahavastu is a product of the Lokottaravadan community, one of the earliest schools in Buddhism. Extant manuscripts are written in a hybrid form of Sanskrit and its oldest elements may stem from as early as the second century BCE. The Mahavastu is a lengthy collection of sayings and Jataka Tales, organized in a loose

manner around a central biography of the Buddha. The title *Mahavastu* literally means “Great Event” and it refers to the birth of the Buddha in our time and space. The story is organized into three distinct stages. The first stage begins with his previous life as a bodhisattva in the age of Buddha Dipankara eons ago. The second stage begins with his penultimate reincarnation in Tusita Heaven where he meticulously plans the time, place and circumstances of his final rebirth. This section goes on to recount stories between his infancy and his Enlightenment. The third stage outlines his first seven weeks as the Buddha, the conversions of the earliest disciples and the successful visit to his hometown. Much of the material in this last section closely corresponds to the fragmentary versions found in the Pali Canon.

With the *Mahavastu*, Buddhism finally had a written text that focussed on the story of the founder, at least up to the institution of the monastic order. Yet invaluable as it is, the *Mahavastu* is not without its limitations. The work appears to lack a clear organizational structure, as if it was randomly thrown together. Furthermore, it unashamedly depicts the Buddha as a superhuman figure. He is conceived without intercourse, born painlessly and has minimal need of sleep, food or medicine. It is as if the Buddha lived on another plane of existence, scarcely affected by the suffering inherent in mundane human life. Such unabashed predilection for the miraculous naturally raises issues of plausibility in the mind of the modern reader.

A similar tendency is evident in the *Lalitavistara*, which consists of 27 chapters of composite literary styles. It contains a relatively continuous narrative in classical Sanskrit prose accompanied by numerous sections of verse in a more vernacular form of mixed Sanskrit. The original text was probably composed in an early Sarvastivadin environment but it has subsequently been overlaid and recast with Mahayanan material. It enjoys canonical status in the Mahayana tradition and has been widely influential across the centuries.⁸ The composite nature of the work makes an estimation of its age difficult, but most contemporary scholars opt for the first century CE. The title literally means “an account of the sport (of the Buddha)”. In other words, the final reincarnation of the Buddha is understood as the play (*lalita*) of a superior being, similar to the Hindu Puranas. The *Lalitavistara* begins with the splendid descent of the Buddha from Tusita Heaven into our world via his physical conception and birth. It finishes with the Buddha’s first sermon to his five companions at Isipatana. Thus, its scope is very similar to the *Mahavastu* in that both texts terminate at the commencement of the teaching mission. They are more interested in the journey of the main subject from childhood to Buddhahood than the subsequent foundation of the monastic order and the dissemination of the message. The *Lalitavistara* also shares the *Mahavastu*’s tendency to ascribe superhuman qualities to the main character.

The third of the earliest biographies is the *Buddhacarita* (“Acts of the Buddha”) by Ashvaghosha.⁹ Little is known of his personal life but it is thought that Ashvaghosha was a philosopher-poet and religious adviser in the court of Kanishka who reigned over the Kushan Empire from 127 to 151 CE. The original work was composed in Sanskrit and probably consisted of 28 cantos in which the life of the Buddha is described in some detail. Ashvaghosha’s masterpiece is frequently preferred by scholars over the *Mahavastu* and the *Lalitavistara* for several reasons. First, it extends the narrative beyond the Enlightenment and first sermon, referring to a number of key events in the long missionary career of the Buddha, including his death. Second, the

style of the *Buddhacarita* is not only elegant and lyrical, making it one of the finest examples of Buddhist literature, but it is also remarkably free of supernatural elements. In contrast to the authors of the *Mahavastu* and the *Lalitavistara*, Ashvaghosha exercised considerable restraint with regard to mythological embellishment. Third, the *Buddhacarita* displays greater organization of material and seems to be more faithful to the biographical fragments found in the Pali Canon. In time, a host of other biographies in various languages were produced across the full spectrum of Buddhist schools. Each is characterized by its own distinctive style and its own particular concerns. Yet there is a fundamental agreement on the general outline of the story, suggesting that most were derived from the original canonical fragments or the first generation of biographies described above.

Scientific scrutiny of the traditional sources commenced in the nineteenth century and scholars immediately faced a serious methodological difficulty.¹⁰ The central figure of the early biographies is undoubtedly an impressive person, but on many occasions he seems hardly human. The story is so littered with miraculous occurrences that scholars understandably felt compelled to suspect, if not declare outright, that a healthy dose of legendary enhancement has been applied. The interval of several centuries between the Buddha's life and the written texts only served to reinforce the sense that the many unusual occurrences are subsequent additions by the pious authors. If many aspects are indeed later accretions, scholars began to ponder what constituted the original, historical core.

That question gave rise to two distinct approaches. The first, and most radical, approach was the claim that most, if not all, of the material in the traditional sources was mythological. Put simply, the Buddha never really existed, or if he did it was impossible to know anything about him.¹¹ The main proponents of this position were scholars who focused on comparative mythology, such as Rudolf Otto Franke, Emile Senart and Heinrich Kern.¹² In contrast, a second group of scholars was more hopeful that the Buddha had indeed existed and that it was possible to know something about him even though the truth lay hidden beneath many layers of fictional enhancement. The most famous academics in this group were Hermann Oldenberg and Thomas William Rhys Davids. With them the quest for the historical Buddha commenced, mirroring the same contemporary search for the historical Jesus among biblical scholars.¹³ The goal of uncovering the man behind the myth sounded legitimate, but it quickly became apparent that the subjectivity of the scholars themselves had been underestimated. Personal presuppositions and prejudices were not easily put aside and the result was not the expected consensus but a frustrating variety of "historical Buddhas", each reflecting the deeper concerns and values of the historian. For example, the Buddha was variously portrayed as the founder of a rationalistic ethic, the discoverer of a scientific system of meditation, a social reformer who fought against the evils of Hinduism, a pioneer of democracy, a radical egalitarian and even an ideal Victorian gentleman.¹⁴

Today, Buddhist scholarship leans toward the second approach despite its problems. Most accept that the Buddha is not a totally fictional creation, arguing that a real historical person stands at the head of the Buddhist religion, which would be inexplicable otherwise.¹⁵ Moreover, there is a growing confidence that the ancient texts, so replete with mythological elements, also contain genuine first-hand memories

of sixth-century BCE northern India. Yet most admit that the proliferation of miraculous elements in the traditional sources makes it almost impossible to reconstruct a detailed account of the Buddha's life that would satisfy the demands of modern history. To a real extent, the figure of the Buddha remains concealed behind the mists of time. Perhaps nothing underscores the elusiveness of the subject more than the lack of agreement among scholars regarding the dates of his birth and death. While most concur that he lived to be approximately 80 years of age, there are different calculations utilized to determine when those 80 years fall on the timeline. Depending on the timing of the coronation of the emperor Ashoka, some argue that the Buddha's dates are 624–544 BCE, others say 570–490 BCE and a third group proposes 450–370 BCE.¹⁶ Although most scholars now agree that the Buddha is a genuine historical figure, the sources leave us with serious uncertainty about when he lived, not merely in terms of the year or the decade but the century.

Gospel Portraits

In contrast to the vagueness concerning the Buddha's key dates, we are on firmer ground in the case of Jesus, although there is still a lack of accuracy concerning the precise year of his birth and his death. The gospel of Luke claims that Jesus was born during the census of Quirinius, governor of Syria, which occurred in 6 or 7 CE according to the historian Josephus. However, both Matthew and Luke indicate that Jesus was born while Herod the Great was still alive. Given that Herod died in 4 BCE, most scholars ignore the census link and conclude that Jesus was probably born between 6 and 4 BCE. This may sound odd given that the CE (Common Era) numbering is equivalent to the Christian system (Anno Domini) that supposedly begins with the year of Jesus's birth. The explanation for the discrepancy is that Dionysius Exiguus, the sixth-century monk who converted the Roman year numbers to the new Christian version, made a minor miscalculation.

Pinpointing the year of Jesus's death is also somewhat frustrating. Jesus was executed on the orders of Pontius Pilate who was prefect of Judea from 26–36 CE and all agree it was a Friday, the day before the Sabbath. What is not clear is whether that Friday was the preparation day for the Passover (14 Nisan), as stated in John's gospel, or the first day of Passover (15 Nisan) as implied by the Synoptic gospels, which describe the Last Supper on the previous evening as a Passover meal. Scholars usually favor the former, given that activities would have been severely restricted on the first day of a major annual festival. 14 Nisan fell on a Friday in the years 27, 30 and 33 CE. Moreover, Luke states that John the Baptist's ministry began in the "fifteenth year of the reign of the emperor Tiberius",¹⁷ which would have been 28 or 29 CE. If that is true, then we are left with either 30 or 33 CE as the most likely year of Jesus's death and the preference for one or the other depends on the length of his public ministry.¹⁸ In any event, it is clear that we have a much better idea of Jesus's dates than those of the Buddha, but what are the main sources of information about what happened between his birth and his death?

There are a few scant references to Jesus in secular Greco-Roman writing of the period, but these are many decades later, typically brief and primarily concerned with

the fledgling Christian movement rather than Jesus himself. The Jewish historian Josephus mentions Jesus just twice, noting that he attracted large crowds and was crucified by Pilate.¹⁹ The paucity of material in secular sources is echoed in Jewish writing. There are a number of references in the Talmud to a certain Yeshua, but they are all negative in tone, forming part of a later anti-Christian polemic and providing no real biographical information.²⁰

Thus, the search for more detailed sources necessarily shifts to Christian writings, both canonical and noncanonical. In recent times, there has been heightened scholarly interest in early noncanonical Christian literature, particularly the apocryphal gospels, as a potential source for a more complete picture of Jesus. There are over fifty such gospels, which were not considered worthy of inclusion in the New Testament canon for a variety of reasons. Many of these are lost in the sense that we have no extant manuscripts but only indirect references to them in other writings. Others exist only in fragmentary condition. The main problem with these texts is that they date to the second century CE or later, and so are further removed from Jesus's time than the canonical gospels. Moreover, like the Buddhist Mahavastu and Lalitavistara, they abound in blatantly miraculous tales that are presumably the result of the religious imagination.²¹ One apocryphal gospel, the Gospel of Thomas (not to be confused with the Infancy Gospel of Thomas), has caught the eye of scholars. It is ostensibly a product of second century Gnostic Christianity but it contains an earlier stratum of authentic sayings making it a "fifth gospel" of sorts.²² Other Gnostic gospels have been discovered in recent times, including the Nag Hammadi library unearthed in Egypt in 1945, but all of these are late compositions.²³

So the search for the most reliable sources necessarily narrows to the New Testament canon with its 27 books. Twenty-one of these are epistles written to specific groups of Christians, thirteen of which are associated with Paul. One might expect to find here a treasure trove of information about Jesus, but in fact the opposite is the case. Although Jesus occupies a central role in the message of the epistles, the overwhelming focus, especially in Paul, is on his death and resurrection. Even then, Paul is more interested in the theological meaning of those events rather than providing an in-depth description of what occurred. Somewhat surprisingly, Paul shows minimal interest in the period prior to Jesus's death. There is virtually no information in the Pauline corpus concerning the key events of Jesus's public ministry or his teachings, let alone his birth and childhood. If we relied solely on Paul as a source, we would know hardly anything about Jesus. For all of these reasons, most scholars admit that the most substantive biographical sources for Jesus are the canonical gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. John Meier concludes: "We are left alone – some would say forlorn – with the Four Gospels, plus scattered titbits".²⁴

Although it is traditionally listed in second position among the four, Mark is generally considered to be the earliest of the canonical gospels. It is also the shortest, mainly due to its lack of an infancy narrative and the limited amount of Jesus's teachings. Mark begins his story when Jesus is already an adult and he includes only 13 parables in total, compared with more than 30 each in Matthew and Luke. Despite its brevity, Mark's style is dynamic and vivid, with one incident following the other

at an almost breathless pace. The structure of the gospel is partially geographical in that Jesus commences his public ministry in Galilee, moves southward to Jerusalem, only entering Gentile territory on two occasions. The identity of the evangelists is perplexing since all four gospels are anonymous, their names only being added in the second century CE. In the case of the second gospel, tradition has identified him as the cousin of Barnabas known as John Mark, whose mother hosted Christians in her Jerusalem house and who accompanied Paul and Barnabas on their first missionary journey.²⁵ He is mentioned in several New Testament epistles²⁶ and was identified as Peter's secretary by the second century bishop Papias.²⁷ Many believe that the gospel was written in Rome for a Gentile Christian audience, not familiar with Jewish customs and facing persecution.²⁸ Most scholars have argued that it was probably composed just prior to the destruction of the Temple in 70 CE, although some prefer a date soon after that cataclysmic event. It was an unprecedented literary creation, in which Mark wove together preexisting units (pericopes) that had been transmitted orally within ecclesial settings during the 40 years since Jesus's death.

Readers of the New Testament have long noted the conspicuous similarity between the first three gospels. Matthew, Mark and Luke are so alike in content and order of events, that they are aptly described as the "Synoptic gospels". The general consensus of experts is that Matthew and Luke both borrowed extensively from Mark to create their own similar but distinctive versions of the Jesus story.²⁹ However, there is another interesting feature of Matthew and Luke that caught the scholarly eye. Not only have they borrowed heavily from Mark, but there is also a remarkable similarity in the material that is not from Mark. This extraordinary coincidence led to the hypothesis that a second common source was used, consisting mainly of Jesus's sayings. It was named "Q", from the German word *Quelle* (source), but no copy has ever been discovered.

Matthew and Luke are very different gospels, despite their common dependence on Mark and hypothetical Q. Each contains unique material from their own independent third sources. For example, both commence their gospels with a narrative about Jesus's conception and birth but, despite a common kernel, there are profound differences between the two versions. Only Matthew mentions Joseph's dream, Herod's jealousy, the magi and the escape into Egypt. Only Luke mentions the parallel with John the Baptist, Gabriel's appearance to Mary, her visit to Elizabeth, the angels' appearance to the shepherds and the presentation rite in the Temple. Yet it is not only the sources and contents of Matthew and Luke that ground their distinctiveness. The two evangelists also acted as final editors who selected, arranged and adapted Mark and Q for their own special purposes.

Matthew has always enjoyed first place in the order of gospels, reflecting not only the esteem with which it was held in the early Church but also the traditional belief that it was the first to be written and that the author was one of the Twelve. Modern scholarship has cast doubts on these presumptions, especially given that the gospel is written in Greek and not Aramaic. If Mark was composed just before or after the destruction of the Temple in 70 CE, then many scholars date Matthew to the following decade or two, around 75–90 CE. Indeed, its version of Jesus's prediction of the fall of the Temple contains details hinting that the event had already occurred when Matthew was writing.³⁰ There are a number of features of Matthew's gospel that indicate that his main audience were Jewish converts to Christianity. The gospel opens

with a genealogy of Jesus that begins with Abraham and passes through the royal Davidic line; it cites the Hebrew Scriptures twice as frequently as Mark or Luke; it is divided into seven sections (a highly symbolic number in Judaism); and the middle five sections, each a combination of Jesus's deeds and teachings, mirror the five books of the Torah. Many scholars speculate that the gospel was composed in Antioch with its mixed community of Jewish and Gentile Christians.

If Matthew was primarily concerned with Christians of Jewish background, conversely, Luke wrote for a very different demographic. The third gospel is the largest book in the New Testament but, more importantly, it combines with the Acts of the Apostles to form an impressive two volume work by the same author. Both volumes are addressed to "most excellent Theophilus", which may refer to a Christian convert in public office. Indeed, a key theme of Luke-Acts is to demonstrate that Christianity is a legitimate religion in the Roman Empire. Luke is particularly interested in the expansion of Christianity beyond Israel and into all corners of the pagan world, including the capital, Rome. Luke's universalist thrust, combined with his lack of interest in Jewish themes and his limited knowledge of Palestinian geography and culture, has led scholars to conclude that the evangelist was writing for a predominantly non-Jewish (Gentile) audience. As to his identity, the author reveals at the very outset that he is not an eye-witness to the events of Jesus's life but rather that he received instruction from those who were.³¹ Tradition has identified him as Luke, the doctor and companion of Paul mentioned in the letter to the Colossians.³² Modern scholarship notes that the author possessed considerable literary talent given the superior quality of the Greek language used. The gospel is usually dated to about the same period as Matthew, namely 75-90 CE.

The fourth canonical gospel stands apart from the three Synoptics for a number of reasons. Although it relates the story of Jesus as they do, it is clear that John's perspective is a very different one. For one thing, the order of events in John does not correspond exactly with the Synoptic version.³³ Moreover, John describes only seven miracles ("signs"), using them as the basis for an extensive discourse by Jesus each time.³⁴ In these lengthy sermons, Jesus speaks more about himself than the Kingdom of God, which is the key theme in the Synoptic tradition. Consequently, Jesus's divine identity is more apparent in John; in fact, it is stated outright in the gospel's prologue, which functions like the overture to a grand symphony. Unlike Mark who starts his gospel with the adult Jesus, and unlike Matthew and Luke who commence the story with Jesus's conception and birth, John takes us back to the moment of creation itself. Jesus is identified as the unique incarnation of the divine Word (Logos) in time and space, neatly summed up in the classical verse: "And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us".³⁵

Consequently, the fourth gospel is usually dated toward the end of the first century CE, although its original contents are based on the testimony of an eye-witness.³⁶ As with the Synoptic gospels, the author is not named, but the gospel indicates that the authority behind it is the "disciple that Jesus loved" – a member of the inner circle who leaned on Jesus's breast at the Last Supper. Second-century church fathers identified him as John, the son of Zebedee and brother of James, although this claim is debated among scholars today.³⁷

John's gospel is something of an enigma for scholars in search of the earliest reliable sources for Jesus. On one hand, it is a later composition that has reworked the