



BUDDHA, JESUS AND MUHAMMAD

A COMPARATIVE STUDY

PAUL GWYNNE



WILEY Blackwell

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For Noel, Colin and their families.

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.

I would like to express my profound gratitude to those academic colleagues who kindly reviewed the draft chapters: John D'Arcy May (Trinity College Dublin), Mehmet Ozalp (Charles Sturt University), Douglas Pratt (University of Waikato), Gerard Hall (Australian Catholic University) and Riaz Hassan (Flinders University). I am also indebted to the staff of Wiley Blackwell - Karen Raith, Rebecca Harkin, Georgina Coleby, Ruth Swan and Rhea Padilla - for their invaluable assistance throughout the publishing process. Finally, I would like to thank my wife, Kim Host, for her constant support throughout this project, including proofreading the manuscript.

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.

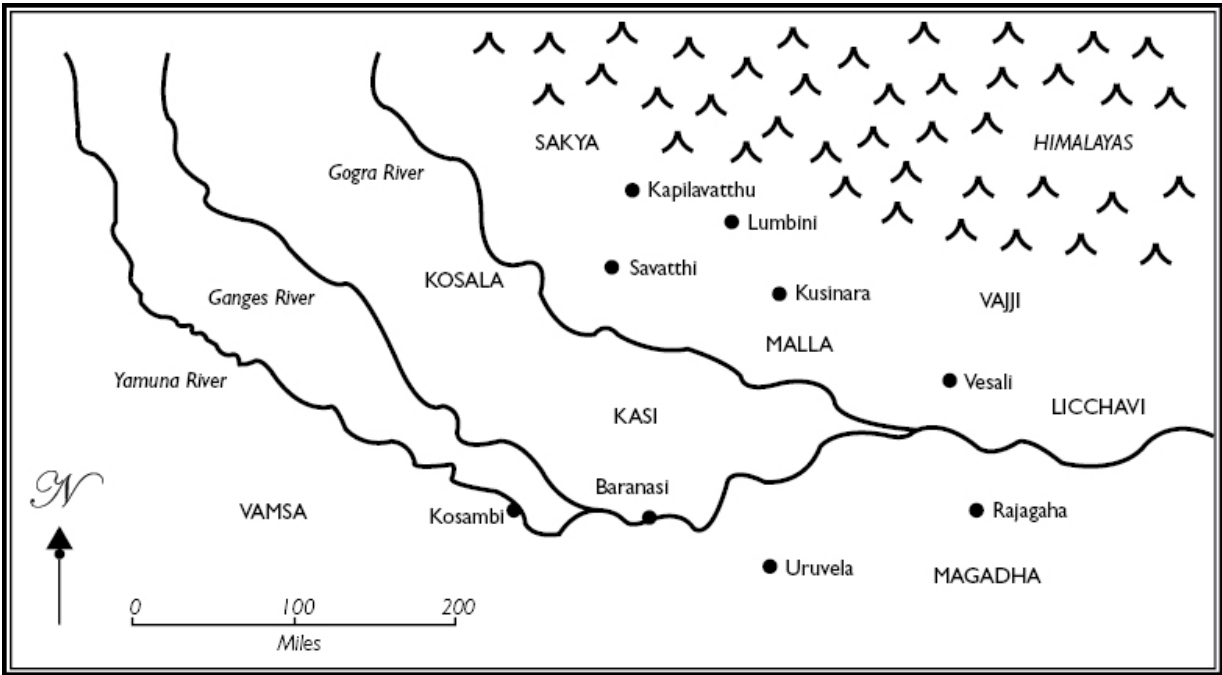
Foreign Terms

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

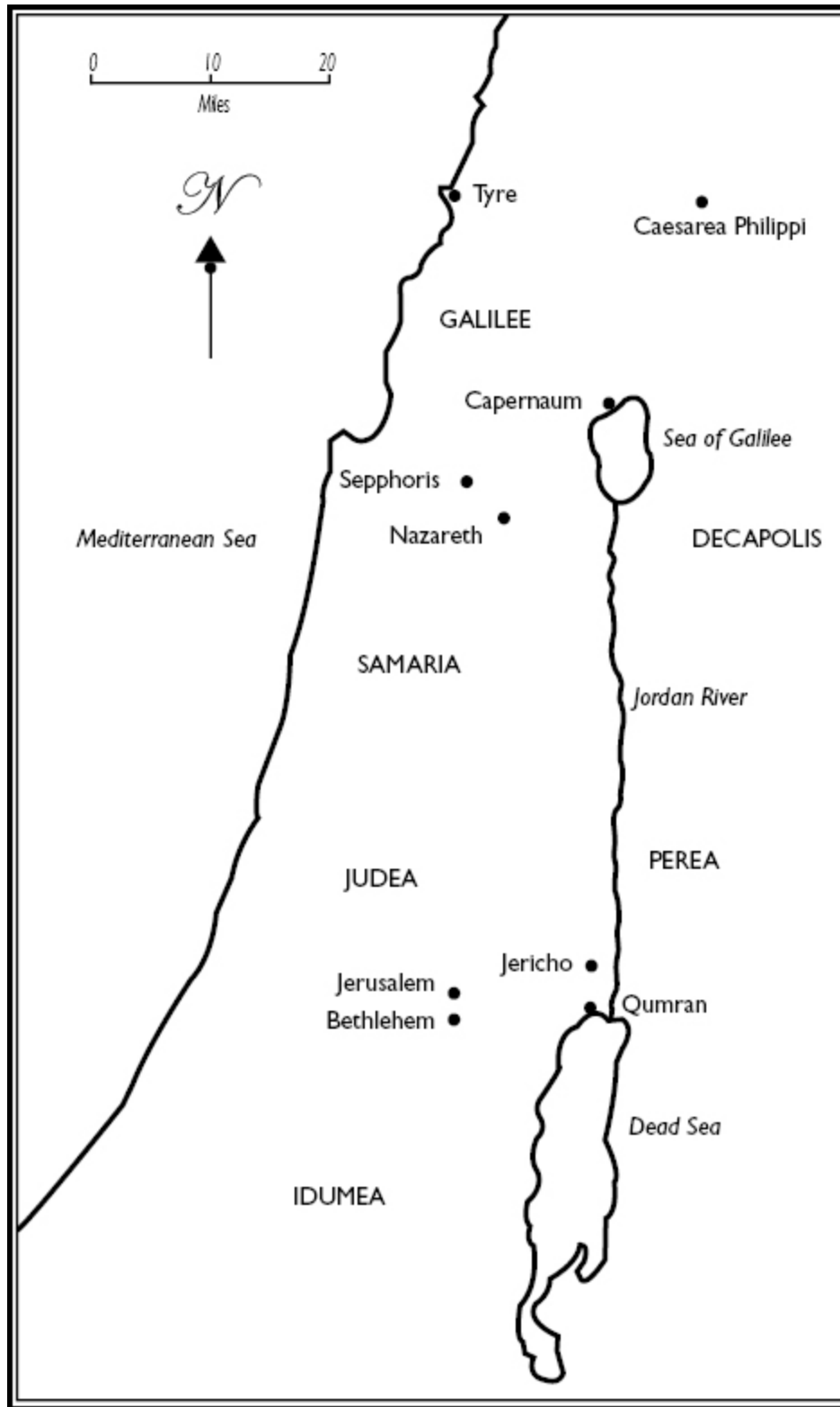
The anglicized spelling of most transliterated terms has followed *The Oxford Dictionary of World Religions* (2000, edited by John Bowker).

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.

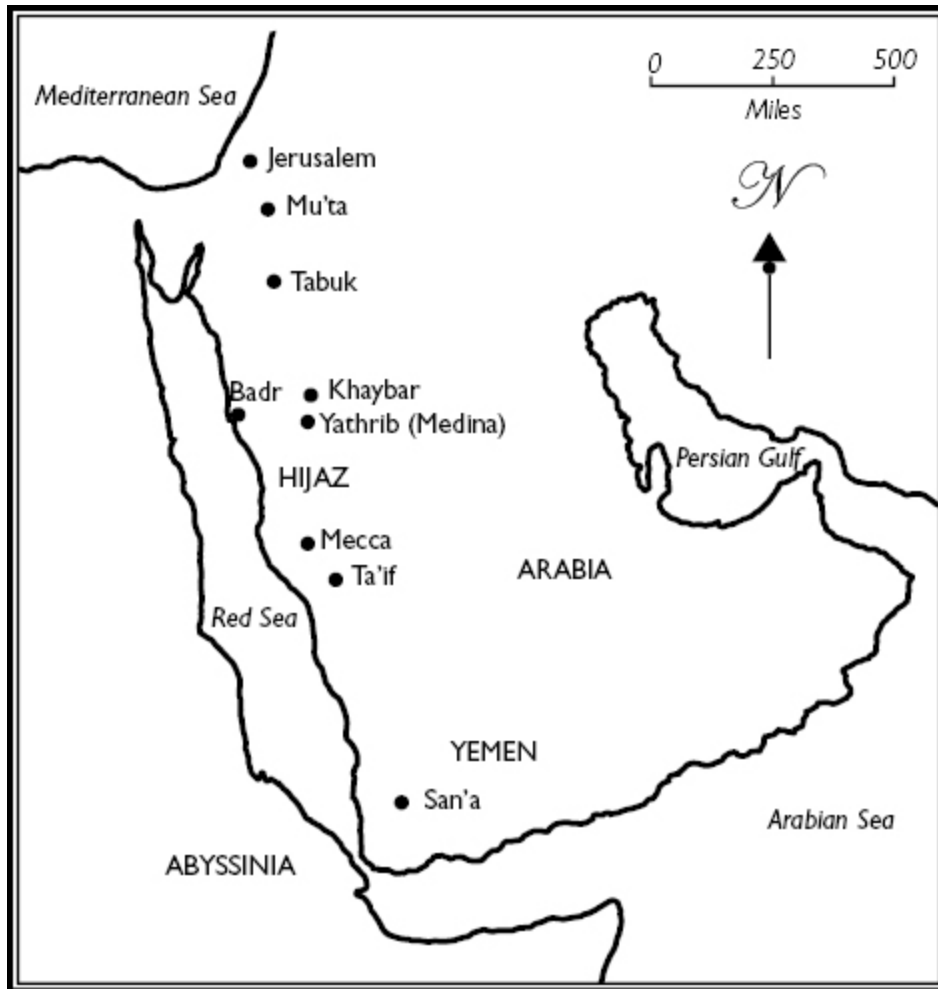
Map 1 Sixth-century BCE Northern India



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. Theirs 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,