

The Temptation of Buddha/Christ and the Fourth Gospel*

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This essay is a short response to Professor Michael Lockwood, the brilliant author of *Buddhism's Relation to Christianity* (Chennai, 2010), who wonders that the *Gospel of John* “makes no mention of the temptation of Jesus by the devil” at all (p. 37), and to Professor Christian Lindtner, who always challenges us all to rethink our received ideas about the New Testament in the light of the pre-Christian Buddhist literary tradition and who has made the intriguing statement that Jesus was a Sanskrit scholar. Agreeably so; however, I would go further and suggest that the author of the Fourth Gospel was a scholar well-versed in the teachings of Mahāyāna Buddhism. While this essay may appear to be subversive, it is not. It is simply an attempt to redefine the origins and continuity of the literary traditions of the followers of Jesus as they encountered the literary and cultural contexts in which the early Christian traditions had taken shape.

I owe the original inspiration for this essay to the seminal ideas hinted at briefly by an original thinker, J. Edgar Bruns, a Catholic priest-theologian, who concludes his path-breaking short study, published in 1971, on the presence of Buddhist ideas in the *Gospel of John* as follows:

¶The interpretation of Johannine Christology and theology here given may be said to emerge from the Johannine writings themselves [the Fourth Gospel and *First John*], but the cogency of the interpretation rests heavily on the similarity of what is presented as John's thought-structure to that of certain Mahayana Buddhist teachings with which, we may justifiably surmise, John was familiar. It is unlikely that a first-century Christian would have constructed a theology so radically different from both Judaic and Hellenistic models unless he drew his inspiration from another cultural milieu. . . .

¶The fact that the Johannine writings were eventually accepted into the canon means that they were not really understood. . . . Perhaps the supposed apostolic authority of John was operative in his case. . . .¹

In our own day, of course, we have been exposed to Leslie Dewart's profound analysis of the Christian concept of God and to his conclusion that God, indeed, is not a being, a conclusion which he finds in no way incompatible with the mysteries of our faith.²

But further questions remain. If John's allegedly Buddhist theology, Christology, and eschatology do not exceed the bounds of “orthodoxy,” what meaning, in such a system, could other defined doctrines have?³

This essay suggests that the entire Fourth Gospel has but one dominant theme: Jesus' (Buddha's) contest and final victory over killer Satan (Māra, the God of Death), which concept unmistakably underlies traditional theories of Christian soteriology or the doctrine of atonement.

Contest Between God and the Devil: Biblical Idea of Atonement

We must view the temptation motif found in the Synoptic Gospels in the wider context of the doctrine of atonement, the central biblical teaching that Jesus redeemed mankind from the captivity of and control by Satan. Let me explain.

*This is a revised version (2015) of an essay entitled “The Temptation of Buddha and the Fourth Gospel: Some Observations”, published earlier on Christian Lindtner's Blog: < jesusisbuddha.com >.

The classical and biblical doctrine of redemption / atonement, which was generally accepted for nearly a thousand years,⁴ presents redemption as contest and victory; that is, Christ fought against the Devil and triumphed over him and his minions who had held mankind in bondage since the time of Adam.⁵ According to St. Paul, the chief adversaries of humankind in this redemptive warfare waged by Christ are the Devil and the Powers of Darkness:

Put God's armor on so as to be able to resist the Devil's tactics. For it is not against human enemies that we have to struggle, but against the Sovereignities and the Powers who originate darkness in this world, the spiritual army of evil in the heavens. (*Ephesians 6:10-12*)

First Peter 5:8 admonishes: "Be sober, be vigilant, because your adversary the Devil, as a roaring lion, walks about, seeking whom he may devour."

It's natural then that salvation be expressed in terms of a transference "from the dominion of Satan to God" (*Acts 26:18*); "He has taken us out of the power of darkness and created a place for us in the Kingdom of the Son that he loves, and in him we gain our freedom, the forgiveness of our sins" (*Colossians 1:13-14*); "He has overridden the Law and canceled every record of the debt that we had to pay . . . and so he got rid of the Sovereignities and the Powers, and paraded them in public, behind him in his triumphal procession" (*Col. 2:14-15*).

My contention is that this Pauline or New Testament soteriological theory of the contest between God and Satan permeates the theological insights also of the Fourth Gospel even though it does not retell the Synoptic story of the Temptation of Jesus literally.

Let us look first at the fascinating Christian story of the Temptation of Jesus found in the Gospels attributed to Matthew (*4:1-11*), Mark (*1: 12-13*), and Luke (*4:1-13*) vis-à-vis its Buddhist counter-stories, and then John's take on it.⁶

Temptation Stories: The Christian

According to Matthew and Luke, Jesus, after having fasted for forty days [and after having been enlightened, like the Buddha], is overcome by hunger while in the wilderness; the Devil tempts him and demands that Jesus turn stones into bread, throw himself down from a Temple pinnacle, and worship him (the Devil) in order to become the master of the world; Jesus rebukes the devil, who "departs from him for a while."

This last sentence, "[The Evil One] departs from him for a while", takes on great significance in all the four Gospels, especially in the Fourth Gospel, with the arrest of Jesus, as I shall show below in the course of this essay.

One notable difference is that, whereas the baptism of Jesus and the epiphany with the descent of the Holy Spirit take place in the Jordan before the temptation episode, in the Buddhist tradition the baptism (bathing) of the Buddha in the river Nirañjanā with the vision of Sujātā takes place after Buddha's fast.⁷ Here is the Christian version of the temptation of Jesus according to the *Gospel of Matthew*, in the King James translation:

Then was Jesus led up of the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted of the devil. And when he had fasted forty days and forty nights, he was afterward ahungred. And when the tempter came to him, he said, If thou be the Son of God, command that these stones be made bread. But he answered and said, It is written, Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceedeth out of the mouth of God. Then the

Devil taketh him up into the holy city, and setteth him on a pinnacle of the temple, and saith unto him, If thou be the Son of God, cast thyself down: for it is written, He shall give his angels charge concerning thee: and in their hands they shall bear thee up, lest at any time thou dash thy foot against a stone. Jesus said unto him, It is written again, Thou shalt not tempt the Lord thy God. Again, the Devil taketh him up into an exceeding high mountain, and sheweth him all the kingdoms of the world, and the glory of them; and saith unto him, All these things will I give thee, if thou wilt fall down and worship me. Then saith Jesus unto him, Get thee hence, Satan: for it is written, Thou shalt worship the Lord thy God, and him only shalt thou serve. Then the Devil leaveth him, and, behold, angels came and ministered unto him. (4:1-11)

What is notable here is that several pre-Christian Buddhist tales also contain more or less the same temptation story.⁸

Temptation Stories: The Buddhist

Though in the Buddhist tradition Māra appears in different guises or with different interpretations, in the temptation stories he appears as a demon or as the embodiment of the power of evil who tries to seduce Buddha with the vision of beautiful women. The word *māra* comes from the root *mṛ*, which means ‘die’; that is, Māra, the demon is associated with death as well, just as the Devil is in the writings of John: “He [the Devil] was a murderer from the beginning. . . . He is a liar and the father of lies” (*John 8:44-45*).

The Buddhist texts in general include the following: Buddha’s temptation in solitude, the Devil in person with the name of Māra, fast and hunger, rejection of the request for the miracle of transformation of the Himālaya mountain into gold (with an indirect reference of turning stone into meat in the *Padhāna Sutta*⁹), the specific demand of voluntary suicide (entering into *nirvāṇa*), and the generous offer of dominion over kingdoms,¹⁰ and the temptation that Buddha should commit suicide.

To summarize the longish Buddhist passages (especially the first one) of the *Mahā-Parinibbāna-Sutta*: When the Buddha had attained enlightenment under the Bodhi tree (the tree of knowledge)¹¹ and had extinguished all desire within himself, he finally escaped the power of the Evil One. Being well aware of this, the Evil One still cherished the hope of keeping mankind in his fetters, and so he wanted the Enlightened One to abandon his mission of proclaiming the truth he had obtained and to depart from this life. He addressed Buddha: “Now that he has obtained Enlightenment, may the Exalted One enter into *Nirvāṇa*.” Knowing the true intentions of the Evil One, the Buddha declares that he would not put an end to his life until he had assembled enough disciples, monks, nuns, and converts in order to ensure the continuance of his doctrine and virtuous living among mankind.¹² Interestingly, the Buddhist scriptures give elaborate theological explanations of the temptation stories; on the other hand, the Synoptic Gospels seem to present the temptation scenes as a tightly organized short debate with each side quoting Hebrew scriptures to make his point, which is not the case in the Fourth Gospel.

The Fourth Gospel: A Buddhist Sūtra?

The Fourth Gospel, to repeat, is the most Buddhist of all the Gospels, as J. Edgar Bruns would argue;¹³ it is full of ambiguities, ironies, and double meanings, and it has “made use of Mahayana Buddhist concepts.”¹⁴ This Gospel incorporates elements of the

Temptation story in very subtle ways in different places of the narrative. The reason the Fourth Gospel refuses to narrate the temptation as a single episode is that John's Jesus is enlightened or divine from the very beginning of his earthly existence as the bodhisattva in a human body and didn't need to strive, fast or do austerities in order to reach enlightenment or to obtain Buddhahood or apotheosis.¹⁵ I would even claim that the entire Gospel is an elaborate Christianized/Hellenized exposition of the temptation story of Māra and the Buddha or of the battle between the forces of good and evil or of the ongoing confrontation between light and darkness, life and death. The Prologue of the Gospel puts it thus:

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, (*ton theon*) and the word was divine (*theos*). He was in the beginning with God. . . . In him was life, and the life was the light of men. The light shines and the darkness has not overcome it. . . . To all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God. (*John 1:1-12*)

As in the case of Jesus, there is reason to believe that even while the Buddha was alive his disciples considered him as a divine being. He was called *Bhagavat* ("the Lord"), *Jina* ("the Conqueror"), *Tathāgata* ("the One who has come the same way"), *Sugāta* ("Well gone"), *Mahāpurusha* ("the Great person") and so on. Once the Brahmin Droṇa, seeing the Master sitting at the foot of a tree and noticing the mysterious marks on the Buddha's feet, asked him "Are you a god (*deva*)? And the Lord answered: "I am not." Are you a celestial being (*gandharva*)? "I am not." "Are you a spiritual apparition (*yaksha*)? "I am not." "Are you a man?" "I am not." The Buddha spoke to the Brahmin: "O Brahmin, truly I was a god, a celestial being, a spiritual apparition, a man as long as I had not purged myself of fluxes. Brahmin, just as a lotus or water lily born of the water . . . remains unstained by the water, even so, Brahmin, being born of the world . . . I remain unstained by the world. Therefore, Brahmin, consider me as the enlightened one."¹⁶

A comparison of the Buddhist quotation given above with John the Baptist's testimony found in *John* chapter 1, printed below will not only show close accidental resemblance between the two passages but also John's adaptation of the Buddhist text or its variants:

And this is the record of John [B], when the Jews sent priests and Levites from Jerusalem to ask him, Who art thou? And he confessed, and denied not; but confessed, I am not the Christ. And they asked him, What then? Art thou Elijah? And he saith, I am not. Art thou that prophet? And he answered, No. Then said they unto him, Who art thou? that we may give an answer to them that sent us. What sayest thou of thyself? He said, I am the voice of one crying in the wilderness, Make straight the way of the Lord, as said the prophet Isaiah. And they which were sent were of the Pharisees. And they asked him, and said unto him, Why baptizest thou then, if thou be not that Christ, nor Elijah, neither that prophet? John answered them, saying, I baptize with water: but there standeth one among you, whom ye know not; He it is, who coming after me is preferred before me, whose shoe's latchet I am not worthy to unloose. These things were done in Bethabara [Bethany] beyond the Jordan, where John was baptizing. The next day John seeth Jesus coming unto him, and saith, Behold the Lamb of God, which taketh away the sin of the world. This is he of whom I said, After me cometh a man which is preferred before me: for he was before me. And I knew him not: but that he should be made manifest to Israel, therefore am I come baptizing with water.

And John bare record, saying, I saw the Spirit descending from heaven like a dove, and it abode upon him. And I knew him not: but he that sent me to baptize with water, the same said unto me, Upon whom thou shalt see the Spirit descending, and remaining on him, the same is he which baptizeth with the Holy Ghost. And I saw, and bare record that this is the Son of God (1:19-34).

Temptation Stories and the Fourth Gospel

Twelve examples from the Fourth Gospel that reflect the theme of temptation are given below. A more thorough study will unearth more examples and a more profound theology underlying the the Fourth Gospel than has been discovered so far, provided that the scholar delves more deeply into the Buddhist foundations of the Gospel. I am only pointing out the direction for future research.

1. The Fourth Gospel opens with this fundamental theme of the contest between God and the Devil under the metaphors of Light vs. Darkness and Life vs. Death: “In him (the Word) was life, and that life was the light of men. The light dispels darkness, and darkness has not overcome it” (1: 4-5). Thus John introduces Jesus entering the battleground of good and evil, light and darkness, life and death. This scenario in *John* involves not merely passive opposition or just one single encounter but continuous warfare. Just as darkness is constantly battling against light, death is battling against life. In John’s worldview the primal battle is between the forces of God and the forces of the Devil, and the end result is the ultimate triumph of God over the Devil, of good over evil, of light over darkness, and of life over death. John brilliantly illustrates this contest between God and the Devil through the portrayal of Judas, the betrayer, leaving the light and disappearing into darkness, as found in *John*, chapter 13:

Jesus was troubled in spirit and testified, “Very truly I tell you, one of you is going to betray me.” His disciples stared at one another, at a loss to know which of them he meant. One of them, the disciple whom Jesus loved, was reclining next to him. Simon Peter motioned to this disciple and said, “Ask him which one he means.” Leaning back against Jesus, he asked him, “Lord, who is it?” Jesus answered, “It is the one to whom I will give this piece of bread when I have dipped it in the dish.” Then, dipping the piece of bread, he gave it to Judas, the son of Simon Iscariot. ***As soon as Judas took the bread, Satan entered into him.*** So Jesus told him, “What you are about to do, do quickly.” But no one at the meal understood why Jesus said this to him. Since Judas had charge of the money, some thought Jesus was telling him to buy what was needed for the festival, or to give something to the poor. As soon as Judas had taken the bread, he went out. ***And it was night.*** (21-30; emphasis added)

2. John introduces the figure of Māra, who attacks the Buddha with an army, in the persona of Judas, in whom the devil enters after he has received the sop from Jesus (13:21-30): “Satan entered into him” (13:27);¹⁷ like Māra, Judas leads a band of men and officers – as in the Synoptic narratives –, invades Jesus’ space with weapons, and has Jesus arrested; before Jesus is led away, there is sword-play with Peter cutting off the ear of Malchus (a word play on Māra?) (18: 3-11). Just as Māra’s troops are routed by Buddha, Judas’ posse is also discomfited by Jesus: “As soon as he said, ‘I am he,’ they went backward and fell to the ground” (18:6).^{138]} This Gospel episode very closely resembles the Buddhist

tradition of the attempt by Māra and his army on the life of Buddha. Without additional commentary, let me give a summary:

The *Buddhavaṃsa* Commentary and *Nidānakathā* of the Jātaka commentary, particularly in the Sinhalese versions, unfold a very lively and detailed account of Māra's visit to the Buddha just before his Enlightenment, when he was sitting under the Bodhi tree. Seeing Gotama seated with a firm resolve to become a Buddha, he summoned all his forces to attack Śākyamuni. The forces extended twelve leagues in front and back; and nine leagues on right and left. Māra himself with a thousand arms, riding on his elephant Girimekhala, attacked Gotama. His followers armed with deadly weapons and assuming various frightening forms joined him in his attack. The Devas, Nāgas, and others who had gathered round Gotama to pay him homage and sing his praises then fled at the sight of the frightening army of Māra. The Bodhisatta then called the ten *paramis*, which he had perfected in various births, for his defense. Each of the ten divisions of Māra's army was then defeated and routed by one *parami*. Eventually, Māra's army had to flee. Vanquished, Māra then hurled his last weapon – the *chakkavudha* (discus), which stood over the Bodhisatta's head like a canopy of flowers. Still Māra tried to dissuade Gotama from the path of the Buddhahood by falsely claiming the Gotama's seat as his own; and by asking him to prove his right to the seat on which he was sitting. All of Māra's followers then supported Māra's claim by shouting that the seat actually belonged to Māra. As the Bodhisatta had no other witness to bear testimony on his behalf, he asked the Earth to speak for him by touching the ground with his middle finger. The Earth then roared in response and bore the testimony for the Bodhisatta by thundering, "I stand his witness". Thus, Māra's defeat was final; and he and his followers had to flee. The Devas and other celestial beings then besieged him and celebrated his victory.¹⁸

Here I would like to point out that John, in fact, uses the image of Jesus writing on the ground with his finger in the episode of the "Woman Caught in Adultery".

And early in the morning he came again into the temple, and all the people came unto him; and he sat down, and taught them. And the scribes and Pharisees brought unto him a woman taken in adultery; and when they had set her in the midst, They say unto him, Master, this woman was taken in adultery, in the very act. Now Moses in the law commanded us, that such should be stoned: but what sayest thou? This they said, tempting him that they might have to accuse him. But Jesus stooped down, and with his finger wrote on the ground, *as though he heard them not*. So when they continued asking him, he lifted up himself, and said unto them, He that is without sin among you, let him first cast a stone at her. And again he stooped down, and wrote on the ground. And they which heard it, being convicted by *their own* conscience, went out one by one, beginning at the eldest, *even* unto the last: and Jesus was left alone, and the woman standing in the midst. (*John 8:2-9*)

Indeed, the more closely we look at the artifices of John, the more we marvel at his inventiveness.

3. Jesus refers to the Evil One, the enemy that hated him as the “world”, on other occasions, especially in chp. 17, where the world is closely associated with the Evil One:

I have given them thy word; and the world has hated them because they are not of the world, even as I am not of the world. I do not pray that thou shouldst take them out of the world, but that thou shouldst keep them from the evil one. They are not of the world, even as I am not of the world. (*John 17:14-17*)

More often the Jewish establishment stands for the Evil One that tries to do away with him. Throughout the Fourth Gospel Jesus is seen in a constant struggle against the so-called “Jews” who are simply a personification of the primal enemy, Satan or the Buddhist Māra. So the polemic of the Fourth Gospel is simply against those “Jews” who refuse to accept Jesus (as opposed to those like the disciples who receive him); the author of the Gospel seems to equate his Jewish enemies with Māra or the Evil One, who refused to recognize the Buddhahood of Siddhārtha Gautama.¹⁹

4. Jesus’ enemies’ hint that Jesus may commit suicide and to Jesus’ response that he is immortal/divine and hence cannot die or be killed are given in the following verses:

Then Jesus said to them: “I go my way, and you shall seek me and shall die in your sins; whither I go, you cannot come.” Then said the Jews, “Will he kill himself, because he says, whither I go you cannot come?” And he said to them “You are from beneath; I am from above; you are of this world; I am not of this world. . . . For, if you do not believe that I am he, you shall die in your sins. . . . Before Abraham was, I am.” Then they took up stones to cast at him, but Jesus hid himself and went out of the temple, going through their midst. (*8:21-58*)

Like the Buddha in the temptation stories, Jesus refuses to seek nirvāṇa or commit suicide before his appointed time or before he has finished preaching his gospel to humankind.

5. The Samaritan woman in the Fourth Gospel (*4:1-30*) seems to embody features of the three allegorical daughters of Māra – *Taṇhā* (‘thirst’, with obvious implications of desire for earthly satisfactions even as in “I Thirst” – words uttered by Jesus from the cross), *Aratī* (‘greed’, excessive desire for food, sexual promiscuity or boredom at least in the sense that she was bored with five husbands and/or all the prideful riches that came with the men), and *Rāgā* (‘lust/beauty’) – Isn’t the aspect of the temptation involved in physical beauty that John is referring to in the episode of anointing at Bethany, where Mary took a pint of pure nard, an expensive perfume, which she poured on Jesus’ feet and wiped his feet with her hair? (*John 12:1-3*). Māra’s three daughters fail to entice the Buddha.²⁰ Perhaps John is referring to these Buddhist allegories in the following verse: “All that is in the world – the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life – is not of the Father but of the world [Māra]” (*1 John 2:16*). John also calls the mortal Enemy “Antichrist” (*1 John 2:18-22*). I believe John is most likely also referring to Māra, the God of Death (see Jesus’ reference to his “burial” in the sentence) and the father of Rāgā (‘beauty’) in the anointing episode: “Leave her alone,” Jesus replied. “It was meant that she should save this perfume for the day of my burial” (*John 12:8*). Further, the Fourth Gospel seems subtly to associate Māra, the god of death – also within the context of Prakṛti’s affections for Ānanda – with Kāmadeva, the God of Love, in this encounter of Jesus with a woman who is in “love” with her men within and outside of marriage.²¹ The sexual connotation of waters of life, referred to in the story of the Samaritan Woman, is unmistakably found in

the Indian/Buddhist context; for instance, compare Jesus' words, "If you knew the gift of God and who it is that asks you for a drink, you would have asked him and he would have given you living water" (*John 4:10*), with a mantra in the *Atharva Veda*, recommended for a woman who wishes to win or compel a man's love: "Love's consuming longing, this passion, this yearning, which the gods have poured, into the waters of life, I kindle for thee (*taṁ te tapāmi*), by the law of Varuṇa."²² I am also of the view that John used Xenophon's interesting description of Socrates' encounter with the glamorous courtesan Diotime as recounted in his *Memorabilia: Recollections of Socrates* (original title in Greek: *Apomnemoneumata*) III, 11.²³ Indeed, amazingly intriguing is the erudition of the author of the Fourth Gospel!

6. John's Jesus does not turn stones into bread or the Himālaya into gold, but he turns water into wine (*John 2:1-13*) in the very mundane context of a wedding feast, apparently manifesting his "divine" powers and evidently inspiring faith in his followers, according to the Evangelist.²⁴

7. It is noteworthy that the *Buddhavaṁsa* commentary and *Nidānakathā* of the *Jātaka* commentary, particularly in the Sinhalese versions, unfold a very lively and detailed account of Māra's visit to the Buddha-to-be just before his Enlightenment when he is sitting under the Bodhi tree. Māra tries to dissuade the future Buddha from the path of Buddhahood by falsely claiming the Buddha's seat as his own; and by asking him to prove his right to the seat on which he is sitting. All the followers of Māra then testify Māra's claim by shouting that the seat actually belongs to Māra. As the Buddha-to-be has no other witness to bear testimony on his behalf he asks the Earth to speak for him by touching the ground with his middle finger. The Earth then roars in response and bears the testimony for the Buddha by thundering, "I stand as his witness". Thus, Māra is defeated: he and his followers flee the scene.

John does not refer literally to the allegory of the seat contest but rather to Jesus' claim to be the 'Son of Man' or Christ, with the presumed right to teach from the chair of Abraham or Moses (on Mount Sinai) (*Exodus 19:16; John 12:29-34*) and refers to a heavenly voice: "Now is my soul troubled. . . . Father, glorify thy name. Then came there a voice from heaven, . . . 'I have both glorified it and will glorify it again'" (*12:27*).²⁵ John also refers to the defeat of the devil in several verses: "Now is the judgment of this world. Now shall the prince of this world shall be cast out" (*12:31*); "For the prince of this world comes and has nothing in me." (*14:30*); "The prince of this world is judged" (*16:11*).

Having said that John does not literally refer to a seat contest in his Gospel, I should qualify that statement by saying that (1) Jesus did contest for his place/seat in the Temple or in his Father's House and that (2) in the cleansing of the temple and the claiming of it as his own (my Father's house) Jesus asserts his victory over the forces of evil (Satan / the Evil One), as in the Buddhist sources, where the seat-contest is part of the temptation episode as pointed out above. What is especially remarkable about the Fourth-Gospel story of the cleansing of the temple is that John places it at the beginning of Jesus' public ministry, unlike the Synoptics, who by alluding to Odysseus' cleansing of his father's house on his return to Ithaca after his travels, place it at the end of Jesus' public ministry (*Matt 21:12-13; Mark 11:15-17; Luke 19:45-46*).

8. The Devas and other celestial beings celebrate the Buddha's victory over Māra. A comparison of the Buddhist and Christian stories shows that, as in the Buddhist literary tradition, the Gospels also refer to angels ministering to Jesus after the departure of the Devil: "When the devil had left him, angels came and ministered unto him." (*Matt 3:11*). After referring earlier to Nathanael sitting under the fig tree (Bodhi tree), the Jesus of John's Gospel says in the Buddhist context of Māra's temptation and the Buddha's enlightenment under the Bodhi Tree, "Hereafter you shall see heaven open and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of Man" (*John 1:51*; see also *Gen. 28:12*, where angels ascend and descend on Jacob).

9. John, the author of the *Book of Revelation*, considered to belong to the Johannine School, the composers of the books of the New Testament attributed to Apostle John, refers obliquely, in *Revelation*, to the Devil taking Jesus to the Holy City of Jerusalem and to the pinnacle of the Temple, where it is an angel – the Devil is a fallen angel in the Christian tradition – who takes the seer to the top of a mountain: "And in the spirit he [the angel] carried me away to a great, high mountain, and showed me the holy city of Jerusalem coming down out of heaven from God. . . . It had a great, high wall. . . . And I saw no temple in the city, for its temple is the Lord God the Almighty and the Lamb" (*Rev. 21:10-22*). Of course, in spite of the presence of the symbols of the Antichrist, the number 666, the cosmic war or Armageddon, the dreaded four Horsemen and the Beast, the author discusses not the temptation of Jesus but the final triumph of Jesus over the great dragon, the tempter or the forces of evil and the great harlot in the final chapters of the Apocalypse, while the earlier chapters deal extensively with battle between devil and Jesus and his angels.

10. In the words of Gruber and Kersten, "As in Buddhist writings, the devil stands for the earthly, sensuous world. He is 'the prince of this world'" (*John 12:31*).²⁶ In his final Platonic-like dialogue, Jesus admonishes his disciples about the "world" (Māra) as a persona hating both him and his disciples: "If the world hates you, keep in mind that it hated me first. If you belonged to the world, it would love you as its own. As it is, you do not belong to the world, but I have chosen you out of the world. That is why the world hates you. Remember what I told you: 'A servant is not greater than his master.' If they persecuted me, they will persecute you also" (*John 15:18-20*). The evangelist would later proclaim the same idea through the words of Jesus to Pilate: "My kingdom is not of this world" (*John 18:36*).

11. According to the *Nettiprakaraṇa* of *Khuddakanikāya*, Māra hurled a huge stone at Gautama Siddhārtha from the top of the Gijjhakuṭa Mountain.²⁷ John refers to the attempts of Jews, one of the allegories of Māra in the Fourth Gospel, "They took up stones to cast at him" (8:59); "Then the Jews took up stones again to stone him" (10:31).

In *Luke 4: 28-30*, the stoning episode becomes an attempt by the enemies of Jesus to try to hurl him down from a hill to his death: "And they rose up and put him out of the city and led him to the brow of the hill on which their city was built that they might throw him down headlong. But passing through the midst of them, he went away."

12. The trope of the "harrowing of hell" (meaning that Jesus *brought salvation to all of the righteous who had died since the beginning of the world and freed them from Hell and from the dominion of the Devil*) is celebrated in *I Peter 3:19*, the *Book of Revelation 1:18; 20:13-15* (whose authorship is generally attributed to the School of Apostle John), and in the Apostles Creed ("He descended into Hell"). John writes: "Now the prince of this

world [the Devil] is to be overthrown” (*John 12:31*); “It was to undo all that the Devil has done that the Son of God appeared” (*I John 3:8*). And according to the *Book of Revelation*, the war between God’s forces and Satan’s forces started in heaven:

And there was war in heaven: Michael and his angels fought against the dragon; and the dragon fought and his angels, And prevailed not; neither was their place found any more in heaven. And the great dragon was cast out, that old serpent, called the Devil, and Satan, which deceiveth the whole world: he was cast out into the earth, and his angels were cast out with him. (*12:7-9*)

This motif has also its counterpart in the Māra story (see *Lalitavistara*, ch. 21, v. 3-4), where it is recorded that “Māra had the premonition that Gautama would win over him [and] Gautama would make the city of Māra empty.”²⁸ We see that the Christian tradition exploited the Buddhist idea of the final triumph of Jesus over the Evil One (the Devil) in true mythological fashion in the story of “The Harrowing of Hell,” through Christ’s descent into Hell to set free the prisoners, captured by the Devil after the sin of Adam.²⁹

“Temptation” Motif in the Lord’s Prayer

I am even inclined to suggest that the Lord’s Prayer itself is a celebration of the victory of Jesus over the Evil One and an invocation that the faithful too become victorious over the Evil One; in fact, in the Aramaic version of the Lord’s Prayer, we say, “Deliver us from the Evil One (*min bisha*)” [as you have been delivered]; besides, the tropes of seat or abode in heaven, bread, kingdom, temptation, and worship of God are all found in this prayer. As has been made clear above, the Buddhist theological ideas are deeply embedded in all the four Gospels in the sense that Jesus, like Buddha, postpones his death on numerous occasions,³⁰ while he is preaching his truth and sending out his disciples to preach the same.

Jesus vs. Māra: Casting Out Demons and Healing

The Jesus of the Synoptic Gospels, while preaching the Good News, is very active in casting out demons,³¹ whereby Jesus is trying to redeem mankind from the dominance and control of Satan (Māra), who continued to enslave humans by possessing them:

And Jesus went about all Galilee, teaching in their synagogues, preaching the Gospel of the Kingdom, and healing all kinds of sickness and all kinds of disease among the people. Then His fame went throughout all Syria; and they brought to Him all sick people who were afflicted with various diseases and torments, and those who were demon-possessed, epileptics, and paralytics; and He healed them. (*Matthew 4:23-24*)

Certainly, an occasional case of demon-possession and exorcism can be found in literature prior to Jesus’ time as in the popular story of Tobit where we find the expulsion of the demon Asmodeus from Tobias’ bride Sarah (6-8).³² But it also appears that exorcism plays an integral part in Jesus’ battle with Māra and his minions in the Synoptic Gospels.³³ As in the Buddhist tradition where Māra recognizes the Enlightened One, the demons of the Gospels also recognize Jesus as the Son of God (*Mark 1:24-25; Luke 4:34-35*). Just as in the Buddhist tradition the Buddha commands Māra, the Evil One, to leave him, Jesus commands the demons to leave the possessed ones.

The Synoptics viewed Jesus’ acts of exorcism primarily as the defeat of Satan, the Evil One. Dunn and Twelftree write:

He [Jesus] was casting out Satan himself (*Mark 3:23*). He was the one stronger than the strong (Satan) who had overcome Satan and was now plundering his goods (*Mark 3:27*). His response to the disciples who rejoiced at the demons being subject to them in Jesus' name was, 'I saw Satan fall like lightning from heaven' (*Luke 10:18*). In other words, Jesus saw his exorcisms not so much as cures of some merely physical ailment or mental illness, but as the wresting of particular individuals and personalities from the grip or the dominating influence of Satan. That is to say, Jesus not only saw various maladies as manifestations of the single power of evil (Satan), but he also claimed that release could be won by tackling the malady (whatever the physical manifestation) at its spiritual root and source.³⁴

One reason for associating the synoptic stories of exorcism to the non-Jewish source is given by the Jews themselves. The Talmud, codified between 70 CE and 200 CE, attests: "Jesus was hanged on Passover Eve. Forty days previously the herald had cried, 'He is being led out for stoning, because *he has practiced sorcery* and led Israel astray and enticed them into apostasy'" (*Sanhedrin 43a*, my italics). *Mark 3:22* echoes this accusation: "He is possessed by Beelzebub and by the prince of demons he casts out demons." Though we do not find a fully developed demonology in all four Gospels, we can at least conclude that they all view demon-possession as a manifestation of spiritual bondage or domination by Satan, and exorcism by Jesus as establishing the power of God over Satan and as redeeming humans from bondage to Satan, all of which are included in the classical theory of atonement.

Chronology: Buddhist and Christian Temptation Stories

Chronologically speaking, the Buddhist Temptation stories are much older than their Gospel renditions since we find Māra's Temptation and attack as well as the scene of Buddha receiving homage from the animals of the forest³⁵ carved in stone on the North Gate and East Gate, respectively, of Stūpa I at Sanchi, dating from the first century BCE.³⁶ Therefore, the question of who borrowed from whom can be unequivocally answered: The Christian Gospel writers used their Buddhist sources judiciously for developing their ideas of atonement.

Conclusion

Briefly stated, the *Gospel of John* does not give the Temptation episode in one single narrative but scatters the ideas embodied in the temptation story in several parts of his Gospel and in the *Book of Revelation*. The upshot of this short discussion, therefore, is simply that Jesus appears, indeed, also as a Buddha figure when Christian and Buddhist temptation stories are compared.³⁷ In this sense, to use Christian Lindtner's favorite metaphor, Jesus is Buddha; on the other hand, if you prefer a simile, the Jesus of the Gospels, or rather the Christ of faith/myth, is like the Buddha of faith/myth celebrated in Mahāyāna Buddhism.

* * * * *

Endnotes

1 J. Edgar Bruns, *The Christian Buddhism of St. John: New Insights into the Fourth Gospel* (New York: Paulist Press, 1971).

2 Leslie Dewart, *The Future of Belief* (New York, 1966) and *The Foundations of Belief* (New York, 1969).

3 Bruns, *The Christian Buddhism of St. John*, pp. 51-52.

4 In the eleventh century, Anselm developed his own “legal” theory of atonement, which later became quasi-classical in theological circles. According to Anselm, sin must be followed by satisfaction. All sin, including Adam’s sin, is essentially the rape of divine honor when Adam dissed God and disobeyed God’s commands. Consequently justice requires that God must be paid an equivalent for the divine honor He has lost. Only a human being who is at the same time God alone can make this kind of atonement on a parity basis; that is why God became man in order to save mankind. Anselm writes:

‘Summa quaestionis fuit cur Deus homo factus sit ut per mortem suam salvaret homines. . . . Ad quam tu multis et necessariis rationibus respondens, ostendisti restaurationem humanae naturae non debuisse remanere; nec potuisse fieri nisi solveret homo quid pro peccato Deo debebat. Quod debitum tantum erat ut illud, cum non deberet solvere nisi homo, non posset nisi Deus; ita ut idem esset homo qui est Deus. Unde necesse erat ut Deus assumeret hominem in unitatem personae.’ – Cur Deus Homo, ii, 18; PL, 158: 425.

5 See Gustaf Aulén, *Christus Victor* (New York, 1951), pp. 22-23; Zacharias Thundy(il), “Doctrinal Influence of *Jus Diaboli* on Beowulf”, *Christian Scholar’s Review*, III, 2 (1973): pp. 150-169.

6 I would encourage a potential student to develop this idea into a doctoral thesis or book; such a willing person has my approval and good wishes for success.

7 *Khuddaka Nikāya, Buddhavaṃsa*, 2.63; what is remarkable is that, like Jesus, the Buddha was hungry after the fast and that the figure of Sujātā becomes a figure of the Holy Spirit in the physical form of a dove (*Luke 3:22*). In this connection we may also want to recall Jesus’ baptismal discourse with Nicodemus on the necessity of being reborn in *John* chapter three, bearing in mind that *sujātā* means ‘wellborn’.

8 See Richard Garbe, *India and Christendom* (La Salle, IL: Open Court, 1959), pp. 50-56, for a careful analysis; for an extensive study, see Ernst Windisch, *Māra und Buddha* (Leipzig, 1895). See details of the temptation in the *Padhāna Sutta, Saṃyutta Nikāya*, and *Mahā-Parinibbāna-Sutta*.

9 *Padhāna Sutta, Sutta Nipāta*, III.2, trans. John Ireland: Māra: “For seven years I followed the Lord step by step but did not find an opportunity to defeat that mindful Awakened One. A crow flew around a stone having the colour of fat: ‘Can we find even here something tender? May it be something to eat?’ Not finding anything edible the crow left that place.”

10 *Saṃyutta Nikāya*, trans. H. Oldenberg; cited by Richard Garbe, p. 53: “At one time the Exalted One (Buddha) was living in the land of Kosala, in the Himālaya, in a log hut. . . . He thought: ‘It is really possible to rule as a king in righteousness without killing or causing to be killed. . . without suffering pain or inflicting pain on another.’ Then Māra, the Evil One, perceived in his mind the thoughts of the Buddha and spoke thus: ‘May the Exalted One be pleased to rule as a king in righteousness without killing . . . without suffering pain or inflicting pain on another. . . . If the Exalted One . . . desired, he could ordain that the Himālaya, the king of the mountains should become gold, and it would turn into gold.’ Buddha motions him away. ‘What would it profit the wise man if he possessed even a mountain of silver or of gold? He who has comprehended sorrow, whence it springs, how can he bend himself to desire? . . . Then Māra the Evil One said, ‘The Exalted One knows me,’ . . . and disconcerted and disheartened he rose and went away.”

11 The Fourth Gospel refers to the enlightenment episode and Māra's acknowledgment of Siddhārtha's Buddha status in the story of Nathanael: "When you were under the fig tree, I saw you; Nathanael says to him, 'Rabbi, you are the son of God; you are the King of Israel'" (*John 1:48-49*).

12 Garbe, p. 55.

13 Bruns, *The Christian Buddhism of St. John*, *passim*.

14 J. Edgar Bruns, *The Art and Thought of John*, p. 90.

15 That may not be the case in the Synoptic Gospels; it looks like that they seem to view, apart from the infancy Gospels, that Jesus' messiahship or divine sonship begins only with his baptism at the hands of John with the revelation from above: "As Jesus was coming out of the water, he saw heaven being torn open and the Spirit descending on him like a dove. And a voice came from heaven: 'You are my son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased'" (*Mark 1:10-11*). If Mark's Gospel was the first Gospel, then the Infancy Gospels were an afterthought of the institutional Church, having found its justification in the Prologue to John's Gospel based on the Mahāyāna idea of the bodhisattva.

16 Aṅguttara Nikāya 2:37-38; cited by Zacharias Thundy, *Buddha and Christ: Nativity Stories and Indian Traditions* (Leiden: Brill, 1993), p. 58.

17 The highly erudite Luke (22:3-4) also refers to Judas' betrayal of Jesus as instigated by the Evil One: "Then Satan entered into Judas called Iscariot, who was of the number of twelve; he went away and conferred with the chief priests and captains how he might betray him to them."

18 Kalpakam Sankaranarayanan, "Is the Buddha's Encounter With Māra a Depiction of Inner Struggle?", *Brahmavidyā, The Adyar Library Bulletin*, pp. 74-75 (2010-2011): pp. 216-217.

19 There is much biblical scholarship on the "Jews" in the Fourth Gospel. I tend to think that we find more anti-Māra/Devil statements rather than anti-Semitic statements in the Fourth Gospel, for the "Jews", the enemies of Jesus are truly a figure of speech for or an allegory of Māra. Therefore, reading too much anti-Semitism into it is the wrong approach to the study of that Gospel.

20 It looks like John combines the persona of Ānanda, whom Prakṛitī, the Chaṇḍāla woman, wanted to marry, with that of Jesus in the story of the Samaritan woman with the implication of marriage and sex, while alluding also to the encounter of Rachel and Jacob at the well (*Gen* chp. 29). The clue lies in the words of Jesus to the Samaritan woman that he can give her "living water" (4:10). Combine this with the water drops (semen?) from the side of Jesus on the cross after the piercing of his side (see my book *The Trial of Jesus and His Death on the Cross: Gospel Narratives and Their Buddhist Sources* [Kindle Book published by Amazon.com, 2014]). It looks like John is not averse to the notion of Jesus even being married, as the Buddha was married to Yashodharā in order to connect Jesus to the Buddha indirectly, perhaps even implying that the marriage celebration recorded by John in chapter 4 of his Gospel is the celebration of Jesus' own marriage – an idea expressed as spiritual marriage in the *Book of Revelation*, attributed to the authorship of John. Obviously, John is only toying with the idea of Jesus' marriage without admitting or denying it. Maybe the literary authors are discussing spiritual marriage. What do we make of the following incident narrated in *Mark 2:18-20*? Some pharisees wondered why, while everyone was fasting according to the Torah law, the disciples of Jesus were not fasting. Jesus' answer was this: "While the bridegroom is with them, the attendants of the bridegroom cannot fast, can they? But the days will come when the bridegroom is taken away from them and they will fast that day." From a literary perspective, one may even talk about the 'Disciple whom Jesus loved' as a son-figure like Rāhula in the life of the Buddha. We have to make the careful distinction between the Christ of Myth / Faith with the Jesus of history, of whom we know precious little.

21 Michael Lockwood, *Buddhism's Relation to Christianity* (Chennai, 2010), p. 36.

22 C. Blair (1961), *Heat in the Ṛig Veda and Atharva Veda*, American Oriental Society Publication, no. 45, Harvard University Press, pp. 101-103; W.D. Whitney (1950), *Atharva Veda Samhita*, 2 vols., Harvard University Press: < [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tapas_\(Sanskrit\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tapas_(Sanskrit)) >.

23 < <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/1177/1177-h/1177-h.htm> >: This is a collection of Socratic dialogues (371 BCE) by Xenophon, a student of Socrates. Both the figures of the Samaritan Woman at the well and of Magdalene appear to be patterned also after the hetæra Diotime.

24 Perhaps one may suggest that the wedding at Cana can be viewed at least symbolically as Jesus' own wedding, where the bridegroom and his mother are responsible to feed the guests with food and wine. It is remarkable, Jesus leaves the wedding scene not with the bride but with his mother, brothers, and disciples for Capernaum – almost like Buddha who leaves behind his wife but accepts his mother and relatives into his community.

25 I should not fail to mention that of a witness from above – as opposed to a witness from below – is found in the Synoptics also, but after the baptism of Jesus; interestingly this episode takes place before the temptation scene: “As soon as Jesus was baptized, he went up out of the water. At that moment heaven was opened, and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and lighting on him. And a voice from heaven said, ‘This is my son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased’” (*Matthew 3:16-17*). Both *Matthew 20:20-28* and *Mark 10:35-45* refer to the request of the mother of Zebedee's children, James and John, that they sit one on the right hand and the other on the left hand in Jesus' kingdom; the other ten disciples became indignant with the two brothers.

26 Elmar R. Gruber and Holger Kersten, *The Original Jesus: Buddhist Sources of Christianity* (Rockport, MA, 1995), pp. 156.

27 See Kalpakam Sankaranarayanan, “Is the Buddha's Encounter with Māra a Depiction of Inner Struggle?”, *Brahmavidyā: The Adyar Library Bulletin*, pp. 74-75 (2010-2011), p. 214.

28 Sankaranarayanan, p. 219.

29 See Wikipedia at < http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Harrowing_of_Hell >: ‘In the context of Christian theology, the **‘Harrowing of Hell’** (Latin: *Descensus Christi ad Inferos*, “the descent of Christ into hell”) is the Old English and Middle English term for the triumphant descent of Christ into Hell (or Hades) between the time of his Crucifixion and his Resurrection when he brought salvation to all of the righteous who had died since the beginning of the world (excluding the damned). After his death, the soul of Jesus was supposed to have descended into the realm of the dead, which the Apostles' Creed calls “hell” in Old English usage. In some Christian theologies, it is believed that Jesus's soul remained united to the divinity during this time. The realm into which Jesus descended is called Sheol or Limbo by some Christian theologians to distinguish it from the hell of the damned.” ¶This nearly extinct term in Christian theology is referenced in the Apostles' Creed and the Athanasian Creed (*Quicumque vult*), which state that Jesus Christ “descended into Hell”. However, there are no explicit New Testament references to Christ having descended to the underworld (although mention is made in *1 Peter 3:19–20* of Jesus preaching to “the imprisoned spirits”). Its near-absence in Scripture has given rise to controversy and differing interpretations. It is unclear how it became part of the Apostles' Creed. ¶According to *The Catholic Encyclopedia*, the story first appears clearly in the *Gospel of Nicodemus*, written by a Roman praetorian named Ananias circa 425 AD, in the section called the ‘Acts of Pilate, which also appears separately at earlier dates within the *Acts of Peter and Paul*. The descent into hell had been related in Old English poems connected with the names of Caedmon and Cynewulf. It is subsequently repeated in Ælfric's homilies c. 1000 AD, which is the earliest known inclusion of the word ‘harrowing’. Middle English dramatic literature contains the fullest and most dramatic development of the subject.’

30 “My hour has not yet come” – *John 2:4; 7:30; 12:23; 12:27; 16:32.*

31 James D.G. Dunn and Graham Twelftree, “Demon-Possession and Exorcism in the New Testament”, at < http://biblicalstudies.org.uk/pdf/churchman/094-03_210.pdf >. For the numerous examples for casting out demons in the New Testament, see:

< <http://www.kingjamesbibleonline.org/Bible-Verses-About-Casting-Out-Demons/> >.

32 See: < http://biblicalstudies.org.uk/pdf/churchman/094-03_210.pdf >: “The New Testament itself (*Matt 12:27 & Luke 11:19*) alludes to Jewish exorcists; *Mark 9:38 f.* tells of an exorcist who used Jesus’ name (a practice to which Jesus apparently did not object); and *Acts 19:13-19* relates the fascinating account of the itinerant Jewish exorcists, the seven sons of a Jewish high-priest named Sceva.”

33 The Fourth Gospel deliberately avoids recording stories of exorcism.

34 < http://biblicalstudies.org.uk/pdf/churchman/094-03_210.pdf >.

35 See *Mark 1:12-13*: “Thereupon the spirit sent him away into the wilderness, and there he remained for forty days tempted by Satan. He was among the wild beasts; and the angels waited on him.”

36 Michael Lockwood, *Buddhism’s Relation to Christianity* (Chennai, 2010), p. 36:

Māra is seen seated [just to the left of] the middle of the panel as a god of the sixth heaven with an umbrella over his head. The Bodhi tree at the left represents the would-be Buddha symbolically. Sujātā [the small figure, to the extreme left] appears with an offering of food for him. The figure opposite [standing, immediately to the right of the tree] also represents Māra [worshipping the Buddha-to-be, post-conflict] with one of his sons and daughters. On the extreme right are the grimacing figures of his army. The panel portrays the contest between Māra, the lord of the world of desire, and the Bodhisattva, the annihilator of lusts and desires.



37 I can make the same observation about Buddhist-Christian stories of the presentation in the temple, multiplication of loaves, walking on water, the prodigal son, and so on, as Garbe and I have already done in other works. See Garbe, *India and Christendom, passim*, and Zacharias Thundy, *Buddha and Christ* (Leiden, 1993), *passim*, just for two examples.

[38] There is an *earlier Buddhist* parallel to the incident described in *John 18:6* (where soldiers fall to the ground, overcome by the very presence of Jesus) *and it is illustrated on the facing page, where we see two of Māra’s soldiers tumbling to the ground, just in front of the Buddha.*

* * * * *



The Buddha's victory over Māra.
Bactro-Gandhāra, Kushāna Period. Schist, 1st-3rd century CE.
Freer Art Gallery, Washington, DC.