

THE BIRTH AND EARLY HISTORY OF SAKYAMUNI AS TOLD IN THE PALI SCRIPTURES

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WE have already seen that the accounts of the life and teaching of the Buddha which have come down to us in the Pali Scriptures represent the most nearly historical material which we have. We must examine this to see what light it throws upon the early career of Sakyamuni, and what was the general conception of his person as there revealed: considering, (1) the terms applied to him in the canonical scriptures, comparing them with the appellations and titles given him in later centuries, (2) the biographical material in relation to his early life.

1. An examination of names sometimes seems a bare and profitless task, but it frequently reveals facts which are most valuable. This is the case with the names used of Sakyamuni in the writings of the various periods. Without attempting to give the number of times each term is used, we will be able to see that the nature of the names and titles clearly indicates a progress in the thought of his disciples toward him.²⁹ (a) It is a very striking fact that in the Silas, which we have seen to be perhaps the very oldest teaching extant, Sakyamuni is spoken of as "Gotama the Recluse" and "Tathagata": and the picture there drawn of him is that of a strict ascetic. It begins, "Putting away the killing of living things, Gotama the Recluse holds aloof from the destruction of life. He has laid the cudgel and the sword aside, and ashamed of roughness, and full of mercy, he dwells compassionate and kind to all creatures that have life.' It is thus that the unconverted man, when speaking in praise of the Tathagata, might speak. Or he might say, 'Putting away the taking of what has not been given, Gotama the Recluse

²⁹A similar development can be traced in the use of the terms Jesus, Messiah, Christ, Lord, Logos, etc.

lived aloof from grasping what is not his own. He takes only what is given, and expecting that gifts will come, he passes his life in honesty and purity of heart.' Or he might say, etc., etc." The section ends as follows, "These, brethren, are the trifling matters, the minor details of mere morality, of which the unconverted man, when praising the Tathagata might speak." So we have the two terms "Gotama the Recluse" and "the Tathagata" as the accepted titles given by the "unconverted" and the orthodox disciples respectively.³⁰

(b) The Sutta Nipata, which contains the Parayana and the Octades which rank next to the Silas,—in the chronological list given by Rhys Davids,—as among the oldest of the Buddhist works, uses a somewhat larger variety of terms. Among these are to be found "Bhagavat," which means worshipful, or Blessed; Buddha or Enlightened One; Gotama, of the name of his family; Sakyamuni, the Sakya sage or ascetic; Isix, also meaning sage; and Brahamana, with a similar meaning; Muni, meaning ascetic or sage; and Bhikkhu, or mendicant. In these books there seems to be reflected also, the period when asceticism and the attainment of enlightenment were the two most outstanding features of his life.

(c) In the later books of the Tripitaka we seem to have reached a transition period. The terms mentioned above are used, such as the Buddha, the Tathagata, Sakyamuni, etc., and others such as Sugata, or Blessed, in the Dhammapada; and Samana or ascetic, in the Mahavagga, which have a similar content. In addition to these, however, there is a new class of appellation beginning to be used, which is much more extravagant, and which indicates that new meanings were beginning to be attached to his person. Two of these occur in the Mahavagga. The first is "Jina" or conqueror, a term which is later used in the Buddha Charita, the Jina Charita, the Saddharma Pundarika and elsewhere. It is a good Mahayana name for the Buddha.³¹ The second title we will mention by way of illustration is "King of the Law" which is found in the Mahavagga.³² This also came to be a very common title for the Buddha in later years, as will be seen from the Saddharma Pundarika, for example.

The next stage of the development is seen in the later books of the Northern Canon, where such terms are used as, "Saviour of

³⁰*Sacred Books of the Buddhists*, Vol. II, pp. 3-26

³¹*S. B. E.*, Vol. X, (ii) pp. 127, 186. Also Vol. XIII, p. 91.

³²*S. B. E.*, Vol. X (ii) 102. The term used is "Dhammaragan."

Mankind" which we find in the Fo Sho Tsan King, and "God over all Gods used in the "Questions of King Milinda, and the Saddharma Pundarika." We have now reached the place where the earthly career of Sakyamuni was either lost sight of, or glorified; he had become a metaphysical being,—the incarnation of the Eternal Buddha, such as we see in developed Mahayana Buddhism.

2. *The Biographical Material on the Early Life of Sakyamuni.*

One is surprised in reading over the books of the Pali Canon, to find an almost entire lack of any biographical material whatever on the early life of the founder of Buddhism. The Mahavagga, Kullavagga, and Mahaparinnibbana Sutta are the works which contain the only real attempts to give biographical outlines, and none of them touch on the earlier years whatever.

(a) The Mahavagga, and its continuation, the Kullavagga. The translators of this work, Rhys Davids and Oldenberg, make the following statement as to its value as a piece of biography. "Among the elements of historical or legendary character . . . this account occupies by far the first place, both in extent and importance. For it contains the oldest version accessible to us now, and most probably, for ever, of what the Buddhist fraternity deemed to be the history of their Master's life in its most important period."³³ This is a remarkable statement, and probably there are none who would attempt to deny it. It is disappointing to find, however, that instead of beginning with the birth and early career of the Buddha, the account commences with the scene under the Bodhi tree, after enlightenment had been attained.

"At that time the Blessed Buddha dwelt at Uruvela, on the bank of the river Nerangara, at the foot of the Bodhi tree (tree of enlightenment) just after he had become Sambuddha. And the blessed Buddha sat cross-legged at the foot of the Bodhi tree uninterruptedly during seven days, enjoying the bliss of emancipation."³⁴ The book then continues to outline the teachings given in regard to such matters as the development and organization of "the order", requirements for admission to it, and details in respect of medicines, dress, food, residence during the rainy season, etc., for the Bhikkus and Bihkkuni,—the monks and nuns. We will have occasion to study this more in detail later.

³³S. B. E., Vol. XII, p. 73 note.

³⁴S. B. E., Vol. XIII, pp. 73-74.

(b) The Mahaparinibbana Sutta, or Book of the Great Decease, is the only other part of the Pali Canon which aims to be biographical in any large way, or is really interested in the events of Sakyamuni's life, per se. Here, too, as is to be expected, the early events are entirely overlooked, and the story is taken up from the period immediately preceding his death.

(c) Other references to his birth and early history are surprisingly few, in the Pali Canon. We might mention the following.

(1) In the first Sutta of the Mahavagga, the Buddha is giving King Bimbisara an account of his family and birth. "Just beside Hamavanta, O king," he says, "there lives a people endowed with the power of wealth, the inhabitants of Kosala. They are Addikas by family; Sakyas by birth; from that family I have wandered out, not looking for sensual pleasures. Seeing misery in sensual pleasures, and considering the forsaking of the world as happiness, I will go and exert myself; in this my mind delights."³⁵

(2) In the Teviggā Sutta of the Digha Nikaya, there is also a reference to his family and his ascetic life. It reads, "That Samana Gotama, . . . who left the Sakya tribe to adopt the religious life, is now staying at Manasakata, in the mango grove. . . . Now regarding that venerable Gotama, such is the high reputation that has been noised abroad, that he is said to be a fully enlightened one, blessed and worthy, abounding in wisdom and goodness, happy, with knowledge of the world, unsurpassed as a guidex to erring mortals, a teacher of gods and men, a blessed Buddha."³⁶

(3) The only story which approaches the later birth legends is that which is told in the Mahavagga³⁷ of the prophecy and blessing of the sage, Asita, at the time of the birth of Sakyamuni. The story relates how Asita, seeing the great rejoicing among the gods, inquired the cause of it, and was told "The Bodhisattva, the excellent pearl, the incomparable, is born for the good, and for a blessing in the world of men, in the town of the Sakyas, in the country of Lumbini. Therefore we are glad and exceedingly pleased. He, the most excellent of all beings, the preeminent man, the bull of men, the most excellent of all creatures, will turn the wheel (of the Dhamma) in the forest called after the Isis, (he who is) like the roaring lion, the strong lord of beasts." Asita then descends to the

³⁵S. B. E., Vol. X (ii) pp. 68-9.

³⁶S. B. E., XI, p. 169.

³⁷S. B. E., X (ii) p. 125-7.

palace of Suddhodana and is shown the new-born prince, whereupon he begins to weep. He soon reassures the King that it is not because of any evil which will arise for the new Prince, however, but because he himself being old, would never be able to see the spread of the new religion, nor "hear the Dhamma of the incomparable one." This story, which reminds us of Simeon in the temple blessing the new-born Jesus, has perhaps the most valuable material of all the record in the Tripitaka. It contains however, elements of the miraculous, which while not discrediting it altogether, raise questions as to its date and reliability. It may be said with a fair degree of certainty, that some of the later stories find here their point of departure. Or to put the matter differently, this story represents the earliest beginnings of those varied and marvelous tales which have been woven about his birth and early career.

(4) We now come to a remarkable document, which, while not directly biographical in its nature, is very suggestive also in regard to the origins of the stories which we will find later, in regard to the birth and early career of Sakya. This is the Mahapadana Suttanta, a part of the Digha Nikaya.³⁸ It relates how the Exalted One, overhearing some of his disciples talking about the nature of the previous births of the Buddha, approaches them and tells them that he is the seventh reincarnation of the Buddha. The first occurred in the 91st kalpa before the present one, the next two in the 31st, and the four last including his own in the present kalpa. Much more detail is given which it is unnecessary to repeat here. In the evening of the same day, he further discourses to them on the subject of the events which take place when a Bodhisat is born. Each paragraph begins with the formula, "It is the rule, brethren": then follows a detailed account of miraculous events, which we can only indicate here, and ends with the formula, "That in such a case is the rule". The events which take place are as follows: The earth and heaven are filled with wondrous radiance, when the Bodhisat enters his mother's womb; four sons of the gods go to the four corners of the world to protect him; the mother must be chaste; she must have no desire for sensual pleasures; she must live in the enjoyment of the five senses; she enjoys comfort and safety during the time of gestation; she dies seven days after the birth of the Bodhisat, rising again in the heaven of delight; she brings forth

³⁸S. B. *Buddhists*, Vol. III, pp. 4-41.

after ten months rather than the ordinary period of nine; she brings forth standing, rather than sitting or reclining; the child is received by the four sons of the gods who say, "Rejoice lady, for mighty is the son that is born to thee." The Bodhisat issuing from his mother's womb is born without any defilement such as is usually attendant upon parturition, but "like a jewel laid down in Benares muslin"; showers of hot and cold water appear in the sky for the washing of the child and its mother; the child at once stands on both feet, takes seven strides to the north, and shouts with the voice of a bull, "Chief am I in the world. Eldest am I in the world, Foremost am I in the world! This is the last birth! There is now no more coming to be!" "The earth is then filled again with radiance, as it was at the time of conception, and the "ten thousand worlds of the universe tremble and shudder and quake."

The story then proceeds to give, in different form, an account of the later career of the Buddha, by telling the story of the early life of Vipassi, the first of the incarnate Buddhas, who lived, as we have seen, 91 kalpas ago, and whose life extended for 80,000 years. This material too is of great value as a parallel to the stories which arose in a later age, concerning the life of Sakyamuni.

The Rajah, Vipassi's father, is informed by the Brahmans, that his child is to become a great man, for he has the thirty-two marks of greatness. He is to rule the earth, "not by the scourge, nor by the sword, but by righteousness". The 32 marks of the great men, belong rather to the realm of fortune-telling than science, and consist of such marks as projecting heels, long fingers and toes, forty regular and continuous teeth, lustrous eyes, long tongue, and a white, soft and hairy mole between the eyebrows, etc. His father engaged many nurses for him, and built three palaces. He becomes the favourite of all and is regarded as a master of wisdom.

It will be seen on comparing these stories of the birth and childhood of the Buddhas in general and Vipassi in particular, with the later stories told of Sakyamuni, that they run almost exactly parallel. There can be little doubt that there is a very close relationship between the two. This relationship will become even more clear when we take up the latter part of the Suttanta and compare its account of the Renunciation of Vipassi with the story of the Renunciation of Sakyamuni as told in the later Mahayana Scriptures. There are two possible explanations. Either this story is a later development which has been included in the canon, or it represents a very

early story,—told possibly by Sakyamuni himself,—which has been applied by later scholars to Sakyamuni's own career, and used as the basis of the legends which have grown up around him. In regard to the date of the scripture, we can only say that the Digha Nikaya, in which this Mahapadana Sutta occurs, is comparatively quite early. Rhys Davids puts it among the first of the complete works of the Pali Canon to attain its present form. We have no reason for believing that the stories quoted above were later introductions. On the contrary the reverse seems to be the fact. Whether Sakyamuni was the originator of the Buddha stories we have just related, or not, makes little difference. They seem to belong to the early period of Buddhism. Taking these as a text, the later writers have woven their stories of the birth and childhood of the Buddha, using all the wealth of oriental imagination and colouring. These stories they have linked up with the few known details of Sakyamuni's life, and have passed it off as the authentic life history of the great founder of Buddhism. How impossible are some of the stories we will see in the next chapter.

(5) The Jataka Tales. The Jatakas contain the only attempt to be found in the Canonical scriptures of southern Buddhism, to give an account of the birth-stories of the Buddha. The part of the book where these stories are found is the Introduction, however. The main portion is simply an adaptation of ancient Indian folk-tales to the purposes of Buddhism, by recounting stories of animals, as the happenings of the Buddhas in their pre-existent states. This method is quite in keeping with the universal tendency of Buddhism to absorb into itself material of all kinds, and from whatever source it is available. The Introduction however, represents a very different purpose, and must be clearly distinguished from the main body of the book. Furthermore they probably represent very different dates of composition, as well.

The date of the complete work in its present form is uncertain. It is true that there was a collection of Jataka tales in existence at the time of the Second Council, at Vesali, about the year 377 B. C.³⁹

³⁹The Dīpavamsa in telling of this Council says, "In part they cast aside the Sutta and the Vinaya so deep and made an imitation Sutta and Vinaya, changing this to that, the Parivāra abstract and the six books of the Abhidhamma, the Patisambhida, the Nidessa, and a portion of the Jatakas—so much they put aside, and made others in their place." Dīpavamsa, V, 32. The Jatakas were evidently known at this time, though we cannot be sure of the size or nature of the tales.

This does not mean that the Jatakas were then complete in their present form however. The introductory chapter and the notes prefixed to each chapter give very strong evidence of being of later date. Scholars are not agreed as to who the author was. Childers, the translator, credits it to Buddhaghosa about 430 A. D. Rhys Davids is inclined for other reasons to make it still later.⁴⁰ We are quite justified then, in claiming that though the stories of the birth of Sakyamuni as told in the Jatakas belong to the Pali Canon, they are actually the work of a period perhaps a thousand years after the death of the hero. They are accordingly quite outside the realm of the period we are studying, and will be taken up together with the stories which we have in the Buddha Charita, Lalita Vistara and other documents which belong to a later period.

To summarize the material which we have reviewed. We have found in the early Pali Literature almost no material whatever on the early career of the founder of Buddhism. The story of his birth and early life seems to have been of little interest to his immediate disciples. They made no effort to preserve the details or hand them on to posterity. The reason for this is not hard to find. For did he not despise all these things, and count them as hindrances rather than helps in the great task to which he had set himself? It was not the life from which he had come, but that to which he had gone: not the place of his father,—if such there really were,—but the begging bowl and the yellow robe, that really counted in the great struggle of life. Like the great master himself, the disciples were quite willing to forget all that had gone before.

How, then, can we account for the sudden and great revival of interest in the details of his early career which seems to have spread from the first century A. D. onward? Why have the scholars painted with such lavish hand, and such vivid colours the pictures which we find in later Buddhist literature? Without anticipating, is it not suggestive that these stories are all to be found,—with the one exception noted above,—in the Mahayana Scriptures, rather than the Hinayana. And even this exception,—the Jataka Introduction,—was probably added to the original portion of the book long after Mahayana had become prevalent and in all probability by a Mahayana Scholar.

It may seem strange at first glance that Mahayana Buddhism,

⁴⁰For full discussion of this point see the introductory chapter of Rhys Davids translation of Fausboll's "Buddhist Birth Stories."

which is on the whole, far less interested in the Historical Buddha that is the earlier Hinayana Buddhism, should have developed this great interest in his birth and early history. A closer study, however, reveals the fact that in reality it is not the historical Sakyamuni in which they are interested, but a semi-metaphysical Buddha whose birth was attended with miraculous signs and wonders, and whose early life they picture as being surrounded with all possible luxuries and comforts, as a background to the privations and sufferings he was to endure later. We can trace here a double tendency, which is clearly Mahayana in its origin. First, the desire to see in Sakyamuni an incarnation of the Eternal Buddha, and secondly, the effort to emphasize the greatness of his sacrifice, as a redemptive transaction, available for all men who trust in him,—a line of emphasis which appears in many of the Mahayana sects. Such an explanation would clarify the real nature of the interests involved, and make more easy for us the task of trying to evaluate the later stories of the Sanscrit Canon.

Unless some new evidence appears, we must be satisfied to find in the works of the Pali Canon,—omitting of course the Jataka Introduction,—all the material which we have a right to consider as representative of the early traditions of Buddhism. There may have been others not included in the Canon, but we have no evidence whatever of their existence. We are far more likely correct in concluding that the sum total of authentic tradition concerning early Buddhism is to be found in the Pali Canonical works.

If this be true, it will be necessary for us to revise quite extensively our commonly accepted accounts of his early career. The amount to be accepted, on the basis of the earliest records, is quite small. Up to the time of his enlightenment practically nothing is known of him. He was recognized as being a member of the Kshatriya or warrior caste, and of the Sakya⁴¹ clan. His father was apparently a Rajah or petty chieftain,—not a Maharajah, much less a King, as later traditions picture him. About his early years the impenetrable veil will hang perhaps forever. That they were years of comparative ease and comfort is quite probable, though the home of a petty Rajah could never have afforded the extravagant luxury described in the later traditions. But all attempts to fill in the years with colourful details, while poetic and interesting, must be discredited as history.

⁴¹Sakya means "the mighty."