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**Incestuous Ancestries: On the Family Origins of  
Gautama Siddhārtha, Interpretations of Genesis  
20.12, and the Status of Scripture in Buddhism**

Silk, J.A.

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*Jonathan A. Silk*

INCESTUOUS  
ANCESTRIES: THE  
FAMILY ORIGINS OF  
GAUTAMA SIDDHĀRTHA,  
ABRAHAM AND SARAH  
IN GENESIS 20:12,  
AND THE STATUS  
OF SCRIPTURE IN  
BUDDHISM

Incest plays a central role in the narrations of the origin stories of many traditions, generally in highly mythologized ways, recounted in stories such as those of the Japanese Izanami, wife and sister of Izanagi, or of Hindu myths concerning, for instance, the creator Prajāpati.<sup>1</sup> Among the origin stories belonging to Buddhist and Jewish traditions are to be found incest tales that differ from the Japanese and Hindu stories, and resemble each other, in narrating the lineage of holy founders rather than accounting for the origins of the world as such.<sup>2</sup> The Buddhist and the

I would like to extend my thanks to Shai Cherry and Reuven Firestone for their advice and suggestions, as well as to the journal's two anonymous readers.

<sup>1</sup> Since this attempt at comparison anticipates an audience not necessarily familiar with both Buddhist and Jewish materials, I hope readers may forgive me for, as the case may be, both explaining too much and too little, and for my frequent oversimplifications. In addition, I should perhaps emphasize that since my primary interest is in Buddhist materials, this article is not truly comparative in the full sense. Its treatment of Jewish (not to mention Christian) materials is consequently less complete. Moreover, since I do not control the relevant languages, my treatment of these materials is based on translations. For all Buddhist materials, however, the translations are my own. Given the disparity in maturities between the fields of Buddhist and Jewish Studies, I am confident that for the present purposes this is a satisfactory method. Finally, I should emphasize that I do not claim my recounting of the Jewish materials to be complete or comprehensive, although I do think it is basically representative.

<sup>2</sup> Of course, both Buddhist and Jewish lores also contain cosmogonic myths, none of which, however, to my knowledge involve incestuous elements. Although, technically speaking, in Buddhist philosophy the universe is beginningless (*anādi*), the cosmogonic

Jewish stories do not concern the creation of the world, or of a specific land within our world, but instead speak to the origins of a particular lineage, and thus should be considered genealogical, rather than cosmological, etiologies. In addition to its inherent—or one might say, folkloric—interest, a comparative study of these Buddhist and Jewish stories, and their respective places within their traditions, raises productive questions about the nature and status of scripture in Buddhism.<sup>3</sup>

The Buddhist tale to be studied here concerns the origins of the Śākya clan: it is a story about the roots of Śākyamuni Buddha's family tree, a family that, while not a "Holy Family" in a Christian sense, nevertheless represents the origins of the Buddha of our age, and thus possesses a special symbolic, and perhaps even iconic, value. However, Buddhists do not trace their lineage back to this family in any biological, or even meaningfully symbolic, sense. Just what the story signifies, then, will be one of the questions to be considered below. Versions of this legend exist across Buddhist literary traditions, in the Theravāda Pāli canon and commentaries, in texts of the Mahāsāṃghika and Mūlasarvāstivāda schools, and elsewhere. Whatever else we might want to say about this foundation myth, it was widely transmitted throughout the Indian Buddhist world and beyond.<sup>4</sup> The Jewish story, in contrast, concerns Abraham and Sarah, respectively the patriarch and matriarch of the people Israel.<sup>5</sup> The lineage

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myth par excellence is found in the *Aggañña-sutta*, on which see recently and with reference to earlier studies, Lambert Schmithausen, "Man and World: On the Myth of Origin of the *Aggaññasutta*," *Bukkyō Daigaku Sōgō Kenkyūjo Kiyō Bessatsu* 佛教大学総合研究所紀要別冊 (2005): 165–82.

<sup>3</sup> It may well likewise raise interesting questions about Jewish, Christian, and Islamic scriptures as well; I would hope specialists in these fields would address the topic from their respective perspectives.

<sup>4</sup> This is not the only example of a Buddhist story of sibling incest. We may compare the rather odd story of the origin of the influential Licchavi clan, the founders of which were brother and sister, married to each other. However, these twins were born not as human babies but as a single lump of meat, which subsequently divided itself. After abandonment by the queen of Benares, this lump was found by an ascetic, who cared for the twins, before passing them on to some cowherds. When entrusting them, he stipulates that they were to be married to each other, and this is indeed what transpired. For a translation of the story from the *Papaicasūdanī*, commentary to the *Majjhima-Nikāya*, see Max Deeg, "Legend and Cult—Contributions to the History of Indian Buddhist Stūpas, Part 2: The 'Stūpa of Laying Down the Bows,'" *Buddhist Studies Review* 21, no. 2 (2004): 119–49, esp. 128–31. I have discussed this and other relevant materials, including the broader anthropological contexts, in my forthcoming book, *Riven by Lust: Incest and Schism in Indian Buddhist Legend and Historiography* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2008), forthcoming.

<sup>5</sup> There are other possible approaches to the issue. For instance, Jewish tradition asserts that Cain and Abel married their twin sisters, and likewise has to grapple with the problem of the regeneration of the human race after the Great Flood, since the surviving males comprised only Noah and his sons. Though not less interesting, these episodes are less fruitful than the story of Abraham and Sarah as mirrors for the Buddhist story, hence my focus on it here.

that springs from their union, through their son Isaac to his son Jacob and so on, thus provides both the biological and spiritual, symbolic lineage of the Jewish people, a lineage that in decisive ways shapes all subsequent Jewish history. What we may discover, in particular about the Buddhist materials, by reading these stories together, and examining their respective traditional exegeses (or lack thereof), is the focus of the present article.

#### THE BUDDHIST STORY

According to the basic Buddhist story, the sons of a certain king Okkāka (in Sanskrit Īkṣvāku)<sup>6</sup> were banished and went into exile with their sisters. The version in the *Ambaṭṭha-sutta* of the Theravāda *Dīgha-Nikāya* (Long Discourses) says: “Out of fear of the mixing of castes they cohabited (*saṁvāsa*) together with their own sisters,”<sup>7</sup> using what is almost exactly the same euphemism we employ today in English, and just as clearly pointing to a sexual relationship. The sons of Okkāka, according to this Pāli version, had sexual relations with their true, full sisters. The concern for “the mixing of castes” expressed here is a fundamental one and displays an aspect of what we might even term an Indian obsession with marriage structures. The general manifestation of this obsession makes itself known from a very ancient period through elaborate rules and byzantine regulations concerning caste and degrees of consanguinity within which marriages are permitted or restricted. Large sections of the (non-Buddhist) Indian Dharma or legal literature are devoted to discussions of just this problem, and Indian Buddhist literature too displays a constant awareness of and concern for similar considerations. The clichéd stock phrases that begin Indian Buddhist narrative (*avadāna*) tales, for instance, regularly include, in the notice of an initial marriage carried out between two families, the expression that a man “took a wife from a suitable family” (*sadṛśāt kulāt kalatram ānītam*), signifying that the family of the bride had an appropriate caste relation to that of the groom, although to be sure, the texts assume rather than specify the precise nature of the suitability.<sup>8</sup> In the present case, astonishingly, this concern for caste suitability seems

<sup>6</sup> On the problematic relation between the forms of Pāli Okkāka and Sanskrit Īkṣvāku, see Wilhelm Ludwig Geiger, *A Pāli Grammar*, trans. Batakriṣṇa Ghosh, rev. and ed. K. R. Norman (Oxford: Pali Text Society, 1994), 8 (§10, n. 3).

<sup>7</sup> T[homas] W[illiam] Rhys Davids and J[oseph] Estlin Carpenter, *The Dīgha Nikāya* (1890–1911; repr., London: Pali Text Society, 1975), 1:92, lines 21–22 (III.1.16): *te jātisambhedabhayaṃ sakāhi bhaginiṃhi saddhiṃ saṁvāsaṃ kappesuṃ, 27–29: . . . kappenti.*

<sup>8</sup> This expression is common in the *Divyāvadāna* (see Hiraoka Satoshi 平岡聡, *Setzuwa no kōkogaku: Indo Bukkyō setzuwa ni himerareta shisō* 説話の考古学インド仏教説話に秘められた思想 [Tokyo: Daizō shuppan 大蔵出版, 2002], 157) and elsewhere. For the Pāli Jātaka, see Richard Fick, *The Social Organisation of North-East India in Buddha's Time*, trans. Shishirkumar Maitra (Calcutta, 1920; repr., Delhi: Indological Book House, 1972), 52.

to trump the otherwise dominant, if not virtually ubiquitous, taboo against close-kin marriage.<sup>9</sup>

In Buddhaghosa's fifth-century Ceylonese commentary to the *Ambaṭṭha-sutta*, the explanation of the rationale for this union of siblings is somewhat expanded: "The princes thought: 'We don't see any daughters of kṣatriyas who are appropriate (to our caste), nor young kṣatriyas who are appropriate for our sisters. Sons born through union with those who are unlike (in caste) are impure either on the mother's or the father's side, and will bring about mixing of castes. Therefore let us consent to cohabit together with just these our sisters.' Out of fear at the mixing of castes, while treating their eldest sister as their mother (and not marrying her), they cohabited with the others."<sup>10</sup>

<sup>9</sup> Although there is of course a fundamental distinction between sexual relations and marriage, and between restricted sexual partners and restricted marriage partners, in the present context such distinctions collapse.

<sup>10</sup> T[homas] W[illiam] Rhys Davids and J[oseph] Estlin Carpenter, *The Sumaṅgala-Vilāsinī, Buddhaghosa's Commentary on the Dīgha Nikāya*, vol. 1 (London: Pali Text Society, 1886), 260, lines 15–19 = Burmese Sixth Council edition (Dhammagiri-Pāli-Ganthamālā 4 [Dhammagiri, Iḡatpuri: Vipasanna Research Institute, 1993]), 210, lines 14–17; compare the translation in Edward J[oseph] Thomas, *The Life of Buddha as Legend and History* (1949; repr., London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1975), 8, and note his remarks on the parallels with the *Rāmāyaṇa* on pp. 10–12. Virtually the same is found in Buddhaghosa's commentary to the *Sutta-Nipāta* called *Paramatthajotikā* (II) (*ad Sutta-Nipāta* 359 [Sammāparibbājanīya-sutta], in Helmer Smith, ed., *Sutta-Nipāta Commentary, being Paramatthajotikā II* [London: Pali Text Society, 1916–18], 1:354, lines 6–10 = Burmese Sixth Council edition [Dhammagiri-Pāli-Ganthamālā 55 (Dhammagiri, Iḡatpuri: Vipasanna Research Institute, 1995), 79, lines 18–20]), in a passage that was already edited (by Fausbøll) and translated long ago on pp. 332 and 340 in Albrecht Weber, "Die Pāli-Legende von der Entstehung des Sākya- und Koliya-Geschlechtes," *Monatsberichte der Königlich Preussischen Akademie der Wissenschaften zu Berlin 1859* (1860): 328–46 = pp. 417 and 427 in "Die Pāli-Legende von der Entstehung des Sākya- und Koliya-Geschlechtes," in *Indische Studien: Beiträge für die Kunde des indischen Alterthums*, vol. 5 (Berlin: Ferd. Dümmler's Verlagsbuchhandlung, 1862), 412–37 and, without the Pāli text, p. 238, in "Die Pāli-Legende von der Entstehung des Sākya (Çākya)- und Koliya-Geschlechtes," in *Indische Streifen*, vol. 1 (Berlin: Nicolaische Verlagsbuchhandlung, 1868), 233–44. Additionally, precisely the same is found also in the *Vamsatthappakāsini*, the commentary to the *Mahāvamsa*, a text dating to perhaps the eighth or ninth century (George Peiris [Gunapala Piyasena] Malalasekera, *Vamsatthappakāsini, Commentary on the Mahāvamsa*, vol. 1 [London: Pali Text Society, 1935], 133, lines 8–14. The passage had already been presented in English based on a Sinhalese work by R[obert] Spence Hardy, *A Manual of Buddhism in its Modern Development* (London: Williams & Northgate, 1880), 136 (first ed., 1853, which I have not seen), but in a curious way that may owe more to the translator than the text: "The princes then said to each other, 'If we send to any of the inferior kings to ask their daughters in marriage, it will be a dishonour to the Okkāka race; and if we give our sisters to their princes it will be an equal dishonour; it will therefore be better to stain the purity of our relationship than that of our race.'" The same episode is noted in the text translated by P[aul Ambrose] Bigandet, *The Life or Legend of Gaudama, the Buddha of the Burmese: With annotations; The ways to neibban, and notice on the phonygies or Burmese monks*, 4th ed. (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trübner & Co., 1912), 11 (first ed., 1858, which, again, I have not seen). These references demonstrate that this episode has been known since the very early days of Buddhist Studies in the West; despite this, it appears to have been noticed very rarely—but see 222–23 in M[urray] B. Emeneau, "Was There Cross-Cousin Marriage among the Sākya?" *Journal of the American Oriental*

The logic to which Buddhaghosa here appeals is interesting: the disability affects both the princes and their sisters, since in their exile there are suitable mates for neither, and thus it is reasonable that they turn to each other. There is no attempt here to soften the reality of the sibling incest that, in the focus on caste purity, seems in fact to be entirely ignored.

In a version of the same sūtra preserved in the Chinese translation of the *Dirghāgama*, belonging to the Dharmaguptaka school, the story is cast in a somewhat different form.<sup>11</sup> The mothers of the four exiled princes missed them, and upon receiving the king's permission went to see them. "Then the mothers said: 'I will give my daughter to your son. You give your daughter to my son.' And so they betrothed them to each other and they became husband and wife."<sup>12</sup>

As I understand the text, the mothers of the four princes, consorts of the king who is the father of the princes, also each have at least one daughter, whose father is likewise the same king, of course. These mothers, then, offer among themselves to have their sons marry their agnatic half-sisters, one mother's son to another mother's daughter. The king's co-wives marry their respective male and female offspring, half-siblings, to each other. This reading of the Chinese text assumes that the key phrase is to be understood in the singular, and that the mothers are speaking to each other.<sup>13</sup> In his study of this passage, however, Hajime Nakamura understood the text differently—the mothers speak not to each other, but to the princes: "We will give your sons our daughters. Give our sons your daughters." According to this interpretation, which Nakamura sees as perhaps reflecting the Chinese translators' modification of an Indic original under Confucian moral influence, the exiled princes themselves already had children, thus leading to a portrayal of aunt-nephew and uncle-niece marriages, rather than those of half-siblings.<sup>14</sup> But how old were these

*Society* 59 (1939): 220–26, followed very closely by Thomas R. Trautmann, "Consanguineous Marriage in Pali Literature," *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 93, no. 2 (1973): 158–80 (see 160), and now the brief note on 70 in Oikawa Shinkai, "Women and Men as Described in Pāli Commentaries," in *Buddhist and Indian Studies in Honour of Professor Sodō Mori*, ed. Publication Committee for Buddhist and Indian Studies in Honour of Professor Sodō Mori (Hamamatsu: Kokusai Bukkyō Kyokai, 2002), 67–78.

<sup>11</sup> *Dirghāgama*, T. 1 (20) (I) 82c22–83a4 (*juan* 13), trans. Sueki Fumihiko in Okayama Hajime 丘山新, Kamitsuka Yoshiko 神塚淑子, Karashima Seishi 辛嶋静志, Kanno Hiroshi 菅野博史, Sueki Fumihiko 末木文美士, Hikita Hiromichi 引田弘道, and Matsumura Takumi 松村巧, in *Gen-daigoyaku Agon Kyōten: Jōagonkyō Dai-yonkan* 現代語訳阿含経典 長阿含経 第4卷 (Tokyo: Hirakawa shuppan 平河出版, 2001), 157–58. (Compare T. 20 [I] 260a25ff.).

<sup>12</sup> *Dirghāgama*, T. 1 (20) (I) 83a1–2 (*juan* 13): 時諸母言。我女與汝子。汝女與我子。即相配匹遂成夫婦。

<sup>13</sup> wǒ nǚ yǔ rǔ zǐ, rǔ nǚ yǔ wǒ zǐ (我女與汝子，汝女與我子)。

<sup>14</sup> Nakamura Hajime 中村元, *Gōtama Buddha: Shakuson no shōgai* ゴータマ・ブツダ釈尊の生涯, Genshi Bukkyō 原始仏教 1, Nakamura Hajime Senshū 中村元選集 11 (Tokyo: Shunjūsha 春秋社, 1979), 16–17 = *Gotama Buddha: A Biography Based on the Most Reliable Texts*, trans. Gaynor Seikmori (Tokyo: Kosei Publishing, 2000), 32–34.

princes? Were they already married? While Nakamura himself realizes that his interpretation makes the story more than a little incoherent, the putative problem here can be avoided by understanding the mothers to be talking among themselves, and in the singular, rather than to be addressing their sons, as Nakamura takes it.<sup>15</sup> The text, it is true, is not entirely unambiguous, since it is never specified to whom the mothers are speaking, but Nakamura's reading requires the mothers to have not only available daughters but additional sons. This likewise seems most unlikely, since these sons too would be princes, and among other things it is hard to imagine how these mothers could arrange for the marriages of princes without the approval of the king, father of these princes. All in all, there is little to recommend Nakamura's interpretation, and much in support of a reading closer in its core significance to the Pāli version, with the difference that the full siblings of the latter have in this Dharmaguptaka version become half-siblings. This seems to represent a slight modification and softening of the more original portrayal preserved in the Pāli tradition, probably due to a desire to mitigate the ethical difficulties that would otherwise arise, although this softening does not go as far as Nakamura imagined it to, nor is it likely to be due to the intervention of the Chinese translators. In fact, we discover just such a modification in our other sources as well.

The *Samghabhedavastu* (Section on Schism) of the Mūlasarvāstivāda Vinaya, or monastic code, contains a lengthy and detailed “biography” of the Buddha that provides an extended context for the episode. In order to reinforce the promise he made to his new bride's father that any son of their marriage would succeed him, King Virūḍhaka Īkṣvāku banished the four sons he sired on the previous chief queen. Then:<sup>16</sup>

<sup>15</sup> In addition to issues of coherence, note that a few lines before and within the same sequence, as well as many other places in this text, we find the word *wōdēng* 我等, that is, “we” explicitly marked in the plural. There is thus no reason to believe that the translators were not perfectly capable of indicating a plurality if they so desired. It is true that in his Japanese version Nakamura does not translate the crucial *wō* 我 as a plural, but his English translator is surely right that it is implied by his understanding.

<sup>16</sup> Sanskrit in Raniero Gnoli, *The Gilgit Manuscript of the Samghabhedavastu: Being the 17th and Last Section of the Vinaya of the Mūlasarvāstivādin*. Serie Orientale Roma 49, no. 1 (Rome: Istituto Italiano per il Medio ed Estremo Oriente, 1977), 29.19–31.1, the corresponding Tibetan in Derge Kanjur 1, 'dul ba, ga 271a–272a7; sTog Kanjur 1, 'dul ba, ga 372b–373a3. In Chinese the same is found in T. 1450 (XXIV) 104b18–c16 (juan 2) and T. 191 (III) 937a22–b10 (juan 2), both renderings of the *Samghabhedavastu*. This story is repeated in the *Abhiniṣkramaṇa-sūtra*, extant only in Tibetan translation, a sūtra entirely distinct from the scripture of the same name preserved in Chinese (for which, see below); the wording is identical with that in the corresponding portion of the Tibetan translation of the *Samghabhedavastu* (Derge 301, *mdo sde, sa*, 121a3–122a1—where I have omitted a few lines from the *Samghabhedavastu* text = Gnoli 30.3–16, the text in the corresponding *Abhiniṣkramaṇa-sūtra* is continuous; i.e., it omits precisely the material I have skipped). For an outline of the Tibetan *Abhiniṣkramaṇa-sūtra*, and a few remarks on its relation to the *Samghabhedavastu*, see Matsuda Yūko 松田祐子, “Zōyaku Abhiniṣkramaṇa-sūtra kenkyū (jo)”

Those princes took along their [true, full] sisters and, in due order, reached the bank of the river Bhagīrathī not far from the hermitage of the sage Kapila in the region of the Himalaya. There they built huts from leaves of the teak tree, and dwelt there, surviving by continually killing animals [for food]. Thrice they approached the hermitage of the sage Kapila. Overwhelmed by the passions of youth, and being extremely severely afflicted by passions and lusts, they grew very pale and gaunt. Then at one point the sage Kapila noticed this state of affairs, and asked them: “Why are you so very pale?”

They replied: “Great sage, we are severely afflicted by passions and lusts.”<sup>17</sup>

He said: “Avoiding your full sisters, cohabit with your agnatic half-sisters.”<sup>18</sup>

“Is it proper, Great sage, for us to do so?”

“It is proper, sirs, since obviously you are disenthroned kṣatriyas.”

Accepting the words of the sage as authoritative, seeking after passions and lusts and giving rise to feelings of joy and delight they had sex, made love and

蔵訳 Abhiniṣkramaṇa-sūtra 研究 (序) [A study of the Tibetan *Abhiniṣkramaṇa-sūtra*], *Nihon Bukkyō Gakkai Nenpō* 日本仏教学会年報 55 (1990): 15–25. Alexander Csoma de Kőrös, “Origin of the Shakya race translated from the 𑖀 (La), or 26th volume of the mDo class in the Kā-gyur, commencing on the 161st leaf,” *Journal of the Asiatic Society of Bengal* 2 (1833): 385–92, repr. in *Tibetan Studies: Being a Reprint of the Articles Contributed to the “Journal of the Asiatic Society of Bengal and Asiatic Researches” by Alexander Csoma de Kőrös*, Collected Works of Alexander Csoma de Kőrös (Budapest: Akadémiai Kiadó, 1984), 27–34, is based on this sūtra, and his paraphrase of the present episode is found on p. 33.

<sup>17</sup> T. 1450 (XXIV) 104b24–25 (*juan* 2): “We are young yet have no wives; day and night we suffer—how could we not be gaunt?” It is interesting to compare here a few lines from the Latin poet Catullus. He writes in 88.1–2 (I cite the translation of Ulysses K. Vestal, published by the Theatrum Pompei Project, <http://www.theaterofpompey.com>): “What does the man do, Gellius, who with his mother and sister is sexually aroused, and after his tunics have been cast aside stays awake at night?” Several lines later he continues with verse 89:

Gellius is thin: why not? For whom there’s so good a mother  
and so vivacious and so vibrant a sister  
and so good an uncle and [a world] so entirely full of girls  
of his own kin, for what reason should he cease being scrawny?  
Although he touches nothing, unless to touch what it is not allowed,  
as much as you like for what reason he should be thin you will find.

<sup>18</sup> *vaimātrkābhir bhaginibhiḥ*, as opposed to *svakasvakā bhaginiḥ*. The relevant Tibetan translations likewise distinguish *rang rang gi sring mo* from *mas dben gyi sring mo*, respectively. T. 1450 (XXIV) 104b25–27 (*juan* 2): “Then the sage told them: ‘Marriage together with your younger sisters is acceptable.’ The princes replied: ‘We didn’t know whether we should accept them or not.’ The sage said: ‘As long as you do not share a mother, it is generally permitted.’” (時仙報曰。汝等之妹互相配適。王子白曰。我等不知合得以下。仙人報曰。既不同母。通許此事)。T. 191 (III) 937a29–b1 (*juan* 2) is a bit less clear, specifying only the prohibition: “The sage said: ‘You must not have sexual relations with your elder sister(s); as for the others, you may do as you please.’” (仙人白言。勿於親姊而行欲事。餘可隨意)。Note that T. 191 here, which does not mention anything about agnatic half-sisters, appears in this respect to align itself with the stance of the Pāli tradition in terms of the relationships it is permitting. This is especially so if we understand the reference to “elder sister” to be in the singular, a determination that is not obvious because of the Classical Chinese tendency not to mark number. But since Buddhist Chinese especially is quite capable of indicating the plural number when necessary, it is likely that we should indeed read this passage as corresponding to the Pāli tradition’s interpretation.

coupled with their agnatic half-sisters. And from that sex, love making and coupling sons and daughters were born, and grew up. . . .

Then the [princes] met together and began a discussion, saying: “Sirs, since we were banished on account of [our father the king] taking a wife of appropriate (caste) [instead of a second wife whose child would not be eligible for the throne], none of us may take a second wife of appropriate (caste,) [who might compete with the legitimate sons for inheritance]; he must be content with only the one.” Thus they took just that single wife of appropriate (caste), and no second.<sup>19</sup>

Then on another occasion King Virūḍhaka, affectionately remembering his sons, said to his ministers: “Peasants, where are those princes now?” They explained the situation in detail: “Your Majesty banished them on account of some judicial decision. They took their own sisters and set out from here.” . . . Avoiding their full sisters, they had sex with, made love, and coupled with their agnatic half-sisters, and as a result of that sex, love making and coupling sons and daughters were born.

The authors or redactors of this monastic code seem to have been uncomfortable with the idea of a completely incestuous relation between the princes and their sisters.<sup>20</sup> In regard to this scruple, however, we cannot forget that according to widespread notions evident not only in the technical legal literature but in numerous considerably more popular sources as well, sexual relations with even an agnatic (or, for that matter, uterine<sup>21</sup>) half-sister were strictly forbidden, a functional equivalence that leads me to wonder, from this perspective, why those who modified the story would have bothered. What seems most probable is that despite the legal equivalence, some would merely affectively have found a relation between half-siblings less objectionable than one between full brother and sister. The authors of the *Samghabhedavastu* here have taken advantage of this

<sup>19</sup> I do not well understand the verb Gnoli prints here as *pariṇamayanti* (which as far as I know is, among other things, intransitive), and translate Tibetan *len gyi* instead. T. 1450 (XXIV) 104c14–16 (*juan* 2) has “The princes met together and had a discussion, saying: ‘Because our father took a second wife, we brothers were banished. We all, comprehensively considering the matter, have reached an agreement: From now on, we will only take one wife, and not another.’”

<sup>20</sup> While one abbreviated recounting of the same story in the *Bhaiṣajyavastu* might give the impression that even Mūlasarvāstivāda Vinaya sources sometimes see the marriage as between full siblings, a look at the full context in the *Vinayaśūdrakavastu* shows this to be an artifact of the way the account is abbreviated in the former (compare Derge Kanjur 1, ‘*dul ba, kha*, 66a5–b2 = sTog Kanjur 1, ‘*dul ba, kha*, 175a2–7 = T. 1448 [XXIV] 33c23–34a6 [*juan* 8] with Derge Kanjur 6, ‘*dul ba, da* 202a5–b4 = sTog Kanjur 6, ‘*dul ba, tha* 299b6–300b1 = T. 1451 [XXIV] 379a18–29 [*juan* 34]).

<sup>21</sup> I say this advisedly; I do not know whether any word \**vaipairkā*, which might mean “uterine half-sister,” exists; it is not attested in any dictionary at my disposal. Nevertheless, even if not explicitly so stated, the restriction would obviously have been implied. In a royal context, it goes without saying, while agnatic kin with king as sire on numerous consorts is the rule, a mother with multiple fathers of therefore uterine kin would be, if not nearly unimaginable, at least extremely uncommon.

story to introduce another, and essentially unrelated, issue, namely that concerning the rules for second marriages in the Śākya clan. The dramatic development of the tale has the four princes banished at the behest of the father of the king's second (chief) wife, a wife whose son, since she is a princess, is eligible to become the heir apparent. In order to insure the succession of her son over the four older princes of the king's first wife, the princes are banished. Now, this plot is hardly unique to this story; in fact, it is almost a staple of Indian dramatic literature. Yet the Mūlasarvāstivāda authors or redactors here make this story into the logical reason for the promulgation of a ruling concerning marriage customs: since the second wife, by virtue of her being taken from an "acceptable" caste and family, is capable of bearing a child with full rights of inheritance, and since this has caused trouble for the princes, they declare that henceforth one must not take such a wife. In other words, the ruling does not bar remarriage or multiple marriages as such. It only prohibits remarriage with a woman whose status is such that a son of hers might compete with sons of the primary marriage for inheritance.<sup>22</sup> The insertion of this legal stipulation here is interesting, and deserves further study, but in the narrow context of the present story its significance seems obvious: a legal justification based on concerns of inheritance is appropriated for use in the context of a debate over close-kin marriage, perhaps because the widespread and seemingly constant consciousness of such fiduciary concerns lends an immediacy to the issue missing when the subject appears to be merely the rare possibility of close-kin marriages.<sup>23</sup>

If I am correct that the *Samghabhedavastu* story, like that in the Dharmaguptaka *Dirghāgama*, represents a modification of a more "original" version, in which the princes did wed their full sisters, the same modification appears to have taken place in other versions of the episode as well, such as that in the *Mahāvastu*, a text that belongs to yet another sect, the Mahāsāṃghika-Lokottaravādins. The framework here is the same as that in the Mūlasarvāstivāda account, the exiled sons alone in the wilderness with their sisters. The key passage reads as follows: "Those princes said: 'There must be no corruption of our lineage.' And out

<sup>22</sup> See P[andurang] V[aman] Kane, *History of Dharmaśāstra (Ancient and Medieval Religious and Civil Law in India)*, 2nd ed., Government Oriental Series B 6 (Poona: Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute, 1968–77), 2:559–60 on second wives in legal literature—the concerns there appear to be primarily ritual.

<sup>23</sup> I interpret the relation in this direction since we know from the existence of parallel versions the basic story of the exile of the princes to have been well-established mythology. Were this not so we might naturally wish to hypothesize that concerns over marriage regulations were paramount, and a somewhat radical and over-the-top story of incest was (merely) borrowed to emphasize and legitimize the case. Still, I suspect there may be more to be said on this question.

of fear of corruption of the lineage, they gave to each other in marriage their own agnatic half-sisters.”<sup>24</sup>

A final example of a similar attempt to mitigate the ethically questionable origins of the Śākya clan appears in the version of the story in the Chinese \**Abhiniṣkramaṇa-sūtra*, in a passage the sectarian origins of which are unclear:<sup>25</sup> “Then the princes settled there [in what became the city Kapilavastu], and mindful of the words of their father the king that they seek to marry within their own clan, they were not able to find brides. Each accepted a maternal aunt and his sisters,<sup>26</sup> and took them as wife, according to the rites of marriage. In the first place they desired to follow the instructions of their father the king, and in the second place they feared introducing corruption into the lineage of the Śākyas.”

Although it is, as we have seen, repeatedly mentioned in the literature of diverse sects, this story and the resulting situation go almost unnoticed in the rest of the vast Buddhist literature. I am familiar with only a single exception and, moreover, the way the story is alluded to in this exception is, at the very least, odd. The origins of the Śākya clan are mentioned (in the same words) in Pāli literature in the commentaries to the *Dhammapada* and the *Jātaka*, when a people called the Koliyas are made to accuse the Sākiyas, with whom they share the same ultimate ancestry, of acting like dogs and jackals in sleeping with their sisters.<sup>27</sup> Here, then, these Buddhist

<sup>24</sup> Émile Charles Marie Senart, *Le Mahāvastu*, Société Asiatique, Collection d’Ouvrages Orientaux, 2nd Série (Paris: Imprimerie National, 1882–97; repr., Tokyo: Meicho Fukyūkai, 1977), 1:351, lines 2–4, reprised on 8–9, and see Jonathan A. Silk, “Bauddhavaçana: Notes on Buddhist Vocabulary;” *Sōka Daigaku Kokusai Bukkyōgaku Kōtō Kenkyūjo Nenpō* 創価大学国際仏教学高等研究所年報 [Annual Report of the International Research Institute for Advanced Buddhism at Soka University] 10 (2007): 171–80, for a justification of this reading.

<sup>25</sup> This Chinese scripture collects materials from multiple sources, for which it often offers sectarian attributions, but not in the present case. T. 190 (III) 675c10–13 (*juan* 5): 爾時, 王子既安住已。憶父王語, 於自姓中求覓婚姻, 不能得婦。各納姨母及其姊妹, 共為夫妻依於婦禮。一欲隨從父王教令。二恐釋種雜亂相生。 Compare the translation by Samuel Beal, in *The Romantic Legend of Śākya Buddha* (London, 1875; repr., Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1985), 22, who I believe has misunderstood the last clause: “and so at first they desired to do, but on second thoughts they feared to pollute their race by such intermarriages.” This appears to be the opposite of the true meaning. (Note, once again, that this text is entirely distinct from the *Abhiniṣkramaṇa-sūtra* preserved in Tibetan and cited above.)

<sup>26</sup> In the key phrase 各納姨母及其姊妹, which I have translated “Each accepted a maternal aunt and his sisters,” the interpretation of whom the princes marry hangs on the word *qí* 其. Normally this word, meaning “that,” “this,” “his,” “hers,” and so on, takes as its referent the immediately preceding subject. This would suggest that the most natural way to understand *qí* here is as picking up “maternal aunt,” thus indicating “her sisters.” But the sisters of a maternal aunt are also maternal aunts, making the expression very hard to understand in this way. Therefore, and in line with parallel versions, I take *qí* in the sense of “[each] his [own].”

<sup>27</sup> *Dhammapada* commentary XV.1 (H[arry] C[ampbell] Norman, *The Commentary on the Dhammapada* [1906–14; repr., London: Pali Text Society, 1970], 3:255, lines 7–8), and *Jātaka* §536 (Kuṇāla; Michel Viggo Fausbøll, *The Jātaka, Together with Its Commentary* [London: Trübner & Co., 1877–96], 5:413, line 1 = W[illem] B. Bollée, *Kuṇāla-jātaka: Being*

texts cite an anecdote in which enemies of the clan of the Buddha bring up the calumny that his clan is of incestuous origin. This is, of course, a “historical fact” that, on the basis of ample sources within that very same corpus of Buddhist literature, we know to have been widely accepted by the Buddhists themselves. But it is peculiar that these commentaries would invoke the episode in a clearly uncomplimentary light, and their reason for doing so remains unclear. As far as I know, this is the only secondary reference to the origin story in South Asian Buddhist literature, a fact that, I will argue below, is of considerable interest.

It is worthwhile stressing that while this story of the brother-sister incest engaged in by the sons of King Īkṣvāku was widely known, sibling incest was demonstrably not approved of by Indian Buddhist authors in general. Indeed, we find in the works of authors who surely would have been familiar with this well-known legend vociferous criticism of the degenerate practices of incest allegedly engaged in by Persians, explicitly including sibling incest.<sup>28</sup> It is also ironic, if nothing more, that the Śākya legend itself explicitly appeals to the need to avoid introducing impurity into the Śākya family line as the rationale for this incest, since it is precisely this concern with purity of lineage that justified their own practices for the Persian Zoroastrians themselves. This is a potentially interesting consentience, especially in light of the possibility of Iranian influences on the development of the life story of the Buddha.<sup>29</sup>

It is not clear why those who compiled the legend of the lineage of the Buddha included within it reference to these incestuous origins; it is not necessarily because it actually represented some ancient historical reality (although this is not entirely impossible). There may have been some doctrinal, political, or sociological motivation, the truth of which is probably lost to us forever, but whatever the reason, the Buddhists did preserve

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*an Edition and Translation* [London: Luzac & Company, 1970], 1.22–2.1): ye soṇasigālādayo viya attano bhaginihi saddhiṃ vasimsu. The passage is translated in Eugene Watson Burlingame, *Buddhist Legends*, Harvard Oriental Series 28–30 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1921; repr., London: Pali Text Society, 1979), 3:70–71, and Edward Byles Cowell et al., *The Jātaka or Stories of the Buddha's Former Births* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985–1907; repr., London Pali Text Society, 1981), 5:219, and see the note in Bollée, *Kuṇḍalajālaka*, 80. It is not unusual for Pāli commentaries to different texts to share verbatim explanations, so this double identical appearance of the reference is not, in itself, remarkable.

<sup>28</sup> This theme is explored in detail in Jonathan A. Silk, “Putative Persian Perversities: Buddhist Condemnations of Zoroastrian Close-Kin Marriage in Context,” to appear in the *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies*, University of London.

<sup>29</sup> Many years ago, when I mentioned in casual conversation what I thought was the generally agreed idea that the patterns of cross-cousin marriage found in some Indian life-stories of the Buddha owe their origins to Dravidian influences (see the papers by Emeneau and Trautmann cited in n. 10 above), the Pāli specialist Sakamoto-Gotō Junko 坂本(後藤)純子 strongly disagreed, suggesting, as I understood her then, that the source of such ideas was rather Iran. I do not know if she had in mind the legend noticed here (concerning which, at that time, I myself was completely ignorant), and as far as I know she has never presented her idea formally. It would certainly be worth pursuing.

within their sacred scriptures a mythology of the clan origins of their founder that involves brother-sister incest. The degree of such incest appears to have been slightly mitigated, as I view the evolution of the presentations, in most of the now-extant accounts, despite the fact that from a normative legal perspective the mitigation would appear to have been toothless, marriage to one's half-sister or even aunt being every bit as objectionable as marriage to one's full sister.<sup>30</sup> Moreover, one thing conspicuous by its absence in the accounts of these relations quoted above, and similarly evidenced by the later tradition's silence regarding the story, is any explicit sense of shame or embarrassment, or any real attempt to explain away what must, in almost any Indian context, have been a very unusual situation, to say the least. At the same time, if I am right that an original story of marriage to full sisters was converted into one with half sisters, this adjustment itself is evidence for some implicit commentarial unease. But however this may have taken place, it happened very early in the development of Buddhist sectarian literatures, not at a later reflective stage of scriptural interpretation.

This tale complex seen within its broader context thus seems to tell us two, perhaps conflicting, things. First, well-attested Indian Buddhist legend presents the origins of the lineage of the Buddha as arising out of primal (half-)sibling incest. The very same tradition, however, also preserves elsewhere an unambiguous record of the objections voiced against the legitimacy of sibling relations, illustrating the problematic light in which they were seen, and thus revealing a very critical attitude toward such relations. The Indian Buddhist tradition, nevertheless, apparently did not feel the need to explicitly address the "problem" of one of its own origin myths. Despite their slight modifications, the several retellings of the tale we find in extant Buddhist literatures represent parallel primary accounts, not secondary discussions of, or reflections on, the basic story. The repetition of the story cannot be seen, then, as evidence of broad concern with the episode; rather, it is an artifact of the way in which much early Buddhist literature was transmitted roughly in parallel within sectarian lineages. As I will argue below, this too is important for our attempts to understand the nature of the Buddhist scriptural and exegetical project writ large.

A comparison and contrast to the Buddhist materials may be seen in the biblical lore concerning Abraham and Sarah, and the ways in which

<sup>30</sup> It is true that in South India uncle-niece marriage was (and is) practiced. As far as I know, however, aunt-nephew unions are viewed quite differently, as we might expect in a patriarchal society.

primarily Jewish exegetical traditions treat the structurally similar biblical story may be instructive for our broader appreciation of the status of scripture in Buddhism.

#### THE BIBLICAL STORY

In contrast to the Buddhist case, the nature of the relationship between the patriarch and matriarch of the Jewish people, Abraham and Sarah, has been a focus of considerable discussion in both traditional Jewish (and also Christian and Muslim) exegesis and modern scholarship.<sup>31</sup> The source of the controversy is Abraham's claim, in Genesis 20:12, that Sarah is, in fact, not only his wife but also his sister, more precisely his agnatic half sister, the daughter of his father but not of his mother. Traditional Jewish exegetes and scholars are troubled by this claim probably above all since such a relationship plainly violates the clear-cut prohibition expressed in Leviticus 18:9, "The nakedness of your sister, the daughter of your father or the daughter of your mother—whether of the household clan or of an outside clan—do not uncover her nakedness."<sup>32</sup> Modern scholars in their turn are interested in the passage and surrounding material because, among other things, it is clearly very closely connected to Genesis 12:13 and 26:7 (and surrounding materials), in the former of which Abraham makes nearly the same claim, and in the latter of which Abraham's son Isaac claims his own wife Rebecca as his sister in a closely parallel way. Many scholars have seen such cases of apparent doublets (or in this case, triplets) as evidence for the so-called Documentary Hypothesis, according to which the Pentateuch was fashioned from earlier sources, variously named but usually referred to in recent work as E (Elohistic), P (Priestly), and J (Yahwist). This approach to the text assumes that repetitions reveal conflation of sources, rather than, for instance, reflecting some originally unitary authorial intent. For traditional exegesis and scholarship, of course, the unitary divine authorship of the

<sup>31</sup> Even to compile a sample bibliography would be a substantial task. I limit references below to those studies that make points relevant to our investigations.

<sup>32</sup> The translation is that of Jacob Milgrom, *Leviticus 17–22: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, Anchor Bible Commentaries, no. 3A (New York: Doubleday, 2000). The same is essentially repeated in Lev. 20:17: "If a man marries his sister, the daughter of either his father or his mother, so that he sees her nakedness and she sees his nakedness, it is a disgrace; they should be cut off in the sight of their people." On the other hand, as Milgrom makes clear (pp. 1541–42), 18:11 does not, as it is usually read (even from early times), repeat 18:9; rather the "father's wife's daughter" spoken of in the former refers to a step-sister, the daughter of a woman who only later marries the father. The prohibition is thus against a sexual relationship with a woman entirely unrelated by blood, while 18:9 refers to a blood relation.

Bible is apodictic, and thus other hermeneutic strategies must be deployed to resolve apparent contradictions.<sup>33</sup>

The biblical text itself provides some reason to question Abraham's rationale for claiming Sarah as his sister. The setting of the episode is the royal city of Gerar, where Abraham journeys together with Sarah. "While he was sojourning in Gerar," Genesis 20:1–2 tells us, "Abraham said of Sarah his wife, 'She is my sister.'" <sup>34</sup> Thinking, therefore, that Sarah was not spoken for, the king, Abimelech, has her brought to him, clearly for sexual purposes.<sup>35</sup> God speaks to Abimelech in a dream, telling him that since Sarah is a married woman, he is fated to die. Abimelech protests his innocence, and moreover proclaims, "He himself said to me, 'She is my sister!' And she also said, 'He is my brother'" (20:5). God appears to agree that the king is guiltless, proclaiming that he has prevented

<sup>33</sup> Although the appeal to divine inspiration is clearly the only applicable one for premodern interpreters, some modern critics (such as John van Seters) also see grave difficulties with the Documentary Hypothesis. Perhaps the most detailed treatment of the present triplet is that of T. Desmond Alexander, *Abraham in the Negev: A Source-Critical Investigation of Genesis 20:1–22:19* (Carlisle: Paternoster, 1997). He states (42) that although it is usually claimed that the episodes in Genesis 12 and 26 belong to J and 20 belongs to E, there is a possibility that the three accounts "have been harmonised to prevent unnecessary duplication when viewed as part of a larger work." He goes on later to conclude that (50–51) "It is possible to view all three episodes as deriving from a single author, who composed each of the wife-sister pericopes with a clear knowledge of what he had already written earlier. . . . The later narratives avoid unnecessary repetition of details and expand upon quite different aspects of the wife-sister motif. This suggests that the narratives as we now know them have been shaped to some extent by a literary process." Ultimately (127) he concludes that "the evidence argues strongly against the idea that underlying these passages we have duplicate accounts of the same events." See also the select list of studies on 197 n. 3, of Reuven Firestone, "Difficulties in Keeping a Beautiful Wife: The Legend of Abraham and Sarah in Jewish and Islamic Tradition," *Journal of Jewish Studies* 42, no. 2 (1991): 196–214, and Tikva Freymer-Kensky, *Reading the Women of the Bible* (New York: Schocken Books, 2002), 378–80. I am unable to judge some other attempts to see the story in a broader biblical context, such as Raymond De Hoop, "The Use of the Past to Address the Present: The Wife-Sister Incidents (Gen 12,10–20; 20,1–18; 26,1–16)," in *Studies in the Book of Genesis: Literature, Redaction and History*, ed. A. Wénin, Bibliotheca Ephemeridum Theologicarum Lovaniensium 155 (Leuven: University Press, 2001), 359–69, or Gershon Hepner, "Abraham's Incestuous Marriage with Sarah: A Violation of the Holiness Code," *Vetus Testamentum* 53, no. 2 (2003): 143–55.

<sup>34</sup> Unless otherwise noted, biblical citations refer to the translations of the Jewish Publication Society, *Tanakh: The Holy Scriptures. The New JPS Translation According to the Traditional Hebrew Text* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1985), and see also particularly Nahum M. Sarna, *The JPS Torah Commentary: Genesis* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1989), for Genesis.

<sup>35</sup> As has been obvious to commentators old and new, this despite the fact that Sarah at this time was about ninety years old. Her attractiveness is then variously explained. See Firestone, "Difficulties in Keeping a Beautiful Wife," 202–3, and Reuven Firestone, "Prophet-hood, Marriageable Consanguinity, and Text: The Problem of Abraham and Sarah's Kinship Relationship and the Response of Jewish and Islamic Exegesis," *Jewish Quarterly Review* 83, nos. 3–4 (1993): 331–47, esp. 338.

Abimelech from violating Sarah's chastity, but that he must restore her to Abraham. In the morning when Abimelech awakes, he summons Abraham and interrogates him as to the reason for his deception. In response, Abraham first explains that since in Gerar there is no fear of God, he was afraid he might be killed so that his wife could be taken. He follows this by saying immediately, "And besides, she is in truth my sister, my father's daughter though not my mother's; and she became my wife" (Gen. 20:12).

The earlier reflex of the story complicates this scenario even further. Eight chapters before, it was recounted that because of a famine Abraham traveled to Egypt and, "as he was about to enter Egypt, he said to his wife Sarai [as she was then known], 'I know what a beautiful woman you are. If the Egyptians see you, and think "She is his wife," they will kill me and let you live. Please say that you are my sister, that it may go well with me because of you, and that I may remain alive thanks to you'" (Gen. 12:11–13). Pharaoh learns of Sarah's beauty, and takes her into his palace, lavishing gifts on Abraham. The text then says laconically that God "afflicted Pharaoh and his household with mighty plagues on account of Sarai, the wife of Abram [as he was then known]" (12:17). For, once again, reasons unexplained, Pharaoh understands the cause of his afflictions, and summons Abraham, whom he interrogates saying, "What is this you have done to me! Why did you not tell me that she was your wife? Why did you say, 'She is my sister,' so that I took her as my wife?" (12:18–19). Commentators are particularly exercised over this episode, strongly implying as it does that Pharaoh actually had sexual relations with Sarah (mirroring a concern later that there be not the slightest hint that Abimelech could have fathered Isaac). What is more interesting for us, however, is the possible understanding that Abraham and Sarah were not, in actual fact, brother and sister, or even half siblings, but that the claim was merely a stratagem to avoid trouble for Abraham. This interpretation brings with it its own raft of problems, starting with the fact that Abraham is willing to sacrifice Sarah's virtue for what certainly seems to be his own material profit (whether this was his motive or not), and that he appears unconcerned about lying. Most commentators have, however, preferred to address these complications, rather than struggle with the implications attendant upon the alternative.<sup>36</sup>

<sup>36</sup> Reuven Firestone, *Journeys in Holy Lands: The Evolution of the Abraham-Ishmael Legends in Islamic Exegesis* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1990), 27–29, 31–38, "Difficulties in Keeping a Beautiful Wife," and "Prophethood, Marriageable Consanguinity, and Text," 340–47 explores Islamic exegesis, which concentrates on refuting any suspicion that Abraham lied, while of course also denying biological kinship between Abraham and Sarah—their kinship is spiritual instead. (A great deal more could no doubt be said about Islamic materials, but they lie outside my competence.) For an approach to deception in Genesis that seems to assume that Abraham is lying about his kinship to Sarah, see Michael James Williams, *Deception in Genesis: An Investigation into the Morality of a*

If Sarah was not, in fact, Abraham's half sister, what was their relation, and why would Abraham have claimed her as his sister? Although the tradition has ready answers to these questions, some sources were willing to accept the plain meaning of the text, namely that Abraham and Sarah were, in fact, agnatic siblings. The mid-second-century BCE *Book of Jubilees*, a sort of abbreviated retelling of the stories of Genesis (and half of Exodus), seems quite content to state (12:9), "Abram married a woman whose name was Sarai, the daughter of his father, and she became his wife" (12:9).<sup>37</sup> About two centuries later, Philo of Alexandria says of the claim of Genesis 20:12, "The literal meaning is excellently clear," although he goes on to offer, as is usual for him, a highly allegorical reading in which he equates Sarah with Virtue, the source of which is only God the Father, understanding the reference to a different mother as a metaphysical null.<sup>38</sup> In the fourth century, the Christian commentator known as Didymus the Blind refers explicitly in his commentary on Genesis to the Egyptian practice of sibling marriages a propos Genesis 12:11–13, suggesting with a quotation of 20:12 that this was also the practice in Abraham's own land. Didymus's modern translators explain that this indicates that Didymus took it as a fact that, before his conversion (i.e., while still a "pagan"), Abraham did in fact marry his own sister, as was the custom not only in Egypt but among Abraham's people as well.<sup>39</sup> Finally, in the late fourth century St. Jerome in his *Hebrew Questions on Genesis* seems to accept

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*Unique Biblical Phenomenon*, Studies in Biblical Literature 32 (New York: Lang, 2001). In the following I aim to survey the variety of approaches to the difficulties of the biblical text found across Jewish, and some Christian, exegesis. There are certainly greater, and perhaps more diverse, riches to be found than I touch on here, and I have, moreover, made little effort to stratify my materials by genre, school, lineage, or even period. Such a treatment awaits the hand of a qualified specialist.

<sup>37</sup> Translation James C. VanderKam, *The Book of Jubilees*, Corpus Scriptorum Christianorum Orientalium 511, Scriptorum Aethiopicum 88 (Louvain: Peeters, 1989), 70. An up-to-date survey of the *Book of Jubilees* is the same author's *The Book of Jubilees* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2001).

<sup>38</sup> *Questions and Answers on Genesis* IV.67, trans. in Ralph Marcus, *Philo*, Supplement 1: Questions and Answers on Genesis, Loeb Classical Library (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1953), 347. The complex allegory does not negate the main point that Philo accepts the biblical text as, on the nonmetaphorical level, saying just what it appears to say. He refers to the same idea of the motherlessness of Sarah (or rather, of Virtue) elsewhere too, for example, in "Who Is the Heir of Divine Things" [Quis Rerum Divinarum Heres] 62 (Francis Henry Colson and George Herbert Whitaker, *Philo*, vol. 4, Loeb Classical Library [Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1949], 313–14), and "On Drunkenness" [De Ebrietate] 61 (Colson and Whitaker, *Philo*, vol. 3, Loeb Classical Library [Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1930], 349). On Philo's portrayal of Sarah, see Maren R. Niehoff, "Mother and Maiden, Sister and Spouse: Sarah in Philonic Midrash," *Harvard Theological Review* 97, no. 4 (2004): 413–44, esp. 438–39, 442.

<sup>39</sup> *Eistèn Genesisin*, in Pierre Nautin and Louis Doutreleau, *Didyme l'Aveugle: Sur la Genèse*, Tome II, Sources Chrétienne 244 (Paris: Éditions du Cerf, 1978), 2:181–83, with note: 226, n. 3.

both that Sarah was Abraham's sister and that she was his niece. He writes regarding Genesis 11:29 that "Abraham took Sarai, because marriages between uncles and brothers' daughters had not yet been forbidden by the law," going on to add that "even marriages between brothers and sisters were contracted among the first human beings," a reference to the marriage partners of the sons of Adam and Eve.<sup>40</sup> However, alongside this, Jerome's comment to Genesis 20:12 reads as follows: "*For truly she is my sister by my father, but not my mother.* That is, she is the daughter of Aran his brother, not his sister. But because in the Hebrew it has: *Truly she is my sister, my father's daughter, and not my mother's daughter,* and it states rather more clearly that she was Abraham's sister, we say by way of excuse for her that at that time such marriages had not yet been forbidden by the Law."<sup>41</sup>

Jerome, much as he is aware both of internal reasons for an identification of Sarah as niece of Abraham and legendary (Aggadic) traditions that adjust their relationship, is too honest a reader to disregard the plain meaning of the text. He admits that the text may well mean what it says, even as he explains that, at that time, such a union was permitted, for reasons we will discuss below.

Most commentators, both ancient and modern, are less willing to accept the nature of the close-kin relationship between Abraham and Sarah, generally seeking explanations that do the least damage to the text and to the moral character of the protagonist Abraham. Evidence of this unease—as I understand it—comes as early as the Qumran documents, probably the earliest postbiblical material cited here, in which we find the following passage in the so-called *Genesis Apocryphon*:

And I, Abram, had a dream in the night of my entering into the land of Egypt and I saw in my dream [that there wa]s a cedar, and a date-palm (which was) [very beautif]ul. Some men came, seeking to cut down and uproot the cedar and leave the date-palm by itself. Now the date-palm cried out and said, "Do not cut down the cedar, for we are both sprung from one stock." So the cedar was spared by the protection of the date-palm, and it [was] not cut [down]. That night I awoke from my sleep and said to Sarai, my wife, "I have had a dream; [and] I [am] frightened [by] this dream." She said to me, "Tell me your dream that I may know (it)." So I began to tell her this dream [and made it known] to [her, and (also) the meaning of this] dream, (and) s[aid], "[ ] who will seek to kill me and to spare you. But this is all the favor [that you must do for me]; In what[ever] place we shall be, say] about me, 'He is my brother.' Then I shall

<sup>40</sup> C. T. R. Hayward, *Saint Jerome's Hebrew Questions on Genesis* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995), 43.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, 52–53; see also his notes on 147–48 and 173.

live by your protection, *and my life be saved because of you*. [And they will seek to take you away from me and to kill me.”<sup>42</sup>

Here in this fragmentary parallel to chapter 12 of Genesis, the authors have explained Abraham’s (untrue) suggestion that Sarah claimed him as her brother, rather than husband, not only out of his fear for his life, but because God had spoken to him in a dream and told him to do so. This, then, eliminates the problem of the moral culpability of Abraham entirely, since he has only followed the (implicit) divine command.<sup>43</sup>

What seems to be the majority position, however, found in a wide variety of texts, is that Sarah was indeed Abraham’s “sister,” but only after the fashion of a certain usage of that term; she was, in fact, his niece, the daughter of his brother, his father’s son, and therefore a daughter of his father. Since, variously, either her own mother was not Abraham’s mother, or because her father, Haran, Abraham’s brother, did not share a mother with Abraham, she has no blood relation to Abraham maternally, and therefore it may truly be said that they do not share a mother.<sup>44</sup>

There is early evidence for this interpretation. Already in the first century, Josephus (*Judean Antiquities* I.211) is explicit: “Habrasos [Abraham] said [to Abimelech] that he had not lied about the relationship of his wife, for she was the child of his brother, and that without such dissimulation he would not have supposed that the visit would be safe.” Earlier (I.151) he had made this relation plain, listing Sarra (a variant of the Septuagint’s Sara) as a daughter of Aranes, that is, Haran, one of Abraham’s brothers. However, he also mentions the deception involved, saying first in relation to the episode of Genesis 12:13 (I.162), “And taking Sarra along with him and fearing the frenzy of the Egyptians, lest the king kill him because of the beauty of his wife, he devised the following scheme. He pretended that he was her brother and instructed her that she should feign this, for it was in their interest.” Subsequently, referring to 20:12, Josephus says (I.207), “And Habramos migrated to Gerera in Palestine, taking with himself Sarra, in the guise of a sister, making a pretense similar to the previous one because of fear.”<sup>45</sup> Josephus seems to

<sup>42</sup> Joseph A. Fitzmyer, *The Genesis Apocryphon of Qumran Cave 1 (1Q20): A Commentary*, *Biblica et Orientalia* 18/B (Rome: Editrice Pontificio Istituto Biblico, 2004), 99, translating 1QapGen 19:14–21. According to Fitzmyer (25–28), the manuscript of the *Genesis Apocryphon* dates to right around the beginning of the Common Era, although the text it contains may, of course, well be older, perhaps considerably so.

<sup>43</sup> On this passage, see James L. Kugel, *The Bible as It Was* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1997), 146–48.

<sup>44</sup> According to Firestone, “Prophethood, Marriageable Consanguinity, and Text,” 337 n. 20, the latter explanation does not actually appear in known traditional sources.

<sup>45</sup> Louis H. Feldman, *Flavius Josephus: Translation and Commentary*, ed. Steve Mason, vol. 3, *Judean Antiquities 1–4* (Leiden: Brill, 2000), 54, 61, 78, 80, with detailed annotations.

be unsure whether Abraham's reference to Sarah as his sister can be understood to be a justifiable expression of their true relationship, or whether rather Abraham was being deceptive.<sup>46</sup>

The Babylonian Talmud, recording opinions that may be as old as the second century, or even older, says the following (Tractate Sanhedrin 58b): "Come and hear: *And yet indeed she is my sister; she is the daughter of my father, but not of my mother.* This implies that the daughter of one's mother is forbidden! . . . And do you think that she was his sister? She was the daughter of his brother! And since that is so, there is no difference between [a sister] through [one's] father and [a sister] through [one's] mother—she is permitted. Rather, there he [Abram] said to him [Abimelech] thus: The relationship of a sister I have with her, through my father and not through my mother."<sup>47</sup> The Talmud here rejects the plain text of the Bible and insists that all Abraham could have meant to say is that since Sarah is the daughter of his brother, it is as if she were his sister, related through their common descent from Terah, Abraham's father and Sarah's grandfather, but since Abraham and Haran, his brother and Sarah's father, do not share a mother, Abraham and Sarah are not related through the matriarchal line.

Christian commentators share many of the same views, as we have already seen in part in looking at St. Jerome, but they also record others. Slightly earlier than Jerome, in the first half of the fourth century, we find the commentary of St. Ephrem the Syrian, for whom Sarah is the cousin of Abraham.<sup>48</sup> As he states, "Sarah was indeed the sister of Abraham: from his father because she was the daughter of his father's brother, but not from his mother, for none of her sisters had been married to Haran the son of Terah. Another woman, a foreigner, was married to Haran."<sup>49</sup> This interpretation is found in Jewish works too. *Targum Pseudo-Jonathan*,

<sup>46</sup> See also Thomas W. Franxman, *Genesis and the "Jewish Antiquities" of Flavius Josephus*, *Biblica et Orientalia* 35 (Rome: Biblical Institute Press, 1979), 127–32, 147–51. In his analysis of these sections, however, Franxman does not make this particular point.

<sup>47</sup> Adin Steinsaltz, *The Talmud: The Steinsaltz Edition*, vol. 18, *Tractate Sanhedrin, Part IV* (New York: Random House, 1998), 122.

<sup>48</sup> Edward G. Mathews Jr. and Joseph P. Amar, *St. Ephrem the Syrian: Selected Prose Works*, ed. Kathleen McVey, *Fathers of the Church*, no. 91 (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1994), 148 (sec. IX.1) in Syriac, paralleled in Edward G. Mathews Jr., *The Armenian Commentary on Genesis Attributed to Ephrem the Syrian*, *Corpus Scriptorum Christianorum Orientalium*, 573, *Scriptores Armeniaci* 24 (Louvain: Peeters, 1998), 78, in Armenian, although the latter has been shown to be a different text than the former (*Armenian Commentary*, xxxvi).

<sup>49</sup> Mathews and Amar, *St. Ephrem the Syrian*, 165 (sec. XVII.2). In this particular case it does not seem to affect his interpretation that Ephrem was a virulent anti-Semite. The same view is found in a text that knows Ephrem well, the early Syriac commentary studied by Abraham Levene, *The Early Syrian Fathers on Genesis: From a Syriac MS. on the Pentateuch in the Mingana Collection: the first eighteen chapters of the MS.* edited with Introduction, translation and notes; and including a study in comparative exegesis (London:

belonging to a period not before the seventh century,<sup>50</sup> renders Genesis 20:12 as follows: “Besides, she is, in truth my sister, the daughter of my father’s brother, but not of the family of my mother; and she became my wife.” This too takes Sarah as the cousin of Abraham. However, in the same text’s reading of 11:29, she is his niece: “And Abram and Nahor took wives to themselves; the name of Abram’s wife was Sarai, and the name of Nahor’s wife Milcah, the daughter of Haran the father of Milcah and the father of Iscah—she is Sarai.”<sup>51</sup>

Later and authoritative Jewish interpretations take another approach. In the late eleventh century, Rashi (1040–1105), whose interpretations are very influential for later tradition, says the following (based, of course, solidly on earlier traditions):

**She is [indeed] my sister, my father’s daughter.** And the daughter of *one’s* father *from a different mother* is permitted to a son of Noah {*for marriage*}, *i.e., a non-Jew*, for there is no *halachic relationship through paternity* for non-Jews {*in the case of marriage*}. In order to bear out his words he answered him thus. And if you will say *by way of objection*, is it not true that she was the daughter of his brother, *and not his father*? *The answer is that the children of children are like one’s own children*, and [Sarah] is thus *considered* the daughter of Terah, *Abraham’s father*, for *she was the daughter of Haran, another son of Terah*. Similarly, [Abraham] says to Lot, “for we are men who are brothers” {*although they were not biological brothers*}. **Though not my mother’s daughter.** Haran was from a different mother *than Abraham was*.<sup>52</sup>

Several important issues are raised or implied here, including issues that cannot arise for Christian authors since they concern specific problems of Jewish law. In the first place, like Jerome and others, Rashi admits that Abraham lived before the promulgation of the so-called Holiness Code, most centrally the laws of Leviticus 17–26, among which we find the explicit prohibition of sibling marriage.<sup>53</sup> Instead, as Jewish tradition refines the notion, Abraham was bound only by the Noahide or Noahic Laws, seven restrictions held to be binding on both Jews and non-Jews alike. “Sons of Noah” are all those who lived before the revelation at

Taylor’s Foreign Press, 1951), 93; but see p. 86, where Abraham is called Sarah’s uncle, and Sarah is explicitly identified as daughter of Haran. I am confused by Levene’s note on 272, which says that Haran is Terah’s elder brother—just before Levene refers to Gen. 11:29.

<sup>50</sup> Michael J. Maher, *Targum Pseudo-Jonathan: Genesis*, Aramaic Bible 1B (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1992), 11–12.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, 73, 51.

<sup>52</sup> Yisrael Isser Zvi Herczeg, *The Sapirstein Edition Rashi: The Torah, With Rashi’s Commentary*, Bereishis/Genesis, ArtScroll Series (New York: Menorah Publications, 1995), 213–14, and see M. Rosenbaum and A. M. Silberman, *Pentateuch, with Targum Onkelos, Haphtaroth and Rashi’s Commentary*, Genesis (New York: Hebrew Publishing, n.d.), 86, *ad* Gen. 20:12.

<sup>53</sup> Among those who share this understanding is Augustine in *The City of God* 15.16.

Sinai (known as sons of Noah, of course, since all other humanity had been annihilated in the flood that left only Noah, his wife, and his sons and daughters-in-law alive). While it seems relatively clear that no conception of any such set of laws actually existed for the authors of the Hebrew scriptures, much less in the biblical world they describe, later Jewish traditions accept their existence as a means to negotiate between behaviors allowed to those who accept Jewish law and those who do not. According to this understanding, Abraham may have legitimately married his own half-sister, since the prohibition of this in Leviticus 18:9 could not have applied to him. However, while this frees Abraham from the accusation that he lied when he claimed Sarah as his sister, it is also the case that Sarah was not actually his sister; she was his niece, daughter of his brother, but called his sister since she descended from the line of his father.

Later influential commentators sometimes differ from Rashi. Abraham ibn Ezra (1089–1164) comments upon 20:12 as follows: “Some say that this verse is to be understood in the same way as O God of my father Abraham [Gen. 32:10]. However, I believe that Abraham put Abimelech off with a timely excuse.” Ibn Ezra does not accept that Abraham is claiming that Sarah might rightly be called his sister, even though she is not so literally; rather, he believes the excuse to be a matter of convenience. This is confirmed in ibn Ezra’s comments on 11:29: “I do not find the explanation of those who say that Sarah was Abraham’s sister to be acceptable. If Sarah was really Abraham’s sister, Scripture would have stated, And Terah took Abram his son, and Sarai his daughter, the wife of Abram his son. Similarly if Sarah was the sister of Lot the Bible would have stated, ‘and Sarai the daughter of his son,’ as it does in the case of Lot.” Therefore, ibn Ezra does not accept that there is any genetic reason for Abraham claiming Sarah as his sister.<sup>54</sup> Nachmanides (1194–1270), known as the Ramban, taking another approach wrote of Genesis 20:12’s “and yet she is my sister, the daughter of my father” as follows: “I know not the sense of this apology. Even if it were true that she was his sister and his wife, nevertheless when they wanted to take her as a wife and he told them, *She is my sister*, in order to lead them astray, he already committed a sin towards them by bringing upon them a *great sin*, and it no longer mattered at all whether the thing was true or false!”<sup>55</sup> He goes

<sup>54</sup> H. Norman Strickman and Arthur M. Silver, *Ibn Ezra’s Commentary on the Pentateuch. Genesis (Bereshit)* (New York: Menorah Publishing, 1988), 212–13, 147.

<sup>55</sup> According to Barry L. Eichler, “On Reading Genesis 12:10–20,” in *Tehillah le-Moshe: Biblical and Judaic Studies in Honor of Moshe Greenberg*, ed. Mordechai Cogan, Barry L. Eichler, and Jeffrey H. Tigay (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1997), 23–38 (on 29 n. 17), “Nachmanides is the first Jewish exegete to deviate from the traditional stance of viewing the patriarchs as paragons of virtue and morality by ascribing questionable behavior to Abraham in his treatment of Sarah in both Egypt and Gerar.” See also David Berger, “On the Morality of the Patriarchs in Jewish Polemic and Exegesis,” in *Understanding Scripture: Explorations of Jewish and Christian Traditions of Interpretations*, ed. Clemens Thoma and Michael Wyschogrod (New York: Paulist Press, 1987), 49–62.

on to state that Abraham asked Sarah to state their kinship as siblings, imagining Abraham saying, “For the matter is true, and I thought that by doing this human life would be saved.”<sup>56</sup> These no doubt do not exhaust the possible approaches to the issue, and as with the ancients, modern commentators have also agonized over the problem,<sup>57</sup> which will probably continue to generate interesting and passionate engagement.

The complications and theoretical problems this episode creates for traditional Jewish exegesis are myriad. In addition to those we have already noted, including the issue of the veracity of the patriarch, we may refer to questions such as whether Abraham fully complied with the Mosaic law even before its promulgation (as Rabbinic literature in general holds must have been true, despite strong evidence to the contrary),<sup>58</sup> or whether Isaac, the second patriarch and son of Abraham and Sarah, should not legally have been considered a *mamzer*—perhaps badly translated as bastard—since at least the second century Mishnah, and later the Talmud, consider the opinion that a *mamzer* is one conceived through intercourse with a legally forbidden partner. This would raise a profound legal problem for the legitimacy of Isaac’s own marriage, since *mamzerim* may not marry non-*mamzerim*, and consequently call into question the paternity of the Jewish people as a whole.<sup>59</sup>

The biblical materials, although already extensively studied, continue to provide ample ground for further investigations. Here, however, from my perspective as a student of Buddhist traditions I would like to turn in another direction, and ask: in light of the typological similarity of the two

<sup>56</sup> Charles B. Chavel, *Ramban (Nachmanides): Commentary on the Torah, Genesis* (New York: Shilo Publishing House, 1971), 264.

<sup>57</sup> For one interesting example, see Jacques and Marie-Claire Nicole, “Sara, soeur et femme d’Abraham,” *Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft* 112 (2000): 5–23.

<sup>58</sup> Firestone, “Prophethood, Marriageable Consanguinity, and Text,” 336 n. 15, refers to Pesachim 6b in the Babylonian Talmud, “There is no early and late in the Torah,” as representing the logic of the opinion that the patriarchs upheld the laws even before their revelation at Sinai.

<sup>59</sup> As far as I know, this issue is not explicitly raised in relation to the marriage of Abraham and Sarah, and their son Isaac. *Mishnah Kiddushin* 3:12 (trans. Shaye J. D. Cohen, *The Beginnings of Jewishness: Boundaries, Varieties, Uncertainties* [Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999], 274) states: “And any woman who does not have the potential for a valid marriage with this man but has the potential for a valid marriage with other men, the offspring is a *mamzer*. And what [masc.] is this? This is he who has intercourse with any of the relations prohibited by the Torah.” See the discussion in Michael L. Satlow, *Tasting the Dish: Rabbinic Rhetorics of Sexuality*, *Brown Judaic Studies* 303 (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1995), 56–62. Sarah would have been forbidden marriage with a sibling but permitted it with another; hence Isaac would be a *mamzer* if Abraham and Sarah were siblings. Despite the evidence, however, it would have been absolutely impossible for the tradition to have considered Isaac to have been a *mamzer*, since this would consequently invalidate the legitimacy of the entire resulting Jewish people, who trace their line back to him. (Of course, I do not deny that individual authors may have entertained the position, but I do not know any that did.)

basic origin stories, what value might these Jewish materials have for a study of Buddhist literature? Although thematically there is a fundamental parallelism between our Jewish and Buddhist incestuous origin stories, there is certainly no historical connection between them, and the degrees of attention given the accounts in their respective traditions are significantly different. It is this last point which seems to me most suggestive.

#### THE STATUS OF SCRIPTURE

The key I find, lies in the nature of the respective scriptures, Buddhist and Jewish. It is, of course, a commonplace to say that Buddhism has no Bible, that its scriptures are organized into a different sort of canonical collection than is the Bible of Western tradition. And in some ways, this is quite true, especially synchronically. But in another way, there is a great deal of commonality between the traditions. To recognize this commonality, we have to look carefully at the historical evolutions of both traditions, to compare them diachronically. Simplistically, but not inaccurately, we may say that what makes the textual tradition of the Jewish scriptures appear to be so monolithic is the rigor with which certain materials have been excluded from canonization. Early Judaism embraced a considerable textual variety, something that is evident from so-called Apocryphal literature, from discoveries in the Cairo Geniza and the Judean desert, and so on. The orthodox process of canonization, however, selected some texts and versions of texts and rejected others, resulting in the creation of the corpus we know today, a closed canon. It is this closed and delimited canon that provides the base for Jewish biblical exegesis.

It is often said that Buddhism has no comparable canon, since above all most Buddhist collections of scripture were never closed, materials being continually accreted over the centuries. This is a process that continues into the present day, but not one seen equally everywhere in Buddhism. When we contrast Jewish and Buddhist attitudes toward scripture, then, we compare apples and oranges, since the respective scopes of the scriptures in question are so very different. There is, it is fair to say, one dominant, if not indeed universal, Jewish attitude toward the canonical status of biblical scripture that has survived the centuries to become globally accepted. Because of its closed canon, Jewish exegetical tradition is compelled to creatively account for the entire corpus of its scripture, continually renewing its understandings of the relatively limited texts. But there is no comparable parallel uniformity in Buddhist attitudes toward canon. In fact, for geographical, political, and linguistic reasons, from a relatively early time there developed in various Buddhist traditions a vast panorama of views toward scriptures and canonicity. While our knowledge of this variety is not perfect, historically speaking, we do see a sharp

contrast between the closed canon of the (Sri Lankan and Southeast Asian) Theravāda lineages and the open canons of the Chinese and Tibetans. Buddhism having effectively disappeared from the Indian subcontinent by around the thirteenth century, we have very little information about how other, now vanished, hypothetical canons, in Indic languages for instance, may have looked, or how their respective traditions may have treated them, though we have some reasons for believing that such canons (if this is even the right word for such collections) did exist.

Although there are other factors at work, this fact alone has serious implications for the way Buddhist authors may have looked at their scriptures, and what they may have felt compelled to explain. For Jewish exegesis, God's Torah—more strictly, the whole Mikra, the whole biblical literature—is perfect, not a letter unnecessary or superfluous. Jewish authors, therefore, on the one hand must attempt to reconcile each and every aspect of the limited textual corpus with each and every other aspect, while on the other hand, it is precisely their willingness to engage and reengage the entire canon that allows them to keep scripture alive.<sup>60</sup> For Buddhist authors too, everything the Buddha taught is authoritative and true, and they developed various means to reconcile what we (etically, so to speak) might see as internal contradictions. These methods include such techniques as an appeal to “skillful means,” *upāya*, to the idea that the Buddha may have said things which appear contradictory, but that he did so only as a stratagem to make his lessons available to audiences with varying levels of understanding and capacity. The flexibility with which Buddhist authors were able to expand the scope of the authoritative is evident in the way the early Buddhist tag line “All that is spoken by the Buddha is well spoken” is later transformed into “All that is well spoken is spoken by the Buddha.” With hermeneutic strategies like this, strict consistency need not be expected from the scriptural corpora, and there is little pressure to develop complex exegetical methods to cope creatively with apparent inconsistency. A related factor is the very vastness of the scriptures—perhaps even their theoretical limitlessness: this may have been felt, subliminally perhaps, to remove the pressing necessity to address potentially problematic instances. In one sense, there may have been simply too much else to talk about.

Although some of this logic is speculative, we may still accept the conclusion that the diversity of Buddhist scriptures allows Buddhist authors to avoid the necessity—which is a driving force in Jewish Biblical hermeneutics—to reconcile each and every statement that may appear

<sup>60</sup> I leave aside as not relevant to my basic argument the question of whether Christian commentators generally held the “Old Testament” in the same high regard. They may well have been responding to different pressures, and under different constraints.

somewhere with each and every other “canonical” statement. While such a conclusion would appear to be correct, we can also see matters in another way, one which highlights something fundamental about the differences between Jewish and Buddhist scriptures. For I believe Buddhist traditions *do* demonstrate concerns for systemic coherence parallel to those we see in Jewish biblical exegesis. But these concerns are not concentrated in the hagiographic, legal, or narrative sphere, as they are in Jewish traditions. Rather, these concerns for system are what generate the Buddhist Abhidharma.

Abhidharma is a collective title for Buddhist doctrinal systematics, the attempt to normalize and rationalize everything the Buddha (was thought to have) taught about how the world fits together and how things work. Thus, in theory Abhidharma is based solely on materials that appear in canonical works, principally sūtras, the diverse and various aspects of the truth Buddha taught being brought together and regularized into one unified and self-consistent system. Of course, in practice we certainly see innovation in the Abhidharma; it is in the very nature of living religious systems that innovators claim not to invent anything new, but only to transmit the pure and original vision. To claim otherwise is to sunder oneself from the tradition. The idea behind the Abhidharma is one of systematics, of approaching the holy word much as Jewish exegetes approach the biblical text: in the end, God or the Buddha can ultimately, on any particular point, only have meant one thing—there is only one real Truth.<sup>61</sup> Since Buddhist literature is most essentially concerned with the Buddha’s presentation of his Dharma, however, rather than with his life or with narrative or historical episodes, the fundamental nature of the systematization of this literature differs from what we find in Jewish biblical tradition(s), in which God’s revelation appears through and within the history of his people. Abhidharma systematics works, thus, in a way structurally parallel to Jewish biblical exegesis, both with respect to its efforts to unify the sacred vision and in its willingness to fill gaps, to make room for innovation, but differs in the genre it engages.

Now, as we have seen, Jewish scholasticism devotes considerable attention to an apparent problem of the incestuous sibling relationship of the patriarch Abraham and the matriarch Sarah. But as observed above, while parallel primary sources variously do recount the same basic story, subsequent Buddhist commentarial tradition virtually ignores the similar sibling incest that lies at the root of the Buddha’s familial origins. How

<sup>61</sup> This may be too dogmatic: on the Buddhist side, one only has to think of certain interpretations of Madhyamaka epistemology, while from a different perspective, Midrashic hermeneutics does recognize the multiplicity of divine intention. One might contrast Ibn Ezra’s rationalism with Rashi, for instance. I am grateful to Reuven Firestone for his suggestion here.

might we explain these very different responses to such similar origin myths? Or to put the question another way: can the fact that one literature devotes attention to a topic ignored by the other serve as any sort of laboratory for the study of the respective traditions? One way to approach this is to think about the different natures of the Buddhist and Jewish holy texts, as suggested above. Buddhist texts do not emphasize episodes in the history of the Buddha because they concentrate on his teachings, his Dharma, the (emically) timeless and ahistorical lessons he gave revealing the true nature of reality, and hence the path(s) to liberation. A related, but not mutually exclusive, avenue of inquiry concerns the source of authority and authenticity in Buddhism. To start at the beginning, the Buddha is a model—of buddhahood, perfection—and his life is a model—of the path to that perfection. Why, then, does Buddhist literature on the whole not concentrate on the Buddha's life nearly as much as on his nature? The simple answer is that spiritual authority for Buddhists lies in the Buddha's awakening, in the nature he came to acquire, not in who he was in any genealogical or biological sense—in who he was born as—nor does this nature emerge in a straightforward way from his biography. At the same time, it *is* important that the Buddha, in his last life in particular, controlled and directed his birth into a specific family at a specific time and place. Indeed, a great deal of attention is given the Buddha's genealogy in one particular sense, namely that of mapping and narrating his previous lives. The tales of these lives, the Jātakas, illustrate the Buddha's accumulation of perfect qualities, but consequently they are in no meaningful sense "biographical." The focus is squarely on the Buddha's antecedents, to be sure, but in a fashion radically different from what we see in Jewish tradition. Therefore, the Buddha's history, his lineage, is his own story (or stories), including the morality tales depicting his moral and spiritual development, not the story of the ancestors into whose line he will ultimately be born.

Jewish identity, in contrast, rests primarily in genealogy. It is based on the "biography" of the Jewish people. Jews are Jewish, in sacred mythology if not in genetic fact, because they are descended from two primarily chosen people, Abraham and Sarah.<sup>62</sup> Attention must therefore be

<sup>62</sup> Of course, this does not ignore the possibility of conversion to Judaism. However, it is very interesting in this regard to recall that converts traditionally adopt as their patronymic *ben/bat Avraham (Avinu)*, son/daughter of (Our Father) Abraham (or in some ritual contexts *ben/bat Sarah [Imenu]*, son/daughter of [Our Mother] Sarah). While I believe the currently common *ben/bat Avraham v' Sarah* is probably modern, there is relatively early evidence for the adoption of the appellation "son of Abraham." The fifth- or sixth-century *Genesis Rabbah*, in commenting on Genesis 12:5, understands that Abraham converted the men of Haran, and Sarah the women (§§39:14 and 84:4, H. Freedman and Maurice Simon, *Midrash Rabbah*, Genesis [London: Soncino Press, 1939], 324, 771). Just what this means may be clearer in

given to the relationship between these two. If the patriarch and matriarch are themselves not pure, and if the line they spawned is legally, ritually, or affectively defiled, this is a problem for all who subsequently trace their identity along that line. Since Jewish biblical exegesis must always keep in mind as one of its missions the need to understand and justify the divine choice of Jews as the chosen people, this genealogical link to Abraham and Sarah is central and essential. In contrast, for Buddhists, the Buddha stands as a vital model for the possibility of human perfection, whether this be understood as liberation from *samsāra* in *nirvāṇa*, or more abstractly as the attainment of Awakening. The focus, however, is resolutely on the Buddha as a *buddha*—an awakened one who has realized the goal toward which we too strive—rather than on Gautama Siddhārtha, an historical figure. Episodes of the Buddha's life or lives are, of course, important in Buddhist theology, and their narration may convey basic paradigms of the Buddhist soteriological message.<sup>63</sup> The Buddha's actions must reflect his nature as a perfect being, and therefore be, morally and otherwise, themselves perfect, complete and beyond reproach. But here there is an important difference between the two stories we examined, the Buddhist and the Jewish. The attribution of incest in Buddhist tradition is not onto Gautama himself, but only onto his ultimate ancestors, those from whom sprang the clan of the Śākya. While this makes his familial origins problematic, possibly legally and probably affectively, the Buddha himself is not in any way personally implicated in this transgression. Indeed, even setting aside the distinction suggested above between focus on the "individual" iterated through birth after birth and the (essentially adventitious) family circumstances of a particular birth, part of what defines the Buddha from a narrative biographical point of view is precisely his own abandonment of his family. The reasons for this renunciation, to be sure, have nothing whatsoever to do with the questionable origins of his clan,

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the seventh- to ninth-century *Midrash Tanhuma'* (§3.6, Genesis 14.1, pt. I, trans. in John T. Townsend, *Midrash Tanhuma* [Hoboken, NJ: Ktav, 1989], 66), which says, "The Holy One said: Thus do I love the proselyte. Moreover, Abraham is the father of the proselytes." The absolutely central role Abraham plays in the ideas of Maimonides (1135–1204) on conversion and Jewish identity are well discussed by James A. Diamond, "Maimonides and the Convert: A Juridical and Philosophical Embrace of the Outsider," *Medieval Philosophy and Theology* 11 (2003): 125–46. Slightly later, according to Isaac Klein, *A Guide to Jewish Religious Practice* (New York: Jewish Theological Seminary of America, 1979), 445, Jacob ben Asher (1270–ca. 1340) in the "Even Ha'ezer," section on marriage, of his very influential *Arba'ah Turim* (§129:20) insisted on the patronymic *ben/bat Avraham Avinu* in order to identify converts. All of this provides good evidence for a long-standing consciousness of the centrality of descent from Abraham (and, even if not explicitly, from Sarah) even among converts not born Jewish.

<sup>63</sup> See Jonathan A. Silk, "The Fruits of Paradox: On the Religious Architecture of the Buddha's Life Story," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 71, no. 4 (2003): 863–81, for an example.

but the fact remains that the Buddha renounced the family in which some impropriety once took place.

In Jewish tradition things could not be more different, nor the significance of identification with a particular lineage more central. Even if one wanted to suggest that the Jewish people as a nation obtained their link to divine chosenness from (or through) Moses at Sinai, the sacred text revealed there itself goes to great lengths to detail the lineage linking the Jews of the exodus to the patriarch and matriarch generations earlier—linking the people Israel to Israel, otherwise known as Jacob, son of Isaac, grandson of Abraham and Sarah. Conversely, our Buddha Śākyamuni does not, and buddhas in general do not, belong to a chosen people, much less those who may follow the teachings of such buddhas as Buddhists. What makes a Buddhist a Buddhist is not some particular connection to the Buddha or a buddha in any genealogical or biological sense, but rather, ideally, an aspiration ultimately to make oneself into a buddha too. This is a point we certainly do not need the Jewish materials to help us understand or appreciate. Where they do help us, however, is in emphasizing the underlying logic of attention or inattention to biography in its narrative centrality, thereby highlighting a distinctive feature of the overall Buddhist project.

A final question we might ask is why, to begin with, the respective traditions preserved such origin stories, the morality of which is quite problematic for both. In the Jewish case, the answer may be relatively straightforward—the lineage of the people Israel should be as linear and “pure” as possible, with a concern to avoid the introduction of outside blood motivating many otherwise “improper” alliances, at least early on.<sup>64</sup> It is possible that the same motive may be responsible for the Buddhist preservation of the incestuous origin story of the Śākya clan. The texts themselves attribute to the sons of King Īkṣvāku the desire to avoid introducing impurity into their line. And just as with the biblical materials, it is clear that this account was maintained even in the face of strong cultural pressure disapproving of close-kin marriage. Later biblical bans on incestuous unions and Indian legal and cultural aversions to such pairings appear, in their respective cases, to have been similarly trumped by the desire, or even the perceived necessity, of guaranteeing the purity of descent of the holy family.

A first lesson to be learned here, in conclusion, is once again perhaps an obvious one: the internal dynamics of a tradition motivate its responses even to extremely similar stimuli. The laboratory-like conditions provided

<sup>64</sup> For some complications of this project, see Nancy Jay, “Sacrifice, Descent and the Patriarchs,” *Vetus Testamentum* 38, no. 1 (1988): 52–70. I am grateful to Miriyam Glazer for emphasizing to me the question of purity of lineage.

by the biblical story of Abraham and Sarah and the Buddhist account of Śākyamuni's antecedents allow us a window into the very different approaches to, and valuations of, "biography" in the respective traditions. This window, in turn, permits us to peer into the inner workings of the traditions, in particular their attitudes toward sources of authority and legitimacy. It will remain a task for the future to explore whether there may have been ethical implications of such divergent approaches as well, whether, for instance, Buddhist attention, or lack thereof, to the immorality displayed in the Buddha's life story is paralleled in other attitudes toward illicit behaviors, or whether, on the contrary, the karma doctrine of personal responsibility, for instance, balances whatever systemic disregard there may have been. However one chooses to continue thinking about the implications of the issues raised above, one thing is certain: incestuous ancestries can be fruitful indeed.