H-Net Reviews
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Vanessa R. Sasson. *The Birth of Moses and the Buddha: A Paradigm for the Comparative Study of Religions.* Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2007. xiii + 216 pp. $85.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-905048-38-0.

Reviewed by Rachel Adelman (Miami University of Ohio)

Published on H-Judaic (September, 2009)

Commissioned by Jason Kalman (Hebrew Union College - Jewish Institute of Religion)

Moses and Buddha: Never Shall the Twain Meet?

Vanessa R. Sasson, in *The Birth of Moses and the Buddha,* sets out to establish a new paradigm for comparative religious studies, impelled neither by the historical search for sources of influence, nor by the quest for universal, archetypal patterns within the human psyche. Rather, she analyzes the narratives of the prenatal and birth experiences of Moses and Buddha, spiritual giants within their respective religions, in order to highlight commonalities and differences between Judaism and Buddhism. Otto Rank set the precedent for this type of study in his monograph, *The Myth of the Birth of the Hero* (originally published in 1914), comparing the birth narratives of Moses, Sargon, Heracles (Hercules), Oedipus, Jesus, and others–all heroes exposed (sometimes with the intention of infanticide), because the child was the product of an illicit union, or the subject of an oracle predicting their rise to power and the havoc that would ensue. Fascinated by the shared paradigm behind the myths, Rank suggested that they present an "ideal human skeleton," lying in the closet of the universal unconscious. With a very different agenda, Nahum Sarna took up the gauntlet in his concise comparison between "The Legend of Sargon" and Moses's birth narrative (Exod. 1 and 2), in *Exploring Exodus* (1986, pp. 29-31). While Sarna points out the differences between the myths, his main point is to show that the Book of Exodus draws from a common ancient Mesopotamian source. He underscores the parallel themes, images, and linguistic tropes–the basket of rushes sealed in bitumen, the epithet "drawer of water," and even the motif of justifying the legitimacy of the leader (through a priestly affiliation). Sasson's study does not engage in historical source criticism or in psychological paradigms.

Given her thorough coverage of both the Jewish and Buddhist literature, it is clear that there is no overlap in textual sources. Her agenda is not inspired by a historical search for the *ur*-text, the naval of origin, but rather engages in a study of the naval experience itself. Quoting Wendy Doniger, she establishes her agenda: "Comparison makes it possible for us literally to *cross*-examine cultures, by using a myth from one culture to reveal to us what is *not* in a telling from another culture, to find out

the things not 'dreamt of in your philosophy' (as Hamlet said to Horatio)…. Comparison defamiliarizes what we take for granted. We can only see the inflection of a particular telling when we see other variants."[1] Her excavation of the sources, then, is less a search for commonality, than a chiseling out of differences, setting religious tenets in high relief.

Yet the project seems to fall short of these lofty ambitions. While she points to various interesting parallels between the birth narratives–the motif of supernal light, at the birth of Moses and within the womb for Buddah; the painless birth; the uncanny precociousness of the newborns; their virtuous mothers; and the absence and reappearance of the father figure–she sometimes misreads the Jewish sources in her eagerness to find common ground. (Not being a scholar in Buddhist or Sanskrit sources, I cannot adequately evaluate her analysis of these sources). For example, she cites Pieter van de Horst and David Daube, who point to Moses's possibly divine nature, based on the claim of "divine intervention" in his premature birth, or, in Daube's conjecture, that there had even been a "divine conception." Yet, as Sasson admits, these ideas are not representative of mainstream Jewish exegesis. On the contrary, the biblical and midrashic texts are emphatic about Moses's *all-too-human* origins (most clearly delineated in the elaborate account of his death and burial, cf. Sasson's discussion [pp. 185-187]). Which brings me to a sharper critique. Sasson does not draw a line between the biblical text, the context of its composition, and the midrashic tradition that evolves from gaps in or discrepancies between biblical texts. She relies heavily on the standard translations, which sometimes leads to gross mistranslations (e.g., she translates *'ish ha-elohim* as "man-god," rather than "man of God," a common epithet for prophet in the Hebrew Bible). Sasson also seems unaware of the modern midrashic scholarship engaged in tracing "exegetical motifs" (James Kugel's terms) across compositions within a given tradition. The lack of historical awareness and the tendency to cast all commentaries (ancient and modern, exegetical and homiletical, Hellenistic and Palestinian) into one primordial exegetical soup undermines her scholarship. For example, Jocheved is said to be the ripe old age of 130 at the birth of Moses, probably related to the tradition on the timing of the Exodus, after 210 years of the Egyptian exile when the prophet was 80 (cf. Exod. 7:7; as recorded in *Seder 'Olam Rabbah* and other tannaitic sources; see the discussion in Joseph Heinemann, *Aggadot ve-Toldoteihen* [1974]). Sasson, instead, relates her uncanny old age to her merit as the righteous mother of Moses, and her role as midwife (as recorded in *Exodus Rabbah*)–exegetical traditions that are separated by at least five hundred years. Furthermore, the legend of the marriage and separation of Moses's parents, Jocheved and Amram, is based on a close reading of Exod. 2:1 (the two verbs understood as a divorce and remarriage, *va-yelekh* [he went, i.e., left], and *va-yikah* [and took her "again" as a wife]). Instead, Sasson links (I think, mistakenly) the midrashic tradition to the questionable paternity of the "god-like man," and the absence and reappearance of the father figure, a motif prevalent in the legends on Buddah's "immaculate conception."

Admittedly, Moses is deemed to be *very human*, mortal, even tragically flawed, whereas Buddha, in his many reincarnations, is more akin to a god. The legends surrounding the latter share more in common with the narratives of Jesus's nativity than Moses. I concur with her concluding remarks: "it seems to me that, if we are to be fair to both religions examined here, he [Buddha] must be placed in a category all his own. He was not a man, or a prophet of God, or God itself. He was a Buddha. In his birth narrative, he shared archetypal elements with Moses, but archetypes are merely forms, and as such they are emptiness" (p. 189). In shucking off the search for archetypal patterns and emerging from "the cave" of mere forms (a Buddhist inversion of Plato's allegory), does Sasson not undermine the enterprise she set up initially? How does a comparative study benefit by underlining the differences between religious traditions, what Doniger calls "defamiliarizing"? By abandoning historical and cultural specificity, too much is lost in a superficial comparison of motifs and themes. The question remains: wherein lies the gain?

Note

[1]. Wendy Doniger, *The Implied Spider: Politics and Theology in Myth* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), 33-34.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

https://networks.h-net.org/h-judaic

Citation: Rachel Adelman. Review of Sasson, Vanessa R., *The Birth of Moses and the Buddha: A Paradigm for the*

Comparative Study of Religions. H-Judaic, H-Net Reviews. September, 2009.

URL: http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=24779

This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.