

# Chapter 1

## SOURCES

We start our journey with an obvious fact, yet one that is far from trivial. It is simply this: all three founders lived and died long ago. It is approximately two and a half millennia since Siddhattha Gotama wandered the Ganges Plain and 2,000 years since Jesus first taught in Galilee, placing them both firmly in the period of classical antiquity. The most recent of the three, Muhammad, died in 632 CE, which puts him at the cusp of late antiquity and the early Middle Ages. Their lives and their worlds are separated from ours by a vast temporal gulf that renders them figures of ancient rather than modern history. There are many implications that arise from this fact but one of the most relevant is the question of information. A common problem for anyone studying ancient times is the frequent paucity of material, combined with its fragmentary nature and questions about its historical accuracy. Frequently, we just do not have much reliable data to go on, and this is the case for the three founders as well. This raises a series of initial questions. What are the key texts that have generated the standard versions of the lives of the Buddha, Jesus and Muhammad? When were they composed and by whom? To what degree are they consistent with each other? How do contemporary scholars – both inside and outside each religious tradition – assess their reliability and worth?

### The Delay in Writing

The Buddha is said to have lived to be 80 years of age, and by the time of his death, his new spiritual movement had been established for over four decades, yet there is virtually no early information about him from nonreligious sources. The traditional story has been constructed almost entirely from Buddhist writings that, understandably, were written from a specifically religious viewpoint. That is not to say that these sources are bereft of historical information but the first point to acknowledge is that, for better or worse, the main sources for the life of the Buddha are texts authored

by persons who were his committed followers and viewed him through the lens of faith.

The second point that should be noted is the date of these texts. Even the earliest of them are separated from the Buddha by several centuries. If the first generations of Buddhists felt a strong compulsion to create a biography of the founder for posterity, then there is no convincing evidence that such a work ever existed.<sup>1</sup> One reason often proffered for the lack of an early written biography is the claim that the story of the Buddha is ultimately irrelevant. It is the message and not the man that matters. In fact, focusing on the man can easily distract one from the message. As the founder of the Lin-Chi tradition once summed up: “If you meet the Buddha, kill the Buddha”.<sup>2</sup> In time, however, Buddhists began to feel the need to tell the story of the master as well as to pass on his eternal wisdom. It is as if his teaching about ultimate liberation could not be entirely divorced from his experience of seeking liberation. The Buddha’s own arduous quest for escape from the enslaving wheel of rebirth was seen as a powerful demonstration of the truth of his message and a unique example of its practicality. To see the teacher was to see the teaching.<sup>3</sup>

Although precise dates are elusive, scholars have identified several broad phases in the gradual development of a complete written biography of the Buddha. The first of these is the oral phase. As far as we know, the Buddha and his earliest companions did not actually write anything. There was a culture in which the master’s doctrines were memorized and passed on orally. Accounts of the First Buddhist Council, which occurred soon after the Buddha’s death, reflect the importance of this oral stage. Its main business was to establish an authentic collection of the Buddha’s teachings and monastic guidelines, and it was the excellent memory of two monks that provided the material. The Buddha’s cousin and personal assistant, Ananda, recited the sermons that he had witnessed firsthand, while Upali provided an account of the rules of community life that the Buddha had commended to his followers. For the next four centuries, that twofold collection of discourses and regulations was memorized and handed down from generation to generation within the monasteries of the new religious movement as it slowly expanded across Southern and Eastern Asia.

The second phase is marked by the emergence of written texts, in particular the Pali Canon, which dates back to the reign of the Sri Lankan regent Vattagamini during the first century BCE. Theravada Buddhism recognizes its contents as authoritative and definitive, thus ascribing it canonical status. These are its holiest scriptures. The Pali Canon consists of three subdivisions known as the Three Baskets (Tipitaka). The first of these is the Basket of Discipline (Vinaya Pitaka), which contains the Buddha’s instructions concerning monastic life. It is believed that its many rules and regulations, which provide a comprehensive blueprint for monks and nuns, can be traced back to the contribution of Upali at the First Council. While it is primarily concerned with the ordering of the monastic community, the Vinaya Pitaka also contains snippets from the Buddha’s life. Frequently, a rule or set of rules are preceded by a brief anecdote, which presents the original setting in which he delivered that particular teaching. In a similar fashion, the contents of the second basket, the Basket of Threads (Sutta Pitaka), are believed to be the sermons of the Buddha and other early disciples as recalled by Ananda at the First Council. Typically, each sermon is prefaced by Ananda’s claim: “Thus on one occasion I heard the Buddha say. . .”

Like the first basket, the Sutta Pitaka focuses on doctrine rather than biography, but the sermons recorded here also contain fleeting references to episodes during the founder's life. In addition, it includes the Jataka Tales, which tell of the Buddha's previous reincarnations and his gradual spiritual progress over many lifetimes. The third basket, the Abhidhamma Pitaka (Basket of Higher Learning), is very different from the first two and is considered to be a later work. It consists of a more developed philosophical interpretation of time, mind and matter. As such, it has little or no information concerning the life of the historical Buddha.

As one of the oldest extant writings in Buddhism, the Pali Canon naturally enjoys pride of place among the many texts that provide information regarding the Buddha's story. Although scholars point out that later Chinese and Tibetan translations from older Sanskrit sources contain strands of material that possibly predate the Pali Canon, the Three Baskets remains "the single most useful source" for constructing the life of the Enlightened One.<sup>4</sup> However, there are still limitations concerning its biographical material. First, Pali was not the native tongue of the Buddha or his contemporaries, although it is a close cousin. Second, although the Canon claims to be the Buddha's own words, the texts often betray a typically Theravadan viewpoint.<sup>5</sup> Third, despite speculation about the possibility that some of the oral tradition behind the texts can be traced back to an early phase, the fact remains that the written texts are centuries removed from the Buddha. To a great extent, the best that we possess is how the Buddha's disciples viewed him 400 years after his death. Fourth, even if the original material is much older than the texts themselves, the nature of the biographical information is very piecemeal. In this second phase, we may have written texts but we still do not yet have a complete and proper narrative. The bits and pieces of the Buddha's story are there as in a collage, but they primarily serve a didactic purpose, as the preface for a particular teaching or the context of a specific sermon.<sup>6</sup> There is no overall life story but only episodic fragments embedded in sermons to illustrate some practice.<sup>7</sup>

It is only in the third phase that a more complete picture of the Buddha's life is put into written form. Between the first century BCE and the second century CE, there appeared a number of important biographies, which reworked the fragmentary pieces from the oral and canonical phases into the standard story line. Eventually, Buddhism felt the need for more than just a disparate collection of the master's teachings. It required a new form of literature that traced the life journey of its founder more thoroughly, especially the key milestones along the way. One reason for this shift was the geographical expansion of the new religion across diverse national and cultural borders. The first "lives" of the Buddha were part of the overall missionary outreach, aimed at demonstrating the universal relevance of the man and his message. Another reason was the establishment of pilgrimage sites, each of which was said to be the location of an important episode in his life. The earliest three works that describe those great events in detail are the Mahavastu, the Lalitavistara and the Buddhacarita.

The Mahavastu is a product of the Lokottaravadan community, one of the earliest schools in Buddhism. Extant manuscripts are written in a hybrid form of Sanskrit and its oldest elements may stem from as early as the second century BCE. The Mahavastu is a lengthy collection of sayings and Jataka Tales, organized in a loose

manner around a central biography of the Buddha. The title *Mahavastu* literally means “Great Event” and it refers to the birth of the Buddha in our time and space. The story is organized into three distinct stages. The first stage begins with his previous life as a bodhisattva in the age of Buddha Dipankara eons ago. The second stage begins with his penultimate reincarnation in Tusita Heaven where he meticulously plans the time, place and circumstances of his final rebirth. This section goes on to recount stories between his infancy and his Enlightenment. The third stage outlines his first seven weeks as the Buddha, the conversions of the earliest disciples and the successful visit to his hometown. Much of the material in this last section closely corresponds to the fragmentary versions found in the Pali Canon.

With the *Mahavastu*, Buddhism finally had a written text that focussed on the story of the founder, at least up to the institution of the monastic order. Yet invaluable as it is, the *Mahavastu* is not without its limitations. The work appears to lack a clear organizational structure, as if it was randomly thrown together. Furthermore, it unashamedly depicts the Buddha as a superhuman figure. He is conceived without intercourse, born painlessly and has minimal need of sleep, food or medicine. It is as if the Buddha lived on another plane of existence, scarcely affected by the suffering inherent in mundane human life. Such unabashed predilection for the miraculous naturally raises issues of plausibility in the mind of the modern reader.

A similar tendency is evident in the *Lalitavistara*, which consists of 27 chapters of composite literary styles. It contains a relatively continuous narrative in classical Sanskrit prose accompanied by numerous sections of verse in a more vernacular form of mixed Sanskrit. The original text was probably composed in an early Sarvastivadin environment but it has subsequently been overlaid and recast with Mahayanan material. It enjoys canonical status in the Mahayana tradition and has been widely influential across the centuries.<sup>8</sup> The composite nature of the work makes an estimation of its age difficult, but most contemporary scholars opt for the first century CE. The title literally means “an account of the sport (of the Buddha)”. In other words, the final reincarnation of the Buddha is understood as the play (*lalita*) of a superior being, similar to the Hindu Puranas. The *Lalitavistara* begins with the splendid descent of the Buddha from Tusita Heaven into our world via his physical conception and birth. It finishes with the Buddha’s first sermon to his five companions at Isipatana. Thus, its scope is very similar to the *Mahavastu* in that both texts terminate at the commencement of the teaching mission. They are more interested in the journey of the main subject from childhood to Buddhahood than the subsequent foundation of the monastic order and the dissemination of the message. The *Lalitavistara* also shares the *Mahavastu*’s tendency to ascribe superhuman qualities to the main character.

The third of the earliest biographies is the *Buddhacarita* (“Acts of the Buddha”) by Ashvaghosha.<sup>9</sup> Little is known of his personal life but it is thought that Ashvaghosha was a philosopher-poet and religious adviser in the court of Kanishka who reigned over the Kushan Empire from 127 to 151 CE. The original work was composed in Sanskrit and probably consisted of 28 cantos in which the life of the Buddha is described in some detail. Ashvaghosha’s masterpiece is frequently preferred by scholars over the *Mahavastu* and the *Lalitavistara* for several reasons. First, it extends the narrative beyond the Enlightenment and first sermon, referring to a number of key events in the long missionary career of the Buddha, including his death. Second, the

style of the *Buddhacarita* is not only elegant and lyrical, making it one of the finest examples of Buddhist literature, but it is also remarkably free of supernatural elements. In contrast to the authors of the *Mahavastu* and the *Lalitavistara*, Ashvaghosha exercised considerable restraint with regard to mythological embellishment. Third, the *Buddhacarita* displays greater organization of material and seems to be more faithful to the biographical fragments found in the Pali Canon. In time, a host of other biographies in various languages were produced across the full spectrum of Buddhist schools. Each is characterized by its own distinctive style and its own particular concerns. Yet there is a fundamental agreement on the general outline of the story, suggesting that most were derived from the original canonical fragments or the first generation of biographies described above.

Scientific scrutiny of the traditional sources commenced in the nineteenth century and scholars immediately faced a serious methodological difficulty.<sup>10</sup> The central figure of the early biographies is undoubtedly an impressive person, but on many occasions he seems hardly human. The story is so littered with miraculous occurrences that scholars understandably felt compelled to suspect, if not declare outright, that a healthy dose of legendary enhancement has been applied. The interval of several centuries between the Buddha's life and the written texts only served to reinforce the sense that the many unusual occurrences are subsequent additions by the pious authors. If many aspects are indeed later accretions, scholars began to ponder what constituted the original, historical core.

That question gave rise to two distinct approaches. The first, and most radical, approach was the claim that most, if not all, of the material in the traditional sources was mythological. Put simply, the Buddha never really existed, or if he did it was impossible to know anything about him.<sup>11</sup> The main proponents of this position were scholars who focused on comparative mythology, such as Rudolf Otto Franke, Emile Senart and Heinrich Kern.<sup>12</sup> In contrast, a second group of scholars was more hopeful that the Buddha had indeed existed and that it was possible to know something about him even though the truth lay hidden beneath many layers of fictional enhancement. The most famous academics in this group were Hermann Oldenberg and Thomas William Rhys Davids. With them the quest for the historical Buddha commenced, mirroring the same contemporary search for the historical Jesus among biblical scholars.<sup>13</sup> The goal of uncovering the man behind the myth sounded legitimate, but it quickly became apparent that the subjectivity of the scholars themselves had been underestimated. Personal presuppositions and prejudices were not easily put aside and the result was not the expected consensus but a frustrating variety of "historical Buddhas", each reflecting the deeper concerns and values of the historian. For example, the Buddha was variously portrayed as the founder of a rationalistic ethic, the discoverer of a scientific system of meditation, a social reformer who fought against the evils of Hinduism, a pioneer of democracy, a radical egalitarian and even an ideal Victorian gentleman.<sup>14</sup>

Today, Buddhist scholarship leans toward the second approach despite its problems. Most accept that the Buddha is not a totally fictional creation, arguing that a real historical person stands at the head of the Buddhist religion, which would be inexplicable otherwise.<sup>15</sup> Moreover, there is a growing confidence that the ancient texts, so replete with mythological elements, also contain genuine first-hand memories

of sixth-century BCE northern India. Yet most admit that the proliferation of miraculous elements in the traditional sources makes it almost impossible to reconstruct a detailed account of the Buddha's life that would satisfy the demands of modern history. To a real extent, the figure of the Buddha remains concealed behind the mists of time. Perhaps nothing underscores the elusiveness of the subject more than the lack of agreement among scholars regarding the dates of his birth and death. While most concur that he lived to be approximately 80 years of age, there are different calculations utilized to determine when those 80 years fall on the timeline. Depending on the timing of the coronation of the emperor Ashoka, some argue that the Buddha's dates are 624–544 BCE, others say 570–490 BCE and a third group proposes 450–370 BCE.<sup>16</sup> Although most scholars now agree that the Buddha is a genuine historical figure, the sources leave us with serious uncertainty about when he lived, not merely in terms of the year or the decade but the century.

### Gospel Portraits

In contrast to the vagueness concerning the Buddha's key dates, we are on firmer ground in the case of Jesus, although there is still a lack of accuracy concerning the precise year of his birth and his death. The gospel of Luke claims that Jesus was born during the census of Quirinius, governor of Syria, which occurred in 6 or 7 CE according to the historian Josephus. However, both Matthew and Luke indicate that Jesus was born while Herod the Great was still alive. Given that Herod died in 4 BCE, most scholars ignore the census link and conclude that Jesus was probably born between 6 and 4 BCE. This may sound odd given that the CE (Common Era) numbering is equivalent to the Christian system (Anno Domini) that supposedly begins with the year of Jesus's birth. The explanation for the discrepancy is that Dionysius Exiguus, the sixth-century monk who converted the Roman year numbers to the new Christian version, made a minor miscalculation.

Pinpointing the year of Jesus's death is also somewhat frustrating. Jesus was executed on the orders of Pontius Pilate who was prefect of Judea from 26–36 CE and all agree it was a Friday, the day before the Sabbath. What is not clear is whether that Friday was the preparation day for the Passover (14 Nisan), as stated in John's gospel, or the first day of Passover (15 Nisan) as implied by the Synoptic gospels, which describe the Last Supper on the previous evening as a Passover meal. Scholars usually favor the former, given that activities would have been severely restricted on the first day of a major annual festival. 14 Nisan fell on a Friday in the years 27, 30 and 33 CE. Moreover, Luke states that John the Baptist's ministry began in the "fifteenth year of the reign of the emperor Tiberius",<sup>17</sup> which would have been 28 or 29 CE. If that is true, then we are left with either 30 or 33 CE as the most likely year of Jesus's death and the preference for one or the other depends on the length of his public ministry.<sup>18</sup> In any event, it is clear that we have a much better idea of Jesus's dates than those of the Buddha, but what are the main sources of information about what happened between his birth and his death?

There are a few scant references to Jesus in secular Greco-Roman writing of the period, but these are many decades later, typically brief and primarily concerned with

the fledgling Christian movement rather than Jesus himself. The Jewish historian Josephus mentions Jesus just twice, noting that he attracted large crowds and was crucified by Pilate.<sup>19</sup> The paucity of material in secular sources is echoed in Jewish writing. There are a number of references in the Talmud to a certain Yeshua, but they are all negative in tone, forming part of a later anti-Christian polemic and providing no real biographical information.<sup>20</sup>

Thus, the search for more detailed sources necessarily shifts to Christian writings, both canonical and noncanonical. In recent times, there has been heightened scholarly interest in early noncanonical Christian literature, particularly the apocryphal gospels, as a potential source for a more complete picture of Jesus. There are over fifty such gospels, which were not considered worthy of inclusion in the New Testament canon for a variety of reasons. Many of these are lost in the sense that we have no extant manuscripts but only indirect references to them in other writings. Others exist only in fragmentary condition. The main problem with these texts is that they date to the second century CE or later, and so are further removed from Jesus's time than the canonical gospels. Moreover, like the Buddhist Mahavastu and Lalitavistara, they abound in blatantly miraculous tales that are presumably the result of the religious imagination.<sup>21</sup> One apocryphal gospel, the Gospel of Thomas (not to be confused with the Infancy Gospel of Thomas), has caught the eye of scholars. It is ostensibly a product of second century Gnostic Christianity but it contains an earlier stratum of authentic sayings making it a "fifth gospel" of sorts.<sup>22</sup> Other Gnostic gospels have been discovered in recent times, including the Nag Hammadi library unearthed in Egypt in 1945, but all of these are late compositions.<sup>23</sup>

So the search for the most reliable sources necessarily narrows to the New Testament canon with its 27 books. Twenty-one of these are epistles written to specific groups of Christians, thirteen of which are associated with Paul. One might expect to find here a treasure trove of information about Jesus, but in fact the opposite is the case. Although Jesus occupies a central role in the message of the epistles, the overwhelming focus, especially in Paul, is on his death and resurrection. Even then, Paul is more interested in the theological meaning of those events rather than providing an in-depth description of what occurred. Somewhat surprisingly, Paul shows minimal interest in the period prior to Jesus's death. There is virtually no information in the Pauline corpus concerning the key events of Jesus's public ministry or his teachings, let alone his birth and childhood. If we relied solely on Paul as a source, we would know hardly anything about Jesus. For all of these reasons, most scholars admit that the most substantive biographical sources for Jesus are the canonical gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. John Meier concludes: "We are left alone – some would say forlorn – with the Four Gospels, plus scattered titbits".<sup>24</sup>

Although it is traditionally listed in second position among the four, Mark is generally considered to be the earliest of the canonical gospels. It is also the shortest, mainly due to its lack of an infancy narrative and the limited amount of Jesus's teachings. Mark begins his story when Jesus is already an adult and he includes only 13 parables in total, compared with more than 30 each in Matthew and Luke. Despite its brevity, Mark's style is dynamic and vivid, with one incident following the other

at an almost breathless pace. The structure of the gospel is partially geographical in that Jesus commences his public ministry in Galilee, moves southward to Jerusalem, only entering Gentile territory on two occasions. The identity of the evangelists is perplexing since all four gospels are anonymous, their names only being added in the second century CE. In the case of the second gospel, tradition has identified him as the cousin of Barnabas known as John Mark, whose mother hosted Christians in her Jerusalem house and who accompanied Paul and Barnabas on their first missionary journey.<sup>25</sup> He is mentioned in several New Testament epistles<sup>26</sup> and was identified as Peter's secretary by the second century bishop Papias.<sup>27</sup> Many believe that the gospel was written in Rome for a Gentile Christian audience, not familiar with Jewish customs and facing persecution.<sup>28</sup> Most scholars have argued that it was probably composed just prior to the destruction of the Temple in 70 CE, although some prefer a date soon after that cataclysmic event. It was an unprecedented literary creation, in which Mark wove together preexisting units (pericopes) that had been transmitted orally within ecclesial settings during the 40 years since Jesus's death.

Readers of the New Testament have long noted the conspicuous similarity between the first three gospels. Matthew, Mark and Luke are so alike in content and order of events, that they are aptly described as the "Synoptic gospels". The general consensus of experts is that Matthew and Luke both borrowed extensively from Mark to create their own similar but distinctive versions of the Jesus story.<sup>29</sup> However, there is another interesting feature of Matthew and Luke that caught the scholarly eye. Not only have they borrowed heavily from Mark, but there is also a remarkable similarity in the material that is not from Mark. This extraordinary coincidence led to the hypothesis that a second common source was used, consisting mainly of Jesus's sayings. It was named "Q", from the German word *Quelle* (source), but no copy has ever been discovered.

Matthew and Luke are very different gospels, despite their common dependence on Mark and hypothetical Q. Each contains unique material from their own independent third sources. For example, both commence their gospels with a narrative about Jesus's conception and birth but, despite a common kernel, there are profound differences between the two versions. Only Matthew mentions Joseph's dream, Herod's jealousy, the magi and the escape into Egypt. Only Luke mentions the parallel with John the Baptist, Gabriel's appearance to Mary, her visit to Elizabeth, the angels' appearance to the shepherds and the presentation rite in the Temple. Yet it is not only the sources and contents of Matthew and Luke that ground their distinctiveness. The two evangelists also acted as final editors who selected, arranged and adapted Mark and Q for their own special purposes.

Matthew has always enjoyed first place in the order of gospels, reflecting not only the esteem with which it was held in the early Church but also the traditional belief that it was the first to be written and that the author was one of the Twelve. Modern scholarship has cast doubts on these presumptions, especially given that the gospel is written in Greek and not Aramaic. If Mark was composed just before or after the destruction of the Temple in 70 CE, then many scholars date Matthew to the following decade or two, around 75–90 CE. Indeed, its version of Jesus's prediction of the fall of the Temple contains details hinting that the event had already occurred when Matthew was writing.<sup>30</sup> There are a number of features of Matthew's gospel that indicate that his main audience were Jewish converts to Christianity. The gospel opens

with a genealogy of Jesus that begins with Abraham and passes through the royal Davidic line; it cites the Hebrew Scriptures twice as frequently as Mark or Luke; it is divided into seven sections (a highly symbolic number in Judaism); and the middle five sections, each a combination of Jesus's deeds and teachings, mirror the five books of the Torah. Many scholars speculate that the gospel was composed in Antioch with its mixed community of Jewish and Gentile Christians.

If Matthew was primarily concerned with Christians of Jewish background, conversely, Luke wrote for a very different demographic. The third gospel is the largest book in the New Testament but, more importantly, it combines with the Acts of the Apostles to form an impressive two volume work by the same author. Both volumes are addressed to "most excellent Theophilus", which may refer to a Christian convert in public office. Indeed, a key theme of Luke-Acts is to demonstrate that Christianity is a legitimate religion in the Roman Empire. Luke is particularly interested in the expansion of Christianity beyond Israel and into all corners of the pagan world, including the capital, Rome. Luke's universalist thrust, combined with his lack of interest in Jewish themes and his limited knowledge of Palestinian geography and culture, has led scholars to conclude that the evangelist was writing for a predominantly non-Jewish (Gentile) audience. As to his identity, the author reveals at the very outset that he is not an eye-witness to the events of Jesus's life but rather that he received instruction from those who were.<sup>31</sup> Tradition has identified him as Luke, the doctor and companion of Paul mentioned in the letter to the Colossians.<sup>32</sup> Modern scholarship notes that the author possessed considerable literary talent given the superior quality of the Greek language used. The gospel is usually dated to about the same period as Matthew, namely 75–90 CE.

The fourth canonical gospel stands apart from the three Synoptics for a number of reasons. Although it relates the story of Jesus as they do, it is clear that John's perspective is a very different one. For one thing, the order of events in John does not correspond exactly with the Synoptic version.<sup>33</sup> Moreover, John describes only seven miracles ("signs"), using them as the basis for an extensive discourse by Jesus each time.<sup>34</sup> In these lengthy sermons, Jesus speaks more about himself than the Kingdom of God, which is the key theme in the Synoptic tradition. Consequently, Jesus's divine identity is more apparent in John; in fact, it is stated outright in the gospel's prologue, which functions like the overture to a grand symphony. Unlike Mark who starts his gospel with the adult Jesus, and unlike Matthew and Luke who commence the story with Jesus's conception and birth, John takes us back to the moment of creation itself. Jesus is identified as the unique incarnation of the divine Word (Logos) in time and space, neatly summed up in the classical verse: "And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us".<sup>35</sup>

Consequently, the fourth gospel is usually dated toward the end of the first century CE, although its original contents are based on the testimony of an eye-witness.<sup>36</sup> As with the Synoptic gospels, the author is not named, but the gospel indicates that the authority behind it is the "disciple that Jesus loved" – a member of the inner circle who leaned on Jesus's breast at the Last Supper. Second-century church fathers identified him as John, the son of Zebedee and brother of James, although this claim is debated among scholars today.<sup>37</sup>

John's gospel is something of an enigma for scholars in search of the earliest reliable sources for Jesus. On one hand, it is a later composition that has reworked the

order of events as presented in the Synoptics, placed profound theological statements on the lips of Jesus and unequivocally portrayed him as an incarnate divine being, in some ways reminiscent of the superhuman Buddha found in the pages of the Mahavastu and Lalitavistara. On the other hand, John reveals firsthand knowledge of the geographical features of rural Palestine, the city of Jerusalem and the Temple precincts.<sup>38</sup> It is also intimately acquainted with cultural features, such as the Jewish religious calendar, Samaritan customs and the workings of the inner apostolic circle.<sup>39</sup> As a result, the fourth gospel deserves its inclusion as an important source alongside the Synoptics in the quest for Jesus.

The designation of the first four books of the New Testament as “gospels” only occurred in the second century CE. The literal meaning of gospel (Greek: evangelion) is “good news”, and its original application was the oral preaching of the first Christian missionaries. A gospel is not a dispassionate, objective biography of Jesus as seen from outside Christianity. Rather, it is written with the intention of persuading the reader to embrace the Christian faith. A gospel is not just news but good news. It is meant not just to inform but to convince. As with Buddhism, the key sources for the story of Jesus are religious texts composed through the eyes of faith with the aim of winning minds and hearts. That is not to say that they are so distorted by faith that they contain no historical truth, but it does mean that the gospels cannot be read uncritically. Indeed, biblical scholarship has been looking critically at the four gospels for over 200 years in an attempt to uncover the “real” Jesus behind the layers of evangelical redaction, theological interpretation and devotional embellishment. This ambitious quest for the historical Jesus has thrown up some fascinating insights, but it has also suffered some dramatic vicissitudes.

The first author usually associated with this quest is Hermann Reimarus (1694–1768), who argued that Jesus was a failed revolutionary and that the first Christians stole his body to create the myths of resurrection and divine incarnation. The nineteenth century witnessed many similar works by authors such as Strauss, Wrede and Weiss, culminating in Albert Schweitzer’s watershed 1906 publication, *The Quest for the Historical Jesus*. Schweitzer brilliantly exposed the inherent flaw in the entire project: the unconscious, anachronistic projection of modern presuppositions and values back onto Jesus. In the attempt to recover history behind myth, each author inevitably produced a new Jesus fashioned in the author’s own likeness, much like the reconstructed historical Buddha of the same period. Schweitzer himself emphasized the chasm between the world of today and the world of the New Testament. In his view, Jesus was from a totally different age, dominated by messianic hopes and eschatological anticipation. There was little common ground and no bridge over the chasm. With that bleak assessment, the first phase of the quest came to an abrupt halt.

What followed in the first half of the twentieth century was a period of “no quest”, and its dominant figure was Rudolf Bultmann, who resigned himself to the idea that the historical Jesus was irretrievable and ultimately unimportant. Just as the person of the Buddha was considered by some to be inconsequential to Buddhism, for Bultmann, the person of Jesus held little relevance for Christianity. For him, Christian belief was not based on certain dubious claims about a figure from the past, but a courageous leap of faith into the present. With his famous program of “demytholo-

gization”, Bultmann purged the sources of their miraculous and eschatological contents, which only acted as barriers to the modern person, and recast Christianity in the framework of his favourite philosopher, Martin Heidegger.

The academic tide turned again soon after World War II when Ernst Käsemann kick-started the historical quest again. This New Quest (or Second Quest) argued against Bultmann that Jesus could not be ignored. Although it did not return to the heady optimism of the First Quest, it was hopeful that a reasonably accurate picture of Jesus could be salvaged from the sources. The Second Quest continued into the late twentieth century via the often controversial Jesus Seminar and its key spokesperson John Dominic Crossan. Methodologically, it paid closer attention to the Hellenistic background of the gospels. It moved beyond the canonical gospels and quarried the myriad of secular writings that open up the world of the Roman Empire, hoping to cast fresh, yet indirect, light on Jesus. According to Crossan, Jesus did not expect the world to end imminently as Schweitzer had claimed but, rather, the Kingdom was something to be found in the here and now of ordinary life. For Crossan, Jesus was not a Jewish apocalyptic prophet but a Greek-inspired wisdom sage. The key to understanding him is the figure of the itinerant Cynic philosopher-teacher who carried minimal possessions and offered insights via pithy aphorisms to whoever was interested.<sup>40</sup>

A further shift in direction came with the so-called Third Quest, which moved away from the broader context of the Mediterranean and focussed on the more particular context of Palestine and Second Temple Judaism. Thus authors such as Marcus Borg, Anthony Harvey, Geza Vermes, E.P. Sanders, Ben F. Meyer and John Meier have sifted through ancient sources in order to paint a more complete picture of Jesus in terms of his Jewish background rather than the Hellenistic world favored by the Second Quest. The Third Quest is also characterized by greater diversity in its various portraits of Jesus. For example, Meier returns to the eschatological emphasis of Schweitzer and sees Jesus as a Jewish apocalyptic prophet.<sup>41</sup> In contrast, Borg understands Jesus as a Spirit-filled mystic and social critic.<sup>42</sup>

After two centuries of biblical scholarship, there is still no meaningful consensus on which category of ancient religious figure best fits Jesus. Meanwhile, there are also many scholars who defend the plausibility and historicity of the miraculous claims in the canonical gospels and support the traditional position, made explicit in John’s gospel, that Jesus is the incarnate Son of God. What is noteworthy is that the sources, both canonical and noncanonical, Christian and non-Christian, are rich and complex enough to provide supporting evidence for such a broad spectrum of academic opinion. What often differentiates each position on the spectrum is the set of philosophical presuppositions brought to the sources and the hermeneutical method used to interpret them.

## **Qur’an, Sira and Hadith**

Muhammad lived 600 years after Jesus and a full millennium after the Buddha, making him clearly the most recent of the three founders. Such a gap naturally generates expectations that there should be significantly more material available concerning

his life and teaching. Being a figure of the seventh century CE, it would seem that he is much more in the full light of history than his earlier counterparts. This is true to a degree although, as with Jesus and the Buddha, there are still limitations and challenges posed by the main sources.

One of the more reliable time references that we have is the date of Muhammad's death. The vast majority of commentators agree that this occurred on 12 Rabi al-awwal in the eleventh year of the Islamic calendar (11 AH), which converts to 8 June 632 CE.<sup>43</sup> The timing of his birth is more contentious given that neither Muhammad nor his family were public figures at the time. Bukhari states that Muhammad was 63 years old when he died and 40 years old when he experienced his first revelation.<sup>44</sup> Working backwards, we arrive at approximately the year 570 CE, which is commonly cited today.<sup>45</sup> As for the precise date, Sunni Muslims celebrate the birthday of the Prophet (Mawlid al-Nabi) on 12 Rabi al-awwal, the same date as his death, while Shi'ites prefer 17 Rabi al-awwal.<sup>46</sup>

In contrast to the Buddha, and to some extent Jesus, there are a reasonable number of non-Muslim references to Muhammad that are very close to the time that he actually lived. The oldest instance is a manuscript that mentions "the Arabs of Muhammad" at the Battle of Dathin in 634 CE.<sup>47</sup> The same phrase appears in a Christian codex concerning the Battle of Gabintha in Syria (636 CE), at which Arab forces defeated the Byzantines.<sup>48</sup> A more explicit and detailed reference to Muhammad is found in the chronicle of Sebeos, an Armenian bishop, which dates to approximately 661 CE, just 29 years after Muhammad's death.<sup>49</sup> The rapid expansion of the Arabian armies into the vacuum left by the Byzantine and Persian Empires catapulted Islam and its founder onto the world's stage much more quickly than in the case of Christianity and Buddhism. Consequently, it did not take long for Muhammad to attract the attention of chroniclers and historians outside Islam, but the references are still occasional and brief. So, as with the Buddha and Jesus, we must turn to Islamic sources in order to obtain more detailed biographical information, in particular the Qur'an, sira and hadith.

The Qur'an is the principal religious text for Muslims who believe that it contains revelations given by God to Muhammad via the angel Gabriel (Jibril) over a period of approximately 23 years, until his death. These revelations were memorized by the first followers and eventually recorded in written form. The book consists of over 6,000 verses (ayats) organized into 114 chapters (suras). Significantly, the chapters are not arranged in chronological or thematic order but roughly by decreasing length. This feature, along with the fact that the verses are not dated, makes the task of locating each passage in its original historical context a difficult one, although it is possible to distinguish verses from the Meccan and Medinan periods of Muhammad's life.<sup>50</sup>

Thus, the Qur'an is a unique text among the three religions in question. Muslims have always made a clear distinction between the revelations recorded in its sacred pages and the personal statements and sayings of Muhammad. It may be that the revelations were verbally recited by Muhammad but, for the Muslim, their true author is Allah and his prophet had no input in terms of content except to act as a human mouthpiece. There is no such two-tiered distinction between directly revealed messages and personal opinion in the case of the Buddha and Jesus. For Buddhists, the

truths that the Buddha taught were insights that he himself gained in his long search for enlightenment. For Christians, all words spoken by Jesus intrinsically carry divine authority.

The process that eventually produced the written Qur'an has been the subject of scholarly interest for some time. The traditional view is that during Muhammad's lifetime, as the revelations were still occurring, a group of companions known as "qurra" were commissioned to recite the Qur'an daily and commit it to memory. Literate companions also began to act as official scribes, recording verses on stone tablets, bones and palm fronds.<sup>51</sup> Within a year of the Prophet's death, a significant number of those who had memorized the Qur'an were killed at the Battle of Yamama. This prompted the first caliph, Abu Bakr, to order Zayd ibn Thabit to gather the scattered private collections into one volume based on at least two witnesses for each verse.<sup>52</sup> A copy of Abu Bakr's volume was passed on to the second caliph, 'Umar, who gave them to his daughter, Hafsa, on his deathbed. By the time of the third caliph, Uthman (about 20 years after the death of Muhammad), there was a growing sense that a standardized version of the Qur'an was needed as the Islamic movement expanded into North Africa and Persia. Uthman established a committee headed by Zayd who utilized Hafsa's version to produce an official edition. The result is known as al-mushaf al-Uthmani (the Uthmanic codex). Uthman then ordered all remaining private versions to be sent to Medina where they were destroyed. Copies of the Uthmanic codex were then distributed throughout the Islamic world and this is essentially the Qur'an as we know it today.<sup>53</sup>

As with early Buddhist and Christian scriptures, secular scholarly opinion is divided on the early history of the Qur'an. Academics such as Richard Bell, William Montgomery Watt, Andrew Rippin, Fred Donner and F.E. Peters have supported the traditional picture. They assert that certain features of the Qur'an, such as its arbitrary order, its repetitions and its mixture of styles, suggest a collection process that was profoundly respectful of the original fragments. However, scholars such as John Wansbrough, Michael Cook and Patricia Crone are skeptical that the entire Qur'an can be attributed to Muhammad. In their view, there is no convincing evidence that it existed as a single book before 690 CE, and the most likely scenario is that the final text was composed gradually over several centuries as Islam encountered Jewish and Christian challenges.<sup>54</sup>

If the traditional picture is correct and the Qur'an is a genuine record of the revealed messages received by Muhammad, then it constitutes an invaluable source of information regarding his life. Apart from its central role in determining Islamic teaching, it also provides a direct link with the founder rather than a second-hand interpretation from a later generation. For this reason, many commentators describe it as the earliest and most reliable of sources.<sup>55</sup> One particular feature of the Qur'an reinforces this point. The revelations do not come in the form of timeless, absolute truths revealed in systematic fashion so as to form an Islamic catechism. Instead, the messages are highly contextualized, typically responding to a particular crisis or circumstance in the life of Muhammad and the early community. The Qur'anic voice may have been heard only inside Muhammad's mind, but the words reflected what was happening out there in his surrounding world. It is this dynamic, interactive character that makes the Qur'an a useful mirror on Muhammad's later life.<sup>56</sup>

Yet in another sense, the Qur'an remains an indirect and limited source for the life of Muhammad. Although its messages are responses to particular contexts, those historical contexts are rarely stated or explained by the Qur'an itself. Once the context is known, the message begins to make more sense, but the Qur'an seldom provides that vital information. Its allusive, enigmatic style makes it difficult to know precisely which persons and events are intended. Even Muhammad himself is only named on a handful of occasions. In this respect, the Qur'an is more reminiscent of Jewish prophetic books, such as Isaiah and Jeremiah, than the Christian gospels. As a collection of authoritative teachings without a narrative framework, it is also more akin to the Sutta Pitaka than the Buddhacarita. The Qur'an does provide a useful reflection of Muhammad's life story, but the reflection is dimmed and refracted.

About 100 years after Muhammad's death, a second type of source material appeared. The *sira* is a form of biography, tracing the key events of a person's journey from life to death. In the case of Muhammad, many *siras* were eventually produced, but the four most important are those of Ibn Ishaq, al-Waqidi, Ibn Sa'd and al-Tabari.<sup>57</sup> Ibn Ishaq (circa 704–767 CE) wrote several works but the most important is entitled *Sira Rasul Allah – The Life of God's Messenger*. No copy of his original work is extant, but it does survive in an edited version by Ibn Hisham (died 833 CE), and it is quoted verbatim and at length by al-Tabari. It is the earliest surviving biography of Muhammad even though it was penned more than a century after the Prophet's death. The *Sira Rasul Allah* is an extensive book, commencing with a genealogy that traces Muhammad's line back to Adam via Abraham and Ishmael. It continues with an account of his birth, his call to be Prophet of God, the beginning of his public mission in Mecca, the migration to Medina, his military campaigns and concludes with his death. Although Ibn Ishaq includes miracle stories, these are usually accompanied by guarded statements such as “only God knows whether a particular statement is true or not” or “it is alleged”.<sup>58</sup>

The ninth century CE saw two more important *siras* appear, one of which is the *Kitab al-Tarikh wa al-Maghazi* (The Book of History and Campaigns) by al-Waqidi (died circa 822 CE). The work contains stories of Muhammad's military ventures (*maghazi*) during his time as leader in Medina. Not all Muslim scholars are convinced that al-Waqidi is a reliable source but his secretary, Ibn Sa'd (died circa 845 CE), enjoys a more positive reputation for his accuracy and trustworthiness. His major work is *al-Kitab al-Tabaqat al-Kabir* (The Great Book of Scholarly Classes), which is a compendium of biographical material regarding major Islamic figures from the first generations. It comprises eight books of which the first two concern Muhammad.<sup>59</sup>

The fourth important *sira* comes from the pen of al-Tabari (died 923 CE). His two principal works are *al-Tarikh al-Rusul wa al-Muluk* (History of the Prophets and Kings) – usually abbreviated as *Tarikh al-Tabari* – and the *Tafsir al-Tabari* (Commentary on the Qur'an). The former is a 40-volume universal history from the time of creation to the end of the caliphate of al-Muktadid in 915 CE, with four volumes dedicated to Muhammad. In the section of the History where he treats the Prophet, al-Tabari relies heavily on Ibn Ishaq and the material is virtually the same as in Ibn Hisham's edition. Nevertheless, there are important differences, such as the inclusion

of the story of the Satanic Verses and their refutation, which are omitted by Ibn Hisham.

While they are not as late as the first written biographies of the Buddha, the *siras* are still separated from Muhammad by a century or more. Such a time gap rightly raises questions in the secular scholar's mind as to what degree the original material has been altered for religious reasons, especially if one of the main purposes of a *sira* was to provide a more detailed context for Qur'anic verses. The fact that later *siras* often contain far more details about a particular event than is provided in Ibn Ishaq's text tends to diminish confidence in their historical reliability, especially when the sources of that information are not clearly defined or filtered. In general, the *siras* were not particularly concerned with validating information for two reasons. First, the story of Muhammad's life was reasonably well known and recounted many times among the first generations of believers. Second, the *siras* were not used as the chief source for grounding and developing Islamic law. The literary genre that was employed for that purpose is known as *hadith*.

Hadiths are collections of individual reports concerning statements or actions of Muhammad as verified by a succession of witnesses. Consequently, there are two main components to a hadith: the narrative text itself (*matn*) and the chain of narrators (*isnad*) stretching back to the eyewitness at the time of the event or saying. Thus the chain determines the reliability of the source. In much the same way as the *Sutta Pitaka* sayings commence with the phrase "Thus on one occasion I heard the Buddha say . . .", a hadith often commences with the statement by a companion: "I heard the Prophet say . . .". The transmission of sayings and anecdotes from Muhammad began during his lifetime and continued for over two centuries in oral form.<sup>60</sup> It was not until the eighth century that authenticated collections of hadiths begin to appear. Scholars at the time had to trawl through an enormous body of traditions, some of which were partially incompatible or even outright contradictory. Their main task was to gauge the level of trustworthiness of each report. The process of textual criticism by which this was achieved is known as "the science of hadith" (*ulum al-hadith*), and it involves analysis of the text itself, the listed narrators and the pathway of the chain over time.<sup>61</sup>

The six classical Sunni hadith collections took final shape in the middle of the ninth century CE:

- *Sahih Bukhari* by Imam Bukhari (died 870 CE)
- *Sahih Muslim* by Muslim ibn al-Hajjaj (died 875 CE)
- *Sunan al-Sughra* by al-Nasa'i (died 915 CE)
- *Sunan Abu Dawud* by Abu Dawud (died 888 CE)
- *Sunan al-Tirmidhi* by al-Tirmidhi (died 892 CE)
- *Sunan Ibn Majah* (died 886 CE).

An earlier collection known as *al-Muwatta* by Imam Malik (died 796 CE) was largely incorporated into these six.<sup>62</sup> The first two on the list are considered the most reliable, as indicated by their title "*sahih*" (sound). In contrast, Shi'ite Muslims do not use these six collections but prefer their own traditions, which have passed through

Muhammad's descendants via his daughter Fatima, her husband Ali and other supporters.<sup>63</sup> Nevertheless, there are large overlaps in content.

Unlike *siras*, hadiths were used as a complementary source for Islamic jurisprudence since the Qur'an alone did not always provide clear instruction on the host of religious, moral and legal issues that were arising as the Islamic Empire rapidly expanded. The most obvious source to consult outside of the Qur'an was the Prophet himself. His personal example (*sunna*) is regarded as a second source of guidance for Muslims. It was this primarily legal application that generated the intense scrutiny of sources that is so characteristic of the hadith but which is absent in the *sira*. In that sense, hadith probably has a greater claim to reliability as an historical source. Most Muslim scholars are confident that spurious reports were filtered out by Bukhari, Muslim and their colleagues, and that the vignettes and glimpses that survived the filtering process are authentic. However, it also means that the hadiths were not collected for biographical purposes. They may contain thousands of sayings and episodes from Muhammad's life, which provide material for legal debate and spiritual nourishment but, like the sermons of the *Sutta Pitaka* and the pericopes of the pregospel tradition, they are individual items without chronological order and outside a broader narrative framework.

Secular scholarship's initial assessment was skeptical. At the beginning of the twentieth century, many Western academics regarded hadiths as essentially fictitious additions, invented to justify certain legal or theological opinions.<sup>64</sup> Skeptical views continued into the late twentieth century with John Wansborough, Michael Cook and Patricia Crone, who questioned any genuine historical link between Muhammad and the hadith tradition. For such thinkers, the nature of the sources and the lack of knowledge regarding pre-Islamic Arabia preclude an account of Muhammad's life that would satisfy the demands of the modern historian.<sup>65</sup> However, there are scholars who argue that many, if not all, hadiths do provide a genuine historical memory of Muhammad. William Montgomery Watt admitted that some invention was possible in the legal sphere but that material was more likely to have been reshaped rather than completely fabricated. Others argue that wholesale rejection of hadith is unjustified and that, despite occasional contradictions and legendary forms, there is a genuine core that can be recognized using the appropriate scientific methods.<sup>66</sup>

## Observations

We began this chapter by noting that all three religious founders lived in the ancient world and, like most figures from the distant past, each of them is shrouded to some extent by the mists of time. In all three cases, there is a real problem concerning the quantity and quality of material on which to build an accurate biographical picture. The Buddha, Jesus and Muhammad did not actually write anything, and so there are no primary written sources that come directly from their hand. They were not authors in the literal sense. Instead, their message was communicated and transmitted orally before eventually being recorded in writing at some point.

None of the three founders is mentioned in any sources external to their religious tradition during their lifetime. This may seem surprising at first but such a mention

would only have been warranted if they had already made some sort of serious impact on their world. Of the three, the Buddha had the longest lifespan, living into his eighties, but it is unclear how widespread his new religious movement was at the time of his death. It is really only during the reign of Ashoka in the third century BCE, several hundred years after the founder's death, that Buddhism begins to appear on the radar screens of contemporary historians. Jesus died prematurely in his early thirties after a very brief public life and his circle of disciples was a small fledgling group within the complex world of Judaism at the time of his execution. The first secular references to Jesus only appear at the end of the first century, some 70 years later, when Christianity was beginning to attract attention in the broader Roman Empire. Given his astounding success in transforming the political landscape of Arabia, there is more reason to expect that Muhammad might have been mentioned in non-Islamic sources during his life or soon after. This seems to be the case with early references to the "Arabs of Muhammad" possibly dating to within a decade of his death in 632 CE as the Islamic army expanded into the Middle East and beyond.

Although some secular references to Muhammad and Jesus exist and thus lend support to the historicity of both figures, they are fleeting and provide no real detail. Thus, the main sources for the three founders are necessarily religious texts. There is nothing wrong with that *per se*, but historians have rightly pointed out that every text must be read critically with an eye to the author's fundamental presuppositions and inherent motives, whether it is religious or not. In other words, we must acknowledge that the texts that provide most information about the Buddha, Jesus and Muhammad were composed by believers who saw the world through the prism of their faith. These are not historical treatises in the sense that we might use such a term today. Their aim was not necessarily to produce a scientifically objective version of events or an unbiased portrait of the main subject. They were written within a community of belief, which saw the founder as unique and unrivalled. Hence, they often have an apologetic, kerygmatic or didactic purpose. For instance, the gospel of John candidly admits that it is written so that the reader may believe. This means that the authors involved not only had the duty to pass on what the founder had said and done, but they may have sincerely believed that they had a similar duty to select, expand, adapt, change, interpret and embellish in the process. The degree to which this has happened is the stuff of the contemporary scholarly debate in each case.

A second feature of these religious texts is the prescientific worldview that pervades them. Prior to the eighteenth-century Enlightenment, people viewed the cosmos and its processes in a different way. As one author colourfully stated, "the sky hung low in the ancient world".<sup>67</sup> Supernatural and natural forces intertwined with no clear boundaries and accounts of amazing events were not normally questioned. The miraculous element in a story did not meet with the sort of natural skepticism that characterizes the modern mindset. Thus, the presence of supernatural features in the sources presents a special challenge for today's reader and many have simply dismissed these as products of a more primitive religious imagination. The problem is more acute in the case of the biographies of the Buddha and the Christian gospels, whereas a miracle tradition was apparently not as central to the story of Muhammad (see Chapter 6).

A third factor is the time gap between the founder and the earliest written sources but there is a striking variation here. The gospel of Mark appears only about four decades after the death of Jesus, whereas the Pali Canon and the Mahavastu are several centuries after the Buddha. This is partially explained by the absolutely central role that Jesus occupies in the Christian message, which contrasts sharply with the total emphasis on the Buddha's teaching and an almost indifferent attitude to his life story in early Buddhism. Muhammad sits between these two positions with a time-lapse of approximately 120 years between his death and the Sira Rasul Allah of Ibn Ishaq. In one sense, that gap was bridged by the Qur'an, which represents a unique text in that it is claimed to be the carefully recorded *ipsisima verba* of the revelations that Muhammad received and communicated during his lifetime. In each case, the existence of a gap puts pressure on the oral phase of transmission and raises questions regarding the accuracy of the written sources. Critical scholarship has been quick to point out the potential for editorial alteration of the original material but the religious tradition in each case argues for a reliable link. Thus, Buddhism speaks of a double verbal tradition that goes back to Ananda and Upali; the gospel of John claims first-hand apostolic testimony and Luke refers to the eyewitnesses and ministers of the word in his preface; and the science of hadith involved meticulous filtering of the chain of witnesses behind each reported anecdote or saying.

Apart from the issue of the time gap, there is also the issue of an information gap within the sources themselves. The earliest material regarding the Buddha is in the form of individual sermons collected in the Sutta Pitaka. These are stand-alone teachings devoid of a narrative framework. When that framework finally appears as in the Mahavastu and the Lalitavistara, it covers only part of the story – from the Buddha's birth to the beginning of his teaching ministry. Admittedly, the Buddhacarita provides some information about the second stage of his career and his death, but the traditional focus has been squarely on his spiritual journey from protected prince to Enlightened One rather than the subsequent decades spent teaching on the road and establishing a new religious movement. In contrast, the canonical gospels turn their attention almost exclusively to the short public ministry of Jesus and say almost nothing about his youth and early adulthood, although Matthew and Luke both provide short infancy narratives. It is no wonder that Christianity describes that extensive period of Jesus's early life as "the hidden years". Similarly, the Qur'an, the siras and the hadiths provide quite detailed information about Muhammad's career as successful political leader in Medina in the post-Hijra period. There is much less information about his troubled time as persecuted preacher in Mecca and even thinner material concerning his childhood and early adulthood. Those gaps are reflected in the difficulty that scholars face in trying to determine exactly when each founder lived. The lack of precision is most acute in the case of the Buddha for whom the proposed dates vary up to a century. In contrast, Jesus and Muhammad are much more firmly grounded on the historical timeline, at least in terms of their death, but there is a good deal of haziness concerning the year of their birth.

While the sources have been accepted uncritically for centuries by each mainstream religious tradition, the assessment of modern Western scholarship has not been as positive. Where the believer sees a harmonious picture, the secular historian sees stress fractures: between the layers that make up the final edition; between the slight vari-

ations of a saying or an episode across the sources; between the natural and supernatural elements; between the religious version of the sources and information about the time and place gleaned from surrounding contemporary texts. In each case, this more critical, suspicious methodology has led to a search for the “real” founder behind the presumably obscuring and distorting layers of religious interpretation, exaggeration and amnesia. The quest for the historical Jesus began in the late eighteenth century, and it was quickly followed by the quest for the historical Buddha in the nineteenth century and a quest for the historical Muhammad in the twentieth century. Despite the earnestness of the quests, there is surprisingly little consensus among the scholars. Instead, a broad spectrum of opinion is evident, stretching from experts who support the traditional picture to those who are convinced that we know almost nothing about the founder, or in the case of the Buddha, even questioning whether he ever existed. So at the beginning of the twenty-first century, the debates continue, and while the paucity of sources is still a serious problem, each quest has been re-invigorated by progress in the field of archaeology. Although newly discovered manuscripts rarely pertain directly to the Buddha, Jesus or Muhammad, there is a growing confidence that we can learn more about them as we gain more knowledge of the ancient worlds in which they lived. The sources may be limited and frustrating at times, but there is a sense that more light can be shed on the subjects via a more complete picture of their original historical contexts, to which we turn in the next chapter.

## Notes

- 1 Erich Frauwallner argued for a hypothetical text that was composed soon after the Buddha’s death and upon which all subsequent biographies were derived, but most scholars have rejected this theory. See E. Frauwallner (1956) *The Earliest Vinaya and the Beginnings of Buddhist Literature*; Cohen 126.
- 2 Armstrong, Buddha xi; Nakamura I 20.
- 3 Foucher extensively used the artistic tradition unearthed at pilgrim sites for his classical biography.
- 4 Carrithers 8.
- 5 Armstrong, Buddha xvi.
- 6 Armstrong, Buddha xviii; Braden 17.
- 7 Reynolds & Hallisey 1063.
- 8 The Lalitavistara was the inspiration for the artwork of Borobudur temple and Edward Arnold’s famous poem *The Light of Asia*.
- 9 Tradition holds that another “Buddhacarita” was composed within the Kanishka court by the poet Sangharaksa, although the original Sanskrit text is lost and only a Chinese translation exists today.
- 10 Pioneer scholars include Alexander Cxoma de Koros, Brian Houghton Hodgson, Franz Anton von Schiefner, Philippe Edouard Foucaux, Hermann Oldenberg and Thomas William Rhys Davids.
- 11 Thomas 233–234; Drummond 16; Reynolds & Hallisey 1061.
- 12 Guang Xing 7; Drummond 16.
- 13 Reynolds & Hallisey 1061; Foucher Introduction.
- 14 Strong 3.

- 15 Reynolds & Hallisey 1061–1062.
- 16 Nakamura I 68–72.
- 17 Luke 3:1–2.
- 18 On one hand, the Synoptic gospels imply a short interval of 1–2 years, suggesting 30 CE as the year of his death. That date is also supported by John 2:20, in which it is claimed that at the start of Jesus’s ministry, work on the Temple extensions, which commenced in 19 BCE, had been underway for 46 years. On the other hand, John’s gospel mentions at least three Passover festivals during the public ministry, which suggests the year 33 CE. Luke 3:23 states that Jesus was “about 30 years old” when he was baptized by John, but the phrase is ambiguous, and there is no certainty about the year of Jesus’s birth. Third-century author Tertullian claimed that Jesus was crucified in the twelfth year of Tiberius’ rule, which would be 25 or 26 CE. See *Adversus Marcionem* 15.
- 19 *Antiquities* 18.3.3; 20.9.1. For passing references to early Christians, see Pliny’s *Letters to Trajan* 10.96–97 and Tacitus, *Annals* 15.44.
- 20 Yeshu ben Pandera is the teacher of Jacob, a second-century CE heretic; Yeshu Ha-Notzri is a sorcerer who is stoned and hanged on the eve of the Passover; Yeshu is also the name of a spirit summoned from the dead and who describes his punishment in the afterlife as boiling in excrement; another Yeshu is a son who burns his food in public; and Yeshu is the name of a prominent rabbi’s student who, according to the Jerusalem Talmud, becomes a sorcerer and leads Israel astray. See *Avodah Zarah* 16b–17a; *Sanhedrin* 43a; *Gittin* 56b, 57a; *Sanhedrin* 103a, *Berakhot* 17b; *Sanhedrin* 107b; *Chagigah* 2:2.
- 21 Other Passion gospels include the Gospel of Nicodemus (also called the Acts of Pilate), the (lost) Gospel of Bartholomew, the Questions of Bartholomew and the Resurrection of Jesus Christ.
- 22 See Crossan’s list of primary sources: Crossan 427.
- 23 The Nag Hammadi Library is a collection of thirteen ancient codices containing over fifty Gnostic texts.
- 24 Meier I 140.
- 25 Colossians 4:10; Acts 12:12, 25; 15:37, 39.
- 26 2 Timothy 4:11; Philemon 1:24; 1 Peter 5:13.
- 27 Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History* 3.39.4, 15. See also Irenaeus, *Adversus Haereses* 3.1.1 and Tertullian, *Adversus Marcionem* 4.5.
- 28 Mark 13:9–13.
- 29 The evidence for Markan priority is very strong. Mark’s material constitutes 90% of Matthew and over 50% of Luke. While the order of the pericopes is basically the same across the three Synoptic gospels, when one departs from the pattern, it is invariably Matthew or Luke alone.
- 30 Matthew 22:7.
- 31 Luke 1:2.
- 32 Colossians 4:14; see also 2 Timothy 4:11.
- 33 For instance, the disruption in the Temple, which the Synoptics identify as the immediate cause of Jesus’s arrest and execution, comes at the very start of his ministry according to John 2:13–25.
- 34 John’s seven miracles are: turning water into wine at Cana; the cure of an official’s son at Cana; the cure of a paralytic; the multiplication of loaves; walking on the waters; the cure of the man born blind; and the raising of Lazarus.
- 35 John 1:14.
- 36 John 21:24.
- 37 Theophilus of Antioch (circa 180 CE) attributed the fourth gospel to John, the son of Zebedee. See *Adversus Haereses* 2.22.5; 3.3.4; *Ecclesiastical History* 3.23.3.

- 38 John 1:28; 2:1,12,14,20; 3:23; 4:20; 5:2; 8:2,20; 9:7; 10:23; 11:18,54; 12:21; 18:1,28; 19:17.
- 39 The Passover (John 2:13, 23; 6:4; 13:1; 18:28); the feast of Tabernacles (John 7:2, 37); the Dedication of the Temple (John 10:22); and purification rites (John 2:6; 3:25; 11:55; 18:28; 19:31).
- 40 Crossan's opus magnum is aptly entitled *The Historical Jesus: The Life of a Mediterranean Jewish Peasant*. One of the main criticisms of Crossan's thesis is the lack of evidence for a Cynic presence in Galilee at the time. See McClymond 321–322.
- 41 Meier's opus magnum is aptly entitled *Jesus: A Marginal Jew*, emphasizing Jesus's Jewish background rather than the Mediterranean Hellenism favored by Crossan.
- 42 See Marcus Borg, *Jesus. A New Vision* (1987) and *Jesus. Uncovering the Life, Teachings and Relevance of a Religious Revolutionary* (2006).
- 43 Al-Tabari favored 1 Rabi al-awwal, while Ibn Hajar al-Asqalani favored 2 Rabi al-awwal.
- 44 Bukhari 58.190, 242, 243.
- 45 Islamic tradition holds that he was born in the Year of the Elephant, which refers to the failed attack on Mecca by Abraha, ruler of Saba' in Yemen. Al-Tabari states that the attack took place in the forty-second year of the reign of the Sassanid ruler Khosrau I (531–579 CE), which would have been 573 CE. However, this may be too late for two reasons: the Sassanids overthrew Abraha's dynasty around 570 CE and historians estimate that Abraha himself did not reign long after 553 CE. Consequently, Armstrong claims that the Year of the Elephant was probably 547 CE; Armstrong, Muhammad 31. Thus, Ibn al-Kalbi's claim that Muhammad was born 23 years after the Year of the Elephant may be closer to the truth, but the effect is that Muhammad's birth year is still deemed to be approximately 570 CE.
- 46 Tradition states that Muhammad was born on a Monday; see Muslim 6.2603, 2606.
- 47 British Library (BL) Add. 14,643.
- 48 British Library (BL) Add. 14,461.
- 49 R.W. Thomson (1999) *The Armenian History Attributed To Sebeos Part I, Translated Texts For Historians*, Volume 31, Liverpool University Press, 95–96. Other translations can also be seen in Crone & Cook, 6–7.
- 50 Meccan suras are typically shorter prophetic utterances addressed either to Muhammad himself or people in general, and focusing on themes such as monotheism, the Day of Judgment and the negative response to Muhammad's message. The Medinan suras are longer, more ethical and legalistic, and usually addressed to the Islamic community via the phrase "O you who believe". See "The Meccan and Medinan Suras" in Oliver Leaman ed. (2006) *The Qur'an: An Encyclopedia*. Routledge, 398–401.
- 51 Twenty-two such persons are mentioned by name in the hadiths. Among them were Abu Bakr, 'Umar, Uthman, Ali, 'A'isha, Hafsa and Umm Salama.
- 52 Bukhari 60.201.
- 53 Bukhari 61.510. Sources indicate that there were versions owned by Abdallah Ibn Masud, Ubay Ibn Ka'b and Ali, although it is claimed that the variations are only minor.
- 54 Exponents of this position include Michael Cook, Patricia Crone, Christoph Luxenberg, Gerd R. Puin and Karl-Heinz Ohlig.
- 55 Welch 360.
- 56 Welch 361.
- 57 The earliest siras are thought to have been authored by 'Urwah ibn al-Zubayr (died 713 CE), Aban ibn Uthman (died 727 CE) and Wahb ibn Munabbih (died 737 CE), but none of these have survived.
- 58 Ibn Ishaq (Guillaume) xix. Because of his stress on human free will rather than God's omnipotence, Ibn Ishaq has often been criticized by traditional Muslim scholars. Moreover, Bukhari conspicuously avoided his narratives in his voluminous hadith collection.

- 59 Books 3 and 4 contain biographic notes concerning the companions of Muhammad; Books 5, 6 and 7 contain biographical notes on later Islamic scholars; and Book 8 contains biographical notes on important Islamic women.
- 60 Uthman was also concerned about opposition from a small minority of Muslims who rejected the hadith as a secondary written source of law and spiritual guidance. They find support in the Qur'anic verse: "Nothing have we omitted from the Book" (Qur'an 6:38), but they are considered heretical by many Muslims. The modern "Qur'an-alone" movement reached its peak in the middle of the twentieth century but is now in decline.
- 61 This led to the development of different levels of classification for a report. The standard version of Ibn al-Salah has the following categories: sahih (sound), hasan (good), da'if (weak), munkar (ignored) and mawdu' (fabricated). The first two categories are usually acceptable for usage in Islamic legal argument.
- 62 Some also argue for Sunan al-Darimi (died circa 877 CE).
- 63 *Usul al-Kafi* by Muhammad ibn Ya'qub al-Kulayni al-Razi; *Man la Yahduruhu al-Faqih* by Muhammad ibn Babuya; *al-Tahdhib* and *al-Istibsar* both by Shaykh Muhammad Tusi.
- 64 For example, Ignaz Goldziher, D.S. Margoliouth, Henri Lammens and Leone Caetani. In his *Origins of Muhammadan Jurisprudence* (1959), Joseph Schacht argued that isnads going back to Muhammad were in fact more likely to be spurious than isnads going back to the companions.
- 65 Nigosian 6.
- 66 For example, Herbert Berg (2000) *The Development of Exegesis in Early Islam*; Fred Donner (1998) *Narratives of Islamic Origins*; Wilferd Madelung (1997) *Succession to Muhammad*.
- 67 Quoted in Jaroslav Pelikan (1975) *The Emergence of the Catholic Tradition, Volume I (100–600 CE)* Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 132.