The world and the desert : a comparative perspective on the "apocalypse" between Buddhism and Christianity

The World and the Desert: A Comparative Perspective on the "Apocalypse" between Buddhism and Christianity

Federico Divino and Andrea Di Lenardo
University of Bergamo and University of Antwerp
Ca' Foscari University of Venice

ABSTRACT

In this essay, the concept of apocalypse, understood as the "end of the world," will be examined within the context of ancient Buddhism and Christianity. The study will focus on the genealogy and use of expressions such as *lokanta*, *lokassa antaṃ*, and *lokassa atthaṅgama*, as found in the Pāli canon of Buddhism, going on to compare them with Jewish, as well as early Christian, apocalyptic literature, including the Dead Sea Scrolls, the Epistles of James and Jude, and the Gospels. The goal of this article is to identify points of convergence in the history of these two concepts of apocalypse, foregrounding the central role within both traditions of analogous sociocultural circumstances that were actually more influential than their respective doctrinal visions. The essay will argue how the ascetic character of early Buddhism and Christianity, reflecting their opposition to the surrounding social order, contributed to the emergence of similar apocalyptic visions.

KEYWORDS: early Buddhism, early Christianity, apocalypse, end of the world, religious studies

INTRODUCTION

This article aims to conduct a comparative scrutiny of the theme of apocalypse, as manifested in the Pāli canon of Buddhism, Jewish literature, and early Christian apocalyptic literature, encompassing the Dead Sea Scrolls, the Epistles of James and Jude, and the Gospels. The intention of this article is to ascertain areas of concurrence between the evolution of the two concepts of apocalypse and to propose that their genesis may be entrenched in analogous historical, cultural, and social circumstances, which were in contention with the doctrinal aims of their corresponding religions.[1] In order to identify points of convergence in the history of these two concepts of apocalypse and to highlight the central role of sociocultural circumstances in shaping them,

we will argue that the ascetic character of early Buddhism and Christianity, reflecting their opposition to the surrounding social order, contributed to the emergence of similar apocalyptic visions. By analyzing the complex interplay between religious movements, sociopolitical contexts, and the critique of authority across different traditions and time periods, we aim to shed light on the shared concerns and themes that underlie these seemingly disparate worldviews. The exploration of a specific concept concerning the cessation of the world, denoted as *lokanta*, within the framework of Buddhism affords an occasion for undertaking a comparative examination with the early Christian tradition. In the latter, the apocalyptic notion is overtly manifested and assumes a pivotal function at a particular moment in its historical development. Although ancient Buddhism and Christianity emerged in disparate eras and geographical areas, they exhibit a mutual characteristic in their resistance to the prevailing social structure, partially attributable to the ascetic inheritance of each movement.

This essay does not engage classic cosmology and eschatology, which entail well-known Buddhist ideas about the physical world and *dharma* cycles (as found, for instance, in suttas like Dīghanikāya [DN] 14 or 17). Rather, it concerns the notion of the world (*loka*) itself as envisaged by an earlier form of Buddhism, which is reflected in texts such as Suttanipāta (Snp) 4.2 or 4.15. These ideas reflected the world's origin (*samudaya*) and its cessation (*atthaṅgama*) in a rather peculiar way. If we focus exclusively on the cessation aspect, also known as the termination of the world (*lokanta*, *lokassa anta*), it becomes apparent that this notion holds significant importance in ancient Buddhism and can be explained as having a dual origin.[2]

In this article, we will not analyze the aspect related to the metaphysics of private apocalypse, as reference can be made to another work on the subject. Essentially, the concept of apocalypse (*lokanta*) is used in Buddhist ascetic practice to indicate the end of cognitive habits and the transcendence of the worldly order. In this sense, *lokanta* is the precursor of what will later be fully developed as *lokuttara* (transcendent) in the Abhidhamma, in a dichotomy with the worldly order (*lokiya*), which pertains to all the negative aspects of society. However, why Buddhism should adopt these two terms cannot be explained merely by referring to the ascetic nature of ancient Buddhism. It is certainly true that asceticism implies a sort of flight from the world (*fuga mundi*), and it is widely documented that in all Indian ascetic traditions, not only Buddhism, a general intolerance toward the organized city, whether it is understood as an urban dimension or a set of laws. However, the Buddhist interpretation is fundamental, and it reveals that it is not a simple social protest against the established order but rather against certain aspects of the worldly order, such as the retention of the faculty of veridiction by the dominant classes and generalized intolerance toward authority.[3] Without understanding these aspects, we cannot fully understand where epithets directed at the Buddha, such as "leader of the world" (*lokanāyaka*) or "world ender" (*lokantagū*), come from. Why is someone who is a leader of the world also its destroyer? And why do both of these qualities coincide with his being a "knower of the world" (*lokavidū*)? We will reflect on these themes, keeping in mind their historical comparability with early Christianity.

In the context of early Christian texts, our analysis endeavors to draw a comparison between the religious practices of the early Buddhist community and the diverse theological principles that are inherent to both early Christianity and the movement of John the Baptist. The latter is predominantly associated with the enigmatic personality of its leader, John the Baptist. In his teaching, there is no asceticism without tension toward social change as well. This more emphatically political intent is present in the background, or even in the foreground, of a significant part of the Jewish messianic literature of the late Second Temple and of the so-called Judeo-Christian period—a context that helps us frame John the Baptist's figure better. That is the hypothesis we will support in this article, which has a significant parallel in early Buddhist thought.

The decision to adopt the Pāli canon as an authoritative source for the reconstruction of ancient Buddhist thought is essentially arbitrary. While the Gāndhārī canon could potentially provide an equivalent level of antiquity, its fragmentary state necessitates a more comprehensive philological analysis. The Pāli canon poses various challenges related to its stratification and redaction, which render its utilization somewhat arduous. Nevertheless, with appropriate deliberation, it is feasible to construct a dependable and precise representation of ancient Buddhism, as I have previously demonstrated in a published work.

This research project aims to examine the concept of "apocalypse" (*lokanta*) as it is presented in Buddhist texts, through the examination of three key terms, all revolving around the main idea of *loka-anta*, which are *lokavidū* (the "knower of the world"), *lokanāyaka* (the "sovereign of the world"), and *lokantagū* (the "world ender"). Each of these terms raises important questions related to eschatology, ethics, and the practice of Buddhist asceticism.

The concept of apocalypse in Buddhism is closely tied to the conflict between the worldly and the transcendent, which is developed along both political and philosophical axes. The *lokavidū*, for example, is an ascetic who must retreat from organized society to become a "knower" of the world, but in doing so, he stands in opposition to established orders. The *lokanāyaka*, on the other hand, references the metaphor of royal power that Buddhism "inverts" and constructs the narrative of the Buddha as a good "sovereign" or "king of peace." Finally, the *lokantagū* ("world ender") represents the idea of "apocalypse" that has a double origin: an apocalypse that is desired as the end of the old order as a critique of the institutionalized monarchy and priesthood, and an apocalypse as the end of belief in rules and absolutism seen as illusion. This section will focus on the traditional Indian ascetic movements, which adopt meditation as a form of transcendence from the worldly. Here, the two apocalypses (social and personal-ascetic) are merged in the figure of the Buddha. Overall, this research project will provide a comprehensive examination of the concept of apocalypse in Buddhism, through the lens of these three key terms and will be useful for understanding the intersection of eschatology, ethics, and ascetic practice within the Buddhist tradition.

Let us now turn to the Judeo-Christian world. The sources to be utilized to examine messianic and apocalyptic Jewish and Judeo-Christian beliefs include the four

Gospels, the Epistles of James and Jude (as per the American Standard Version), the Dead Sea Scrolls, and Josephus's works. It should be noted that while these sources provide valuable insight, they cannot be considered unimpeachable and comprehensive testimony for the entire period and context under examination. For instance, the New Testament letters and Gospels could be subjected to issues such as stratification and subsequent rewriting, and the Qumran texts may only be representative of a specific sect. Nevertheless, given the limited availability of sources, we will employ these materials. In line with our focus on Jewish messianism, we will exclude Paul's epistolary, the latter is not pertinent to the context of the Jewish messianic beliefs that characterized the followers of John the Baptist, Jesus, and James the Just, who served as the leader of the Jerusalemite Church following Jesus's crucifixion.

The present study focuses on two interrelated themes, namely asceticism and social-political change, which are central to Jewish and Judeo-Christian apocalyptic literature. These themes are embodied in two key symbols: the desert, which represents an ascetic withdrawal from the world, and the world itself, which is portrayed as an external realm that has been invaded. In the context of the examined period, namely the first century BC and AD, the invading force is Hellenistic culture and subsequently the Roman Empire and is often represented through historical metaphors such as Egypt, Babylon, and the Cypriots (known as Kittim in 4Q424, fragment 1, 13), which serve as allegories of Rome. The Dead Sea Scrolls frequently allude to the raids of the so-called Sea Peoples, further underscoring the idea of invasion and conquest.

APOCALYPSE AND *FUGA MUNDI*: BUDDHIST ASCETIC BACKGROUND

The early Buddhist scriptures, such as the Snp and Dhammapada (Dhp), posit the notion that relinquishing worldly attachments and embracing asceticism is imperative for the attainment of complete mindfulness. These scriptures contend that the world is characterized by sensual gratification and the unending cycle of death and rebirth. Furthermore, the world is construed as a construct of identity that is intricately interlinked with cognitive processes, which can trigger anguish. To realize genuine emancipation from distress, one must dissociate oneself from evaluations and convictions, which are regarded as worldly. The remedy entails perceiving oneself as equivalent rather than superior or inferior and comprehending the world as a realm of suffering.

The Dhp (167–178) also emphasizes the transient nature of the world and the importance of abandoning it to transcend death. The metaphor of the Buddha as a world leader is also repeated in the Snp (4.1, 4.3–4.4), where it is understood that the world is shrouded by ignorance and is full of illusions and interdependent mental constructs. The Buddha is seen as the one who has reached the end of the world and is admired by all. Ultimately, the texts suggest that the only "correct" view of the world is one that reveals its inherent vacuity, emphasizing the importance of detachment from worldly opinions and attachments.

In a prior publication, the pivotal role of the ascetic legacy of ancient Buddhism in the development of its eschatology was underscored. Specifically, the intersections

TABLE 1. The development of the concept of *nibbāna* as a *lokuttara* dimension

Tradition	Practice	Goal
Vedic	Ritual sacrifice	*loka* (as *svargaloka*)
Proto-śramaṇa	*pravrajyā* and *brahmavihāra*	*Brahmā* (in *brahmāloka*)
Buddhist	*Dhammavinaya*	*nirvāṇa* (i.e., *lokottarajñāna*)

between the ascetic paradigm and the Buddhist paradigm were shown to stem from the clash with Vedic doctrine (see Table 1), with particular emphasis on the relationship between the ascetic notion of transcendence from the world and the emergence of foundational doctrinal models for Buddhism, such as the four noble truths.[4] The ascetic persona revolves around the concept of *loka*, as the world is deemed a fallacy by Buddhists. Only by comprehending it can one truly grasp the agony in the world, rendering the ascetic an expert on the world (*lokavidū*). The end of the world (*lokanta*) indicates the crossing of the threshold where cognitive mechanisms take place, leading to the repudiation of all classifications, attachments, and self-mortification practices. This, in turn, results in the rejection of all mental constructs, renunciation, and cravings. In essence, the figure of the ascetic and the notion of *loka* are integral to the Buddhist ascetic ideal and the formulation of the four noble truths. The knowledge of the world (*lokavidū*) corresponds to the first noble truth.

It should not surprise us that such a concept is an ascetic legacy, as it also helps us to better understand the eschatological vision of Buddhism, which sees the end of the world (*lokanta*) as a goal to be achieved. Here, apocalypse is not seen as a negative event at all.

In conformity with extant theoretical frameworks, the spatial configuration assumes significant importance for Buddhist ascetic practices. Herein, the dialectic between the urban domain and alterity is epitomized through the ascetic's abstention from locations governed by structured order. The forest (*arañña*) is the favored terrain, and Buddhism frequently expounds on its symbolic function as the ultimate alterity and the termination of the world. In other ascetic traditions, we would expect a similar spatial conception, in which alterity (*araññasaññaṃ paṭicca ekattaṃ*, Majjhimanikāya [MN] 121), as a place outside or at the end of the world, is just as sought after. In ancient Buddhist asceticism, the figure of the homeless wanderer (*anagārika*) holds central importance as the focal point of ascetic experience. The Buddha himself, embodying the archetype of the wanderer, renounced the world, his home, and structured society to venture into the wilderness, frequently represented in the Pāli canon as a forest. This creates a dichotomy between the village and the forest, with the *anagārika* oscillating between the two. The forest's significance lies not in its physical location but in its symbolic representation of the space where the *anagārika* can embrace their vagabond and homeless nature, distancing themselves from the city and established norms to engage in contemplative practice.

This conception of the world is framed within a dialectic contrasting the structured reality of society (the village) and the unadulterated reality of the wilderness

(the forest), which ascetics gravitate toward. Buddhism retains strong connections to these early ascetic intentions, as illustrated in passages from the Theragāthā and Saṃyuttanikāya (SN) 22.94,[5] which highlight the conflict between worldliness and harmonizing one's praxis with the teachings. The world is perceived as a limiting and deceptive vision of reality, further reinforcing the dialectic between the village (*gāma*) and the forest (*araññā*), the former representing culturally ordered society and the latter embodying the "unitary perception" (*araññasaññaṃ = paṭicca ekattaṃ*) attainable in the wilderness. Buddhism's clear opposition to the Vedic normative context suggests a distinct interpretation of the term *loka*, which is prevalent in the Brahmanical tradition. In Vedic usage, *loka* often signifies the realm of the *devas*, separate from the human domain. Thus, the *anagārika*'s journey between village and forest can be seen as an exploration of contrasting realities: the structured, limiting world of societal norms and the untamed wilderness where one can seek a unified perception of reality. In this context, Buddhist asceticism represents a quest for transcending the deceptive constraints of worldly life and embracing the profound truths inherent in the natural world.

THE DESERT

The first reference to John we have is at the beginning of the *Gospel of Mark*, dated around 70 AD:

> The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God. Even as it is written in Isaiah the prophet, Behold, I send my messenger before thy face, Who shall prepare thy way. The voice of one crying in the wilderness, Make ye ready the way of the Lord, Make his paths straight; John came, who baptized in the wilderness and preached the baptism of repentance unto remission of sins. (1, 1–4)[6]

So, John is introduced by *Mark* through a prophetic passage. Following this identification, John is the "one crying in the wilderness," and therefore the one who chooses the way of the desert, the ascetic retreat from the world. His urgent call is to conform one's lifestyle to "the way of the Lord," making "his paths straight," one's way of life. But, as it will be seen, this criticism is not limited to the field of morality or ethics but transcends its boundaries, becoming social criticism or, if you prefer, of the moral conduct of those who hold positions of honor and power at the top of the social structure.

Therefore, the first figure who chooses the way of the desert we meet in the New Testament is that of John the Baptist. *Mark* (1, 2–3), as we have seen, introduces the Baptist at the beginning of his Gospel with a prophetic quote from *Isaiah*, who announced John according to *Luke* (3, 4–6) and, even more explicitly, according to *Matthew* (3, 3). The quote from *Isaiah* (40, 3) "The voice of one crying in the wilderness, Make ye ready the way of the Lord, Make his paths straight" is present, other than in *Mark* (1, 3), in the *Community Rule*, one of the most important Dead Sea

Scrolls, that reads: "On the basis of these norms they will be separated from the midst of the abode of men of injustice to go into the desert to prepare the way for Him, as it is written: 'In the desert prepare the way, make a way in the steppe for our God'" (7, 13–14).

Mark proceeds:

> And there went out unto him all the country of Judaea, and all they of Jerusalem; And they were baptized of him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins. And John was clothed with camel's hair, and had a leathern girdle about his loins, and did eat locusts and wild honey. And he preached, saying, There cometh after me he that is mightier than I, the latchet of whose shoes I am not worthy to stoop down and unloose. I baptized you in water; But he shall baptize you in the Holy Spirit. And it came to pass in those days, that Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee, and was baptized of John in the Jordan. And straightway coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens rent asunder, and the Spirit as a dove descending upon him: And a voice came out of the heavens, Thou art my beloved Son, in thee I am well pleased. And straightway the Spirit driveth him forth into the wilderness. And he was in the wilderness forty days tempted of Satan; And he was with the wild beasts; And the angels ministered unto him. Now after John was delivered up, Jesus came into Galilee, preaching the gospel of God, and saying, The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand: repent ye, and believe in the gospel. (1, 5–15)

Five important points are here introduced: (i) John the Baptist's ascetic way of life, (ii) his diet, (iii) his role as precursor, (iv) the theme of the baptism with water, and (v) of the baptism "with the Holy Spirit and fire" (*Matthew* 3, 11; *Luke* 3, 16).

This sequence recalls Josephus's discipleship with a master named Bannus, whom the future historian lived with "for three years," until he achieved his "goal" and he "returned to the city." Similarly, Jesus came "from Nazareth of Galilee" (*Mark* 1, 9) to John and then returned "to Galilee" (*Mark* 1, 14). John indeed dedicated himself to baptizing "in the wilderness" (*Mark* 1, 4), like "Bannus, [who] lived in the desert, [. . .] and bathed himself in cold water frequently, both by night and by day" (*Life* 2, 11). So, John, who "preached the baptism of repentance unto remission of sins. And there went out unto him all the country of Judaea, and all they of Jerusalem; And they were baptized of him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins" (*Mark* 1, 4–5). While Bannus "used no other clothing than grew upon trees" (*Life* 2, 11), "John was clothed with camel's hair, and had a leathern girdle about his loins" (*Mark* 1, 6). But while Bannus fed "had no other food than what grew of its own accord" (*Life* 2, 11), so, apparently, he was a vegetarian, John "did eat locusts and wild honey" (*Mark* 1, 6).

So, in this way, we have introduced the second issue, the one related to nutrition. The *Damascus Document* (12, 11b–15a), present in the Dead Sea Scrolls, provides instructions on how to cook grasshoppers: "All kinds of grasshoppers will be put into fire or water while they are alive: such is, in fact, the order according to their nature." On the other hand, the *Gospel of the Ebionites* extends the asceticism of John and, with

him, of Jesus, to vegetarianism, a diet shared also by James the Just, according to Hegesippus (Eusebius of Caesarea, Ecclesiastical History 2, 23, 5). Therefore, in the *Gospel of the Ebionites*, in a passage quoted by Epiphanius in his *Panarion*, John's asceticism is even more radical, and he does not usually eat locusts:

> John was baptizing, and there went out unto him Pharisees and were baptized, and all Jerusalem. And John had raiment of camel's hair and a leathern girdle about his loins: and his meat (it saith) was wild honey, whereof the taste is the taste of manna, as a cake dipped in oil. That, forsooth, they may pervert the word of truth into a lie and for locusts put a cake dipped in honey. (30, 13, 4–5)[7]

The Ebionites were vegetarians and objected to the idea of eating locusts. The word "locust" in Greek is *akrís*, and the word they used for cake is *enkrís*, so the change is slight.[8]

In any case, a reference to an ascetic diet also seems to appear in fragment 4Q416, 418, which intimates: "And if you miss it, do not ... riches from your provisions, because {His} deposit will not be missing. {And} everything is founded {on} His word,[9] eat therefore what He gives you, but do not add anything else" (fragment 9, column I, 19–20).[10] Moreover, also John's disciples fasted (*Mark* 2, 18),[11] as James, the brother of Jesus, did, according to Jerome and the *Gospel of the Hebrews*.[12] The salience of John's dietary particulars is noteworthy insofar as they portend an ascetic predilection, one which emphasizes facets of his lifestyle that surpass those delineated in the New Testament.

Regarding John's role as a forerunner, instead, we can observe that the tradition may or may not be authentic. The first hypothesis can be legitimated by the Qumran literary imagination, which presents three different end times figures: the messiah of Israel, the messiah of Aaron, and the prophet. John could correspond to such a forerunner figure. Furthermore, the *navi*, the prophet, in the *Tanak*, does not place himself within the context of the priestly establishment, and he often attacks political power, just like John does. In the second hypothesis, which in fact does not completely exclude the first, Christian authors might have wanted to reduce the role of John, who would even publicly humiliate himself by declaring himself unworthy to stoop down and unloose the latchet of Jesus's shoes (*Mark* 1, 7–8).

As regards the theme of the baptism in water, David Flusser claims that the interpretation of John's baptism is almost identical to the one of the Dead Sea Scrolls, and that there was an affinity between the Baptist and the Essenes. Moreover, the scholar writes that the baptism, both for John and for the Essenes, had the same meaning as the Jewish ritual of immersion in a *mikveh*, a particular tub of rainwater used for purifying purposes. The Essenes, and John with them, adopted the idea of purification of the body by immersion, but they believed that a person's body would become contaminated not only through contact with impure objects but also through sin.[13] Mauro Pesce, on the other hand, has a completely different view from Flusser's and specifies that Josephus, speaking about both John the Baptist and Jesus, although he knew Essenism well, does not relate either of them to this sect.[14] Finally, Pesce

thinks that the only certain thing we know about Jesus's religious background is that, as Filoramo states too, he was related to John.[15]

John's ablutions may have also covered the role of an initiation rite since, immediately after his baptism, Jesus went, moved by the "Spirit [. . .] into the wilderness. And he was in the wilderness forty days tempted of Satan; And he was with the wild beasts" (*Mark* 1, 12–13). The value of the forbearance of temptation is shared by James in his Epistle: "Blessed is the man that endureth temptation; for when he hath been approved, he shall receive the crown of life, which the Lord promised to them that love him" (1, 12). However, in other words, after his baptism, Jesus adopts, for a certain period, John's lifestyle, living "in the wilderness" (*Mark* 1, 13), like the Baptist, who likewise stood "in the wilderness" (*Mark* 1, 4), and like "Bannus, [who] lived in the desert" (Josephus, *Life* 2, 11). Jesus remained in Judaea for an unspecified period of time, until "John was delivered up" (*Mark* 1, 14). Only at this point (perhaps to avoid arrest too?), "Jesus came into Galilee, preaching the gospel of God, and saying, The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand: repent ye, and believe in the gospel" (*Mark* 1, 14–15). So, Jesus, after John's arrest, announced the same message that, according to *Matthew*, also the Baptist preached: "Repent ye; for the Kingdom of heaven is at hand" (3, 2).[16]

There is at the end the theme of purification with fire, reserved for the messiah, as it seems from John's words. The *Gospel of Luke* adds: "he shall baptize you in the Holy Spirit and in fire: whose fan is in his hand, thoroughly to cleanse his threshing-floor, and to gather the wheat into his garner; but the chaff he will burn up with unquenchable fire" (3, 16–17). In the *Epistle of Jude*, there is another reference to the fire as a violent purifying instrument: "And on some have mercy, who are in doubt; and some save, snatching them out of the fire." However, according to the *Gospel of John* (3, 22–26), Jesus and his followers also used to baptize with water, as John used to do.

THE UNIVERSAL MONARCH: BUDDHIST SOCIAL MODEL

The Early Buddhist philosophy was developed in the sociocultural context of India in the time of the Buddha. As Chakravarti states, it was "the most comprehensive attempt" made in India "to analyze the rapidly changing society" and to create a "vision of an alternative society."[17] Although we cannot reduce the whole of Buddhist philosophy to a social movement, its history provides insight into the worldview and society it was trying to create. In particular, it advocated for a "more humane and sympathetic" approach to those who were oppressed, in contrast to the hierarchical model that was emerging in the post-Vedic era. This model was already implicit in the Vedic power, despite its lack of rigid categories and castes. Hierarchies were present in other Indo-European cultures, and the Vedas, strongly criticized by the Buddha, are evidence of that.[18]

Royal power is an Indo-European institution that India fully embraces. However, during the time of the Buddha, Indian culture was undergoing a significant transition from a pastoral to an agricultural economy, leading to population growth, the

consolidation of royal power, and a clearer definition of emerging social classes, in the form of proto-castes. The Buddha, who witnessed this transformation, adopted a "social philosophy" that supported the oppressed classes, criticizing the increasingly authoritarian royal power (*rāja*) and the priestly castes (*brāhmaṇa*) that were gaining normative authority, as stated by Chakravarti.[19]

The rise of royal power is significantly influenced by the evolution of the means of production and the enrichment of specific social classes. Scholars have suggested that the anti-categorical Buddhist philosophy, which frequently denounces the imposition of categorization, may have been rooted in concrete social circumstances: specifically, the division of normative spaces for the purpose of partitioning the land.[20] This division of the "field" (*kṣetra*) reflects a universal mechanism of the human mind, which creates controlled spaces and "fields of knowledge" (*kṣetrajña*), that is, conceptual domains. Chakravarti[21] refers to economic expansion and urbanization as a process criticized by Buddhists in DN, in which the genesis of kingship is attributed to the spatial dominance that imposes the human will on nature, organizing it into "fields" of production. This myth also echoes the royal establishment ceremony (*rājasūya*), in which the king is portrayed as a primordial warrior, conquering "areas" of the world (*loka*) and subdividing the space to attach to his rule.[22] The important figures of the shepherd and farmer also appear in this rite, as reminders of their role in supporting royal power. The Buddha, however, criticized the ideology of the *gahapati*, that is, the controller of the means of production, and the role of the householder, proposing an escape from the world that did not involve subsistence through production or wage earning (*vetan*), or land ownership or subservience to a king. Although Buddhism was likely to have experienced the aggressive expansion policies of King Ajātasattu, who dethroned and confined his father Bimbisāra, an enthusiastic advocate of Buddhism, his son was not in favor of ascetic practices that caused many of his subjects to avoid participating in social life, production, and services to the king.[23] In addition, Chakravarti also points out that various leaders of *avaidika* movements were formerly slaves who had escaped, as was the case with Makkhali Gosala and Purana Kassapa. As such, the renunciation of the world should be seen as a rejection of society, particularly in its economic and social context. This is reinforced by the Vedic view of the *loka*, which is characterized as a space of structured organization. Chakravarti sees in the social critiques of Buddhism an incredible antecedent to Hegelian-like philosophy and the "dichotomy between masters and slaves, or between owners and non-owners."[24]

Buddhism is a philosophy that looks at the world differently than many other practices. In its pragmatic view, the Buddha saw the need to create an ideal society, one where kingship (*rājanya*) was not based on the warrior-sovereign model but instead on the enlightened sovereign (*dhammarāja*). Buddhism borrows numerous terms from the royal lexicon, such as the *cakkavatti* epithet and the appellation *ādiccabandhu*.[25]

The fact that the Buddha almost seems to want to propose himself as an alternative model to the classical monarch also appears in the descriptions of the "just ruler" (Aṅguttaranikāya [AN] 5.133): the just king, wheel-turning sovereign

(*rājā cakkavattī dhammiko dhammarājā*), protects everyone, being they aristocrats, vassals, troops, priests and householders, people of town and country, ascetics and brahmins, beasts and birds. At this point, a series of behaviors are listed that the just ruler should not have, and obviously they coincide with those of the Buddha. In particular, the just ruler is warned against abstaining from city life (*gāmanigamo*). Only having fulfilled this way of life, the ruler can "turn the wheel" (*dhammikaṃ rakkhāvaraṇaguttiṃ saṃvidahitvā upāsikāsu dhammeneva anuttaraṃ dhammacakkaṃ pavatteti*), which is a clear reference to the rite of *rājasūya* in which the enthroning king performs the same symbolic gesture at the end.

A similar description can be found in AN 3.14, which discusses the figure of the *cakkavattī* ruler. The benevolent monarch is equated with the Buddha, who provides protection and guidance for the actions of the body, speech, and mind. The act of turning the wheel, which symbolizes the establishment of the ruler, is also adopted by the Buddha upon achieving enlightenment: "such a wheel cannot be rolled back by any ascetic, brahmin, deity, Māra, or Brahmā or by anyone in the world" (*taṃ hoti cakkaṃ appaṭivattiyaṃ samaṇena vā brāhmaṇena vā devena vā mārena vā brahmunā vā kenaci vā lokasmin*).

The term *lokanāyaka* appears to be a later innovation, being used mainly in texts such as the Therīapadāna and Buddhavaṃsa. The same can be said for *lokanātha*. However, there are two notable exceptions, one of which is very old, namely Snp 5 and Milindapañha (Mil) In Snp 5.1, we read an authentic hymn to the Buddha, in which he is identified as the ruler of the world: "from the city of Kapilavatthu, the world's leader has gone forth" (*purā kapilavatthumhā, nikkhanto lokanāyako*). The expression is repeated forward in the text: "where in the village, town or land is the world's leader so that we may go and pay respects to the Awakened One, best among men" (*katamamhi gāme nigamamhi vā pana, katamamhi vā janapade lokanātho; yattha gantvāna passemu, sambuddhaṃ dvipaduttamaṃ*). Therefore, Snp 5.1 is the only ancient Buddhist text to mention the concept of "world's leader" using both *lokanāyako* and *lokanātho*. Actually, the word *nātha* means "protector" or "refuge" and, by extension, also "leader" or "lord," whereas, *nāyaka* means precisely "master" or "leader." We find these terms expressed also in Mil 5.4.7 and 6.4.1.

An exhaustive examination of the political dimensions of Buddhism is of utmost importance. Scholars have exhibited a perspicacious comprehension that the antiquated Buddhist philosophy is inextricably linked to political considerations and presents an idealized structure for society. The Buddha's influence does not solely displace the role of the monarch, despite drawing heavily from the vocabulary and methodologies of sovereignty. The word *dharma* is derived from the Indo-European root *$*d^{h}er$*- (meaning "to hold" or "to support") and is related to the Greek words *thráō* and *thrónos* (as seen in the English word "throne"). According to Olivelle,[26] the term *dharma* was utilized by Buddhists with clear ties to the Vedic "royal vocabulary." Also, the term *śasana* originally meant "royal edict" but was later used to signify "teaching." Similarly, the terms *cakravartin* and *jina*, which originally referred to war-related concepts, were adopted by Buddhists to gain prestige. The Buddha is "all-conqueror" (*sabbābhibhū*), and the frequent use of the term

"noble" (*ariya* in the Pāli canon) to describe both "disciples" and the four founding truths is another example of this process. It should also be noted that Buddhism has ancient ties to Indo-European solar cults, which have been reinterpreted symbolically.

These statements could be further explored through the work of Apple, which reveals that the adoption of these terms is not simply meant to transform the political order into a religious one but outlines a clear vision of society itself. *Dharma* as a moral order is merely the most glaring example. Buddhism proposes its own genesis of the world, which it views negatively, and challenges the institution of kingship.[27] This is where the first contrast between the worldly (*laukika*) and the transcendent (*lokottara*) arises. Issues such as power and social management belong to the worldly, and thus the ascetic shuns them. However, this does not mean that the Buddha considers them useless. In transforming dharma from regal power to guiding principle, the Buddha reveals his desire to propose a worldly order that, in terms of principles and morals, aspires to the transcendent (*rajadhamma*). This social order would be preferable to the traditional rule of the sovereign and would allow social individuals a less painful transition to the transcendent. The just ruler hypothesized by the Buddha is very similar to a Bodhisatta, who derives his way of governing from transcendent principles.

An alternative hypothesis that explains the prevalence of regal symbolism in the Buddha's discourses posits a biographical rationale. As an individual belonging to the royal caste, the Buddha's princely lineage and heritage might have impacted his rhetorical expressions and symbolic representations. Notwithstanding his abdication of worldly possessions and status, vestiges of his antecedent experiences may have continued to inform his worldview. Fully disentangling oneself from one's past is an impracticable undertaking. Despite the seeming incompatibility between the Buddha's life and that of a monarch or *cakravartin*, he appears to embody both archetypes by transforming the *dharmacakra* from being a symbol of royal power to one representing moral law while concurrently distancing the symbol of domination, the *ajnacakra*, from regal power. The regal power is strongly criticized by Buddhism as the violent imposition of domination; nonetheless, the figure of the ruler is not criticized: "Siddhārtha is born and dies as a Cakravartin, [. . .] kingship is embedded throughout his life as the Buddha."[28]

This Buddhist idea of the "just king" (*dhammiko dhammarāja*) seems startingly close to the Platonic idea of the philosopher king. Buddhism holds a strong conception of state (*āṇā*), and it is undeniable the influence this had on actual policies in India. Even King Ajātasattu, initially opposed to the Buddha's political ideas, later became his protector.[29] There is a highly developed concept of politics in Buddhism, including distinctions between country (*raṭṭha*), kingdom (*rajja*), and conquered territory (*vijita*). It is also interesting to note that in Buddhism's ideal territorial organization, ascetics (*samaṇas*) are included as part of their own assembly (*parisās*) along with other social groups of the time, such as warriors, householders, and priests. Buddhism even seems to transfer its ascetic attitude to its ideal state, describing the king as necessary, although it recognizes the limits and intrinsic violence in the idea of domination. An ideal kingdom is conflict-free, free of "thorns"

(*akaṇṭaka*), and for this reason, the role of the king is very delicate, constantly at risk of abusing power and becoming a criminal.

The Buddhist mythology holds the memory of the first democratic king, a *Mahāsammata*, translated by Apple as "People's Choice." Given such a universalistic view of the king, one would not expect to see him excluded from Buddhist cosmology, and in fact, the idea that the Buddha foresaw two types of sovereignty (*dharma*) seems to be well established, and that the king should act as a bridge between the cosmic dharma and the social dharma (worldly). Between DN 26 and 27, the Buddhist conception of sovereignty is described in a more organic way.

To achieve this ideal, the Buddha recognized the need to leave the world and create his own egalitarian community, the *saṅgha*. This "end of the world" (*lokassa anta*) speaks to a desire to oust the old social models that are seen as wrong. Going deeper, Buddhism speaks of cognition and identifies the origin of the world (*lokassa samudaya*) with the origin of categorical cognition and perception (SN 35.107). In this instance, the Buddha's discourse diverges from his treatment of social roles and hierarchies, particularly evident in DN 27. This deviation suggests that the social stratification perpetuating inequity emanates from the fundamental constructs of categories inherent in both language and perception.

THE "WORLD"

The Gospel of Luke, compared to *Mark*, reports some interesting details, like the fact that John "came into all the region round about the Jordan, preaching the baptism of repentance unto remission of sins" (3, 3). According to *Matthew*: "Then went out unto him Jerusalem, and all Judaea, and all the region round about the Jordan; and they were baptized of him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins" (3, 5–6). The passage comes from the so-called Q source, but there are some different details between *Luke* (3, 3) and *Matthew* (3, 5–6). However, the followers came from Jerusalem and from the Jewish part of the Jordan that flows in the Dead Sea, the area where the members of the Qumran community and, according to Pliny, the Essenes lived. Q (3, 7–9) reports the Baptist's speeches containing the violent images of the axe and the fire:

> He said therefore to the multitudes that went out to be baptized of him, Ye offspring of vipers, who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Bring forth therefore fruits worthy of repentance, and begin not to say within yourselves, We have Abraham to our father: for I say unto you, that God is able of these stones to raise up children unto Abraham. And even now the axe also lieth at the root of the trees: every tree therefore that bringeth not forth good fruit is hewn down, and cast into the fire. (*Luke* 3, 7–9)

The generic "multitudes" of *Luke* (3, 7) are composed, instead, by "many of the Pharisees and Sadducees" in *Matthew* (3, 7), which finds a parallel in the "Pharisees" of *John* (1, 24) and in the "priests and Levites" of *John* (1, 19), most of whom were Sadducees. If John the Baptist's interlocutors were really *Matthew*'s

Sadducees (3, 7), then the threatening image of the axe might have been addressed to them, thus representing a further parallelism with the Qumran literature, which considered Jerusalem's priests as opponents and sons of the darkness. The Baptist's following speech is characterized by social criticism, too:

> And the multitudes asked him, saying, What then must we do? And he answered and said unto them, He that hath two coats, let him impart to him that hath none; and he that hath food, let him do likewise. And there came also publicans to be baptized, and they said unto him, Teacher, what must we do? And he said unto them, extort no more than that which is appointed you. (*Luke* 3, 10–13)

John then warns the soldiers, to whom he orders not to "extort from no man by violence, neither accuse any one wrongfully" (*Luke* 3, 14). This seems to be a political stance, which criticizes the malversations and abuses perpetrated by the Roman occupation army. Even here, a parallel is found in a letter from the Dead Sea Scrolls, in which a Jewish leader reproached a soldier.[30]

The *Gospel of Mark* refers again to John in relation to Jesus later, after Antipas has beheaded the Baptist (6, 16), when the name of the Galilean rabbi "had become known" to Antipas (6, 14). Some, including Antipas ("Herod"), thought Jesus was "John the Baptizer [. . .] risen from the dead, and therefore do these powers work in him" (6, 14). On the contrary, according to others (although *Matthew* does not report this information), Jesus was Elijah or "one of the prophets" (*Mark* 6, 15). It is only at this point that *Mark* (6, 17–20) narrates the causes of John's arrest and execution, which occurred, however, at an unspecified earlier time:

> For Herod himself had sent forth and laid hold upon John, and bound him in prison for the sake of Herodias, his brother Philip's wife; for he had married her. For John said unto Herod, It is not lawful for thee to have thy brother's wife. And Herodias set herself against him, and desired to kill him; and she could not; for Herod feared John, knowing that he was a righteous and holy man, and kept him safe. And when he heard him, he was much perplexed; and he heard him gladly. (6, 17–20)

Therefore, in John's message, there is a comparison between the messiah, the right king, the one who will come after him, and the wicked king. Furthermore, here John is said "righteous" (like his parents in *Luke* 1, 6, and like James the Just, the brother of Jesus). The theme of rightness is frequent in the Dead Sea Scrolls, which also condemn fornication (in 4Q542, fragment 3, column II, 12) and the marriage between an uncle and a niece (in 4Q251, fragment 7, 1–5). Likewise, John condemns the marriage between Antipas and his niece Herodias:

> And when a convenient day was come, that Herod on his birthday made a supper to his lords, and the high captains, and the chief men of Galilee; and when the daughter of Herodias herself came in and danced, she pleased Herod and them that sat at meat with him; and the king said unto the damsel, Ask of me

> whatsoever thou wilt, and I will give it thee. And he sware unto her, Whatsoever thou shalt ask of me, I will give it thee, unto the half of my kingdom. And she went out, and said unto her mother, What shall I ask? And she said, The head of John the Baptizer. And she came in straightway with haste unto the king, and asked, saying, I will that thou forthwith give me on a platter the head of John the Baptist. And the king was exceeding sorry; but for the sake of his oaths, and of them that sat at meat, he would not reject her. And straightway the king sent forth a soldier of his guard, and commanded to bring his head: and he went and beheaded him in the prison, and brought his head on a platter, and gave it to the damsel; and the damsel gave it to her mother. And when his disciples heard thereof, they came and took up his corpse, and laid it in a tomb. (*Mark* 6, 21–29)

The *Gospel of Mark*'s author tries to exculpate Antipas from the responsibility of John's execution: the women wanted his death, moreover by deception, while, for his part, "the king," actually the tetrarch, "was exceeding sorry" and only "for the sake of his oaths," almost out of a high sense of justice and of one's word, according to *Mark*, and in the name of the values of hospitality and for "them that sat at meat," Antipas "would not reject" Herodias's request.

This is how, according to *Mark*, John, who publicly attacked Antipas, highlighting his impiety with respect to the Law and delegitimizing his authority, was beheaded, without Antipas really wanting it. Beyond the legendary character of the story, what emerges is a clear political intention of the evangelist to rehabilitate those who governed Galilee on behalf of Rome, with consequent unrealistic results. *Luke* (3, 19–20), instead, condemns the actions of Antipas without hesitation:

> But Herod the tetrarch, being reproved by him for Herodias his brother's wife, and for all the evil things which Herod had done, added this also to them all, that he shut up John in prison. (3, 19–20)

To dispel any doubts about the clearly political motivation for the killing of the ascetic John, there is the account that Josephus makes of it in *Antiquities of the Jews*:

> Now some of the Jews thought that the destruction of Herod's army came from God, and that very justly, as a punishment of what he did against John, that was called the Baptist: for Herod slew him, who was a good man, and commanded the Jews to exercise virtue, both as to righteousness towards one another, and piety towards God, and so to come to baptism; for that the washing would be acceptable to him, if they made use of it, not in order to the putting away [or the remission] of some sins, but for the purification of the body; supposing still that the soul was thoroughly purified beforehand by righteousness. Now when others came in crowds about him, for they were very greatly moved by hearing his words, Herod, who feared lest the great influence John had over the people might put it into his power and inclination to raise a rebellion (for they seemed ready to do any thing he should advise) thought it

> best, by putting him to death, to prevent any mischief he might cause, and not bring himself into difficulties, by sparing a man who might make him repent of it when it would be too late. Accordingly he was sent a prisoner, out of Herod's suspicious temper, to Macherus, the castle I before mentioned, and was there put to death. Now the Jews had an opinion that the destruction of this army was sent as a punishment upon Herod, and a mark of God's displeasure to him. (18, 5, 2)

Thus, despite the disparate nature of the ascetic and social activist archetypes, they serve as complementary components within the persona of John. This example is representative of a broader trend present within the examined context. The ascetic who elects to embark upon a solitary path in the desert continuously evaluates and assesses society, including its ruling echelons comprised of priests, soldiers, and the tetrarch Antipas.

WISHING FOR THE END OF THE WORLD: BUDDHIST ESCHATOLOGY

The concept of Vedic power serves as a model, albeit it is not the entirety of the Vedas that the Buddha opposes. Rather, the Buddha challenges the Vedic notion of the world, which encompasses social organization and way of living. The ascetic elects to reside in liminality to resist the normalizing power of the village, which he symbolizes as a manifestation of the very power he opposes. Nonetheless, the urban revolution's association with Buddhist success is not solely due to this reason; it is also because the growth of cities facilitated the dissemination of Buddhism by enabling faster and more extensive communication between urban centers. In addition, the burgeoning merchant class recognized in Buddhism's message a means to advance their own interests. The Buddha's presence in sizable urban centers such as Sāvatthi and Rājagaha, where he secured the support of patrons willing to accommodate him, underscores the significance of cities in early Buddhism.

> This new urbanism crated complex problems of individual, familial and social relationships which early Buddhism sought to address with its emphasis on moral values and individual ethical and spiritual culture.[31]

The word *gāma* stands for "the primordial village," whose boundaries range from a single household to a more advanced human settlement. The territorial limits "were defined by hills and rivers, forests and/or walls and ditches" (ibidem.). For this reason, and also for the usage of the term in the Canon, I prefer to consider *gāma* more as a "prototypical village" or an idealized form of social organization to which one can refer to indicate, by extension, society. In the Pāli texts, it is also mentioned the existence of *brāhmaṇagāmas*, "a village owned and/or dominated by Brāhmaṇas" (ibidem.). What is interesting is that many of the Buddha's discourses seem to have been given right near such settlements.[32]

Let us try to analyze the hypothesis that the *samaṇa* movement is a response to the very model of Vedic society, and what the concept of *loka* has to do with all this. According to Gokhale, the hypothesis that much of the Buddhist success was due

to the growing urban revolution developed along the Gangetic Plain societies of the sixth century BCE is tenable, but what exactly is this urban transformation? Following Gokhale, we can identify three major sources of the revolution:

1. the massive deforestation needed to set more areas for the agricultural production;
2. the resultant increase in welfare and trade; and thus,
3. the strengthening of the emerging merchant class, whose interests sometimes conflicted with the previous order.

In the Pāli canon, the term *gāma* we have seen so far used as opposed to *araññā* is just one of the many words used to represent the urban reality. Possibly, the usage of *gāma* as a philosophical tool is to be found in the similar brāhmaṇic opposition between *grāma* and *araṇya* in which, however, the value of sociality and otherness is obviously different. In addition to *gāma* ("village"), we find other terms such as *nagara* ("town"), *nigama* ("market-town"), and *janapada* ("rural town"): these are words whose specificity would testify to the period of flourishing urban development and specialization. In ancient India, the flourishing of urbanization created a stark contrast between ascetic traditions, characterized by wanderers, and the worldly order. This opposition was primarily situated between the village, representing the worldly order, and the otherworldly order beyond its confines. The village, as the epicenter of normative and cognitive orders, is equated with the world (*loka*).

The meditative practice exercised by the homeless wanderer is not merely an escape from the world; it is a necessary departure from the normative order, be it in the desert or the forest, to enable the Buddhist practitioner to deconstruct the world within their mind. This process challenges the normative order's influence. In this context, the *loka*/*lokuttara* dialectic mirrors the perpetual conflict between *grāma* (village) and *araṇya* (forest).

When delimiting the boundaries of a village from the surrounding forest, a contrast between order and anomy is emphasized. Nonetheless, the anomic element is integral to the dual dialectic, serving as the necessary antithesis of the norm. Consequently, the world corresponds not only to the village per se but rather to the normative apparatus, which encompasses both the village and its idealized counterpart. The ascetic transcends the world by venturing into the forest, thereby distancing themselves from the normative epicenter. However, two options emerge from this situation: either to reenter the dialectic with the village and establish a symbolic antinomy, or to remain detached from the normative apparatus altogether.

The discussion on the origin of the world (SN 35.107) has several parallels, the so-called *Lokasuttas*, whose central theme is the world: its origin or its destruction. Texts such as SN 35.107 and 12.44 carefully describe the end of the world as follows:

> And what is, Mendicants, the end of the world?
> Visual consciousness arises because of the [collision between] the eye and the forms. The convergence of these three is [called] contact.

Contact is the condition for feeling.
Feeling is the condition for craving.
[But,] when, with dispassionateness, the entirety of this craving ceases, [then, also] grasping comes to an end.
So, the whole agglomeration of suffering is ended.
This, mendicants, is the end of the world.

The connection between the sensory fields and the world is also confimed by MN 148.6. To understand the Dhamma, it is necessary to comprehend the fundamental sixfold structure (*cha-chakkāni*).

The structure corresponds to the traditional sensory fields (*āyatanāni*): six interior (*ajjhattikāni*), six exterior (*bāhirāni*), six bodies or classes of consciousness (*viññāṇakāyā*), six classes of contact (*phassakāyā*), six classes of feeling (*vedanākāyā*), and six classes of craving (*taṇhākāyā*).

At this point, the Buddha denies one by one the erroneous belief in intrinsic identity for each of these sensory organs (... *attā ti yo vadeyya taṃ na upapajjati*), because each of them is rather subject to rise and disappear (... *uppādopi vayopi paññāyati*). Analogously, the identity of each one arises and disappears (*yassa kho pana uppādopi vayopi paññāyati, attā me uppajjati ca veti cā ti iccassa evamāgataṃ hoti*). Now, the ascetic must simply repeat the refrain for each element of the six sets we just exposed. This attribution of identity is, according to the Buddha, leading to the origin of the "self" (*ayaṃ kho pana, sakkāyasamudayagāminī paṭipadā*). Identity is explained as what leads to this discourse: *etaṃ mama, esohamasmi, eso me attā*, "this is mine, I am this, this is my-self."

Consequently, the opposite operation, "this is not my, this is not me ..." (*netaṃ mama, nesohamasmi, na meso attā*), leads to the cessation of identities. Therefore, the end of the world coincides with the end of one's "self" (*akkāyanirodhagāminī paṭipadā*). As previously mentioned, the figure of the world-ender (*lokantagū*) coincides with that of the Buddha. This epithet summarizes the two roles of the ascetic: that of a social reformer and that of a being who transcends mundanity even on a metaphysical level.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

Theories that state the connection between the sociocultural milieu of ancient India and the birth of Early Buddhism are numerous.

As we have seen, apocalyptic and messianic literature does not understand asceticism solely in opposition to the world but also as a cosmic war between the sons of light and the sons of darkness; this translates into concrete action, in the world, for social change. Hence the recurring themes of the poor and, more generally, of poverty: poverty as asceticism and the poor as the recipients of apocalyptic but also political and social message. From this point of view, some passages from the *Epistle of James* (1, 22–25; 2, 2–7.13), as well as the better-known sermon on the mountain in the *Gospel of Matthew* (5, 1–11), are emblematic.

The focus of this discussion is John the Baptist, an ascetic whose preaching is characterized by apocalyptic images and social criticism and which therefore holds the three elements together whose relationship we have analyzed: asceticism, end times, and social criticism, precisely. As we saw, the Qumran texts appear to be the cultural background to both John's message and the teaching of the *Epistle of James*. The tradition ascribes the latter to James the Just, brother of Jesus, the bishop of the Jerusalem Church after Jesus's crucifixion, and a prominent figure for so-called heresies such as the Ebionites's and the Nazarenes's ones. These movements, while remaining firmly within Judaism, acknowledged Jesus's role as the Messiah or as a prophet, even if as a man and not as a God.

John the Baptist serves as an exemplar of how themes such as ascetic life and prophecy about the end times were intrinsically linked to the much more concrete contents of the preaching, imbued with social criticism, of figures such as those of the Baptist himself but also of Jesus and James the Just. We find an invective against the soldiers, probably with reference to the Roman occupation troops, the announcement of a figure greater than him, a messianic figure, the righteous king of Israel, and the attack on the wicked king, the tetrarch Antipas, who ruled on behalf of Rome over the poor, over the Jewish people, staining himself with fornication and every kind of injustice. At least from the point of view of John, an ascetic, an apocalyptic prophet, and a political opponent.

Regarding Buddhism, we have seen how the dialectic between urban space and dissent space (the forest in their case, but the desert in other ascetic traditions) is essential to describe the religious geography (the conceptual map) of a thought that does not just limit itself to its eschatology but also provides alternative solutions. Dissent space is necessary because in the ordered world (*loka*), an oppressive order actually prevails, rejected by the ascetic. The figure of the ascetic as a role halfway between the political and the religious is also revealed by MN 83, where it is revealed that the founder of the ascetic practice is remembered to be a king. This mythical king-ascetic perhaps serves as a symbolic prototype for the same purposes of the Buddha, who is presented as the ender of the world (*lokantagū*) not only because he goes to the end of the world, but also because he brings the end of the world through gnosis, knowledge (*vid-*); for this reason, the greatest knowledge of the world (*lokavidū*) also coincides with its, desirable, end. In this desire to bring the world to its end, the intentions of ancient Buddhism and early Christianity converge in analogous ways. In its origins, Buddhism develops a kind of parodistic function of royalty (*rājiddhi*), adopting a series of symbolic devices of Indian royalty of the time to assimilate and invert them, using them as a tool to ridicule royal power, which in Buddhism is seen as an exercise of violence (*daṇḍa*). In the preaching of John against the tetrarch Antipas, however, the element of parody does not appear, replaced by scathing invectives. In the Jewish context of the first century AD, other movements delegitimizing royal authority also emerge, but with violent rather than parodistic characteristics. We refer to the so-called fourth philosophy of Judas of Galilee: "These men agree in all other things with the Pharisaic notions; but they have an inviolable attachment to liberty, and say that God is to be their only Ruler and

Lord. They also do not value dying any kinds of death, nor indeed do they heed the deaths of their relations and friends, nor can any such fear make them call any man lord" (Josephus, *Antiquities of the Jews* 18, 1, 6).

The critique of royalty in early Buddhism results from the original choice of the ascetic, who withdraws into the forest and refuses social norms, seeing the figure of the king as the center of emanation from which all rules descend upon society. In this second aspect, the distance from the community of Qumran, John the Baptist, and James must be noted, as they propose a model of observance of traditional rules much more rigid than that adhered to by the sovereign. Here, the foundation of the Law is the Mosaic tradition, not the sovereign, who, as seen, does not adhere to it regarding issues such as incest, divorce, and fornication.

When Buddhism later becomes somewhat institutionalized and the ascetic no longer embodies the simple social protest in the flight from the world (*pabbajjā*) into the forest (*araññña*) but constitutes a parallel community (*saṅgha*) outside the rules of the city (*gāma*), it adopts symbols of royalty both to diminish and to legitimize itself, starting from the very use of terms like *dhamma* "rule," *ariya* "noble," and *cakkavattī* "universal monarch."[33] Communal life in the context of first-century AD Jewish messianism, on the other hand, does not represent a subsequent phase (but rather a previous and contemporary one) to that of individual asceticism; consider, for example, the community of Qumran and that of the apostles on the one hand and the individual asceticism of John the Baptist and Bannus on the other.

But while the type of king that the Buddha represents is a kind of ideal person who is peaceful and guarantees this peace and balance, in the Vedic ritual, the king is the one who conquers the world, establishing a rule over its four quarters (*cāturanto vijitavi*). In the Jewish and Judeo-Christian worlds, the opposition between the righteous king and the wicked king does not hinge on the theme of peace. In the Dead Sea Scrolls, peace is indeed the ultimate goal, but to achieve it, a cosmic war between the sons of light and the sons of darkness led by the righteous king, the messiah, is envisioned. Jesus himself, for example, in the Gospel of Matthew states: "Think not that I came to send peace on the earth: I came not to send peace, but a sword" (10: 34).

Finally, the Buddha advocates for the end of the world (*lokanta*), this kind of mindful apocalypse, understood as the end of the world organized under the aegis of the sovereign, because a series of sovereigns will attain Buddhahood and become "reverse" sovereigns, the quintessential anti-sovereigns, or simply "rightful sovereigns" (*dhammiko dhammarāja*), and therefore will not establish the world but an anti-world, an end of the world that will then be a kind of *nirvāṇa* on earth. In conclusion, the similarities with the messianic and Judeo-Christian worlds are significant, especially where prophecy refers to a series of empires before the end of times, and above all, for the fact that the end of times is presented as both a cosmic phenomenon and a just kingdom on earth. In this way, the analysis highlights the complex interplay between religious movements, sociopolitical contexts, and the critique of authority across different traditions and time periods.

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NOTES

1. In a previous publication dedicated to the anthropology of ancient Buddhism, significant elements have surfaced that provide an outline of what seems to be a Buddhist apocalyptic concept. See Federico Divino, "Reaching the End of the World: An Anthropological Reading of Early Buddhist Medicine and Ascetic Practices," *Religions* 14, no. 2 (2023): 249 (doi: 10.3390/rel14020249).

2. Cfr. Tetsuo Hashimoto, "The Concept of *loka* in Early Buddhism (IV)," *Journal of Indian and Buddhist Studies* (*Indogaku Bukkyogaku Kenkyu*) 33, no. 2 (1985): 861–855 (doi: 10.4259/ibk.33.861). While it is partially derived from Vedic cosmology, which understands the world as a space segmented by human will to establish an organized society, recent studies have shown that this Vedic conception is a part of Buddhism but is also contextualized and criticized within ascetic practices. See also Federico Divino, "An Anthropological Outline of the Sutta Nipāta: The Contemplative Experience in Early Buddhist Poetry," *Religions* 14, no. 2 (2023): 172 (doi: 10.3390/rel14020172). The ascetic renounces the world, which is perceived as a collection of perceptions and norms that govern human society, and seeks its end. In this sense, the ascetic's flight from the world is a quest for an apocalypse. This idea echoes the work of the Italian historian of religions, Ernesto De Martino, who linked shamanic-ascetic practices to experiences of the world's collapse and apocalyptic conceptions prevalent in numerous religions.

3. The veridiction process pertains to the sociological studies of Michel Foucault. It is developed from the capacity of an entrenched power to establish the acceptable as "true," while rejecting what it deems to be false. Notably, Squarcini has highlighted that the veridiction process also characterizes traditional Indian Vedic authority, which has historically been in a state of perpetual conflict with Buddhists and so-called *nāstika* philosophies. See Federico Squarcini, "*Pāṣaṇḍin*, *Vaitaṇḍika*, *Vedanindaka* and *Nāstika*. On criticism, Dissenters and Polemics and the South Asian Struggle for the Semiotic Primacy of Veridiction," *Orientalia Suecana* 60: 101–115.

4. Divino, "An Anthropological Outline of the Sutta Nipāta," 15.

5. The conflict with worldliness is reiterated in SN 22.94, presented as an inevitable collision with the world (*lokova mayā vivadati*) which can be avoided by harmonizing the praxis with the teachings (*dhammavādī kenaci lokasmiṃ vivadati*), while the statement in the Theragāthā reports "I abandoned the world for the sake of life" (*anuttaraṃ puññakkhettaṃ lokassa*).

6. The English translations of the New Testament passages are based on the American Standard Version.

7. James A. Kelhoffer, *The Diet of John the Baptist: "Locust and Wild Honey in Synoptic and Patristic Interpretation* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2005), 139.

8. James Montague Rhode, *The Apocryphal New Testament* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1924), 8–10.

9. Cfr. John 1, 1.3.10.

10. Robert Eisenman and Michael Wise, *Manoscritti segreti di Qumran* (Casale Monferrato: Edizioni Piemme, 2008 [1992]), 253.

11. "And John's disciples and the Pharisees were fasting" (*Mark* 2, 18).
12. "James had sworn that he would not eat bread from that hour wherein he had drunk the Lord's cup until he should see him risen again from among them that sleep" (Jerome, *De viris illustribus* 2).
13. David Flusser, *Le fonti ebraiche del cristianesimo delle origini* (Milano: Gribaudi Editori, (2005) [1989]), 39.
14. Mauro Pesce, "La scoperta dell'ebraicità di Gesù. Un compito non finito," *Qol* 165 (2014): 11–14.
15. Corrado Augias and Giovanni Filoramo, *Il grande romanzo dei Vangeli* (Torino: Giulio Einaudi Editore, 2019), 46.
16. We shall refrain from delving into the question of the Kingdom herein for reasons of spatial constraint. The topic at hand is expansive and captivating, and in brief, we contend that the Kingdom possesses a dualistic religious and political essence, namely, the Kingdom of Heaven and the Kingdom of the Messiah on earth.
17. Uma Chakravarti, "The Social Philosophy of Buddhism and the Problem of Inequality," *Social Compass* 33 (1986): 199–221, cit. 199 (doi: 10.1177/003776868603300206).
18. Ibid.
19. Ibid., 202–203.
20. Cfr. Divino, "An Anthropological Outline of the Sutta Nipāta," 4–6, 7.
21. Chakravarti, "The Social Philosophy of Buddhism and the Problem of Inequality," 204.
22. Cfr. Divino, "An Anthropological Outline of the Sutta Nipāta," 6–11.
23. Chakravarti, "The Social Philosophy of Buddhism and the Problem of Inequality," 209–211.
24. Ibid., 212.
25. Divino, "An Anthropological Outline of the Sutta Nipāta."
26. Patrick Olivelle, "The Ascetic and the Domestic in Brahmanical Religiosity," in *Asceticism and Its Critics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 25–42.
27. James Apple, "Eschatology and World Order in Buddhist Formations," *Religious Studies and Theology* 29, no. 1 (2010): 109–122 (doi: 10.1558/rsth.v29i1.109).
28. Ibid., 113.
29. Balkrishna Govind Gokhale, "The Early Buddhist View of the State," *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 89, no. 4 (1969): 731–738 (doi: 10.2307/596944).
30. Marice Massai, Elisabetta Incanti, and M. Letizia Milanesi, "I rotoli del mar Morto. L'importanza di una setta," *Mondo Archeologico* 62 (1981): 27–33, cfr. 27.
31. Balkrishna Govind Gokhale, "Early Buddhism and the Urban Revolution." *The Journal of the International Association of Buddhist Studies* 5, no. 2 (1982): 7–22, cit. 13.
32. Cfr. Greg Bailey and Ian Mabbett, *The Sociology of Early Buddhism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003). Bailey et al. have conducted comprehensive research on the role of early Indian urbanization in the evolution of Buddhism. I diverge from their excessive reliance on economic factors as a central explanation for many facets of Buddhism. While the economic factor may account for the successful spread of Buddhism, it falls short in addressing the deeper doctrinal inquiries, which are perceived to be "an ideology to serve the new age of urbanism" and "a reaction against this new environment" (p. 19). Notably, Bailey and Mabbett's arguments are cogent, but their treatment of the concept of *loka* appears to be only tangential (pp. 191–195).
33. Kazal Barua, "Tracing the Socio-economic Roots of the Buddhist Concept of Universal Monarch (*Cakkavatti*)," *South Asia Culture, History & Heritage* (2015): 4–12 (http://repository.kln.ac.lk/handle/123456789/11473).