

Kingship and Priesthood: Twin Messianism in Buddhism and Judaism

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Early Chinese Buddhist translations preserved the majority of the literature on the worship of Maitreya, the future Buddha. Can these sources shed any light on this once popular practice in India and Central Asia? Can the understanding of this practice, in turn, help us clarify the massive and often conflicting information on this eschatological figure, in particular, his relationship to another eschatological figure, the Cakravādin?

Buddhist rulers in medieval China tended to identify themselves with both the Cakravādin and the future Buddha Maitreya, where we see a fusion between the two figures. Some texts support this fusion by stating that Ajita and Maitreya refer to the same person, while another group of texts state that Ajita and Maitreya are distinguished from each other, and that they refer to the future universal king and the future Buddha respectively. I call the latter version of eschatological vision "twin messianism."

Somewhat surprisingly, this twin messianism is also found in a Judaist group in Qumran. Their beliefs and practices were first revealed by the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls, where many textual sources suggest that they expect the arrival of two eschatological figures in the end of the age, a king named David and a priest named Aaron. These parallels are very significant to scholars of history of religion, although I am cautious in jumping quickly into any conclusion regarding the origin of the Buddhist worship of Maitreya.