

Will the Real Nigantha Nātaputta Please Stand Up? Reflections on the Buddha and his Contemporaries

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Abstract

It is a venerable academic tradition that Mahāvīra, the founder of Jainism known in the Pāli literature as Nigantha Nātaputta, was a somewhat older contemporary of the Buddha. This article describes the role of Nigantha Nātaputta in Buddhist literature and how this identification of Nigantha Nātaputta and Mahāvīra has become accepted in both Buddhist and Jain scholarship. The article then proceeds to demonstrate that there are reasons to doubt this identification – while it is not possible to state categorically that they were different people, the evidence for their identity is quite meagre and there are textual references that show very different people going under the names of these two Indian religious figures. If we cannot simplistically assume that the figure named Nigantha Nātaputta in Buddhist sources was Mahāvīra, then this has chronological consequences for Buddhist studies, but even more so in Jain studies.

Keywords: Gotama Buddha, Nigantha Nātaputta, Mahāvīra, Early Buddhism, Jainism

Introduction

One of the first things students of Buddhism encounter when they start to learn the biography of the historical Buddha is that he was a near-

contemporary of Mahāvīra, the historical (though not the mythical or archetypal) founder¹ of Jainism. Indeed, this has become a piece of received wisdom in Buddhist studies: Mahāvīra, known in the Pāli literature as Nigantha Nātaputta², was a somewhat older contemporary of the Buddha. They interacted, through intermediaries, on a number of occasions. Nigantha Nātaputta predeceased the Buddha by some years when his disciple Upāli defected to the Buddha's side. In 1930, Jacobi argued that Mahāvīra outlived the Buddha by seven years, a view roundly criticised at the time by Keith (1932), and which has never entered academic orthodoxy in either Buddhist or Jain scholarship. Both scholars assumed the identity of Mahāvīra and Nigantha Nātaputta.

This article will question one of the central suppositions underlying this story. Before we begin though, let me hasten to say that this is not meant as an old-fashioned exercise in historical revisionism, an attempt to prove that any of these people 'did not really exist'. I am happy to adopt a stance of naive realism and stipulate that the Buddha, Mahāvīra and Nigantha Nātaputta all really existed, and even to accept, for the sake of argument, that they, or at least two of them, lived at roughly the same time and that at least two of them interacted with one another.

However, I wish to question whether the Nigantha Nātaputta referenced in the Pāli Canon really was the same individual known as Mahāvīra. On what basis, other than long-established tradition, do we state this to be a fact, and are there reasons to think it might be otherwise? Could it be that Nigantha Nātaputta, real historical figure though he might have been, was just another obscure Indian teacher whose sole legacy is to live on in the Pāli Canon as a straw man for Buddhist polemics? Is it possible that he was not, in fact, Mahāvīra?

1 I use the term 'founder' only in the sense that with the life of Mahāvīra we see Jainism emerge into history in the sense of dateable documentation. Whether or not there were twenty-three tīrthaṅkaras, and a living Jain tradition, before him does not affect the argument raised in this essay.

2 Variant spellings of the name exist, but these do not affect the argument advanced here and will not be discussed.

Nigantha Nātaputta as a Figure in Buddhist Studies and Buddhist Literature

Surprisingly, for all the attention given to Nigantha Nātaputta in the Pāli Canon, there is no record of a direct meeting between him and the Buddha, or even between him and one of the Buddha's senior monks. Instead, there is an incidence where a Buddhist lay follower named Citta approaches Nigantha Nātaputta and holds a discussion with him. This can be found in the Citta Saṃyutta, Saḷāyatanavaggo of the Saṃyutta Nikāya³. The other major appearance of Nigantha Nātaputta is in the Upālisutta, which we will discuss later.

Even so, there is much discussion of Nigantha Nātaputta and his teachings, mostly in order to refute them, notably in the Devadaha Sutta⁴, or to dispute Nigantha Nātaputta's claim to wield supernatural abilities on a par with the Buddha's. His name is commonly mentioned along with those of other religious figures of the time, such as Purana Kassapa, Makkhali Gosala, Sañjaya Belaṭṭhiputta, Pakuddha Kaccayāna and Ajitha Kesakambala⁵.

Nigantha Nātaputta and the Jain tradition

Jain scholarship seems to accept uncritically that the encounters between Nigantha Nātaputta and the Buddha involve the historical Mahāvīra, at least for the purposes of establishing a chronology. Dundas, for example, notes that the ongoing revision of the Buddha's chronology will necessitate a reconsideration of when Mahāvīra lived, while acknowledging that the Jain community 'has not so far proved susceptible to such arguments' (Dundas

3 See <http://metta.lk/tipitaka/2Sutta-Pitaka/3Samyutta-Nikaya/Samyutta4/40-Citta-Samyutta/01-Cittavaggo-e.html> for a contemporary English translation (consulted 15 February 2015).

4 Majjhima Nikāya, Sutta 101. See <http://metta.lk/tipitaka/2Sutta-Pitaka/2Majjhima-Nikaya/Majjhima3/101-devadaha-e1.html> for a contemporary English translation (consulted 15 February 2015).

5 For example, in the Kutuhalasālā section of the Abyākata Vagga, Saṃyutta Nikāya 43, see <http://metta.lk/tipitaka/2Sutta-Pitaka/3Samyutta-Nikaya/Samyutta4/43-Avyakata-Samyutta/01-Abyakatavaggo-e.html> for a contemporary English translation (consulted 15 February 2015).

2002:24). We see Sinha too accepting conventional wisdom on this issue, but inserting a note of caution: ‘It is also remarkable that Lord Buddha has never been mentioned in the entire Āgamic literature, even though the early Buddhist records at several places mention ... Nigantha Nātaputta who was no other than Lord Mahāvīra’ (Sinha 1975:7).

Compare this with Mahāvīra's interactions with another prominent sage of the era, Makkhali Gosāla. For those, we need not go to a foreign set of literature; they are described in the Jain corpus itself (P. S. Jaini 1979:21-25, Dundas 2002:28-30). We should also consider the complex and many-faceted interaction between Jain and Hindu mythologies, in which the mythologies become so interwoven that ‘among the epic heroes Rāma, Lakṣmaṇa, Baladeva, and Kṛṣṇa, Rāma is ... the only one not destined to become a tīrthaṅkara. Even Sītā, Rāma's faithful wife, is predicted to attain emancipation as a chief disciple (gaṇadhara) of a tīrthaṅkara’ (Geen 2011:75). We see none of this when it comes to Buddhism.

How far back does this scholarly identification of Nigantha Nātaputta and Mahāvīra stretch on the Jain studies side of the equation? We can see it in works first published in 1966 (Schubring 1966) and 1940 (Jaini 1982). According to Gopalan, it was first put forward by Bühler and Jacobi in the late 19th century (Gopalan 1973:5-6)., and we can see it raised in Jacobi's Introduction to his translation of the Akarāṅga-sūtra and Kalpa-sūtra in the 1884 work *Jaina Sutras Part II*, in the *Sacred Books of the East* series⁶. And yet Sinha's cautionary note remains a consistent, nagging concern; from Bühler and Jacobi's time to our own, the elaborate linguistic explanations equating Pāli and Jain Prakrit terms that are put forward depend solely on material from a non-Jain, that is, Buddhist, source.

We generally refrain from drawing sweeping conclusions about the existence of a distinct Cārvāka/Lokāyata organisation precisely because all that we know about early Indian skeptics is based on the polemics generated by their Hindu and Buddhist opponents (Chatterjee & Datta 2013:55). There may have been individual skeptics, but was there really anything we could call a Cārvāka school of thought? By analogy, if the only evidence for the identity of Nigantha Nātaputta and Mahāvīra is found in non-Jain texts, that already calls that identity into question. As we shall see, that source is hardly

6 <http://www.sacred-texts.com/jai/sbe22/sbe2202.htm> (consulted 15 February 2015).

complimentary to the supposed historical founder of Jainism it is thought to describe.

More popular sources on Jainism follow the same pattern. At the time of writing, the Wikipedia page on Mahāvīra⁷ was refreshingly free of references to Nigantha Nātaputta, but they could be found on a page comparing Jainism to Buddhism⁸. Elsewhere we see the Buddhist sources used to bolster Jain claims to historicity, for example on the Jain World web site⁹.

Why Nigantha Nātaputta may not be Mahāvīra

There are three issues that complicate the identification of Nigantha Nātaputta and Mahāvīra: the name Nigantha Nātaputta itself, the characters ascribed to the respective individuals by the Buddhist and Jain scriptures, and the events that transpired after their deaths.

The Name Issue

Mahāvīra (Great hero) is a title, just as Buddha is. The individual we know as Mahāvīra was known by a number of personal names. The most commonly used is Prince Vardhamāna. Other names and titles in use for him include Arukaṇ, Arukadevan, Vira, Viraprabhu, Sanmati, Ativira, and Gnatputra.

Only in the Buddhist literature do we find the name Nigantha Nātaputta. In itself, this is not damning evidence. The ancient world, in India as elsewhere, did not regard a personal name as an unchanging attribute of a person. People changed their names to indicate changes in their status, and might use different names depending on who they were dealing with. Beyond a doubt, the individual known as Gaius Octavius Thurinus was the same person later called Gaius Julius Caesar Augustus, or, in English, the Emperor Augustus. Even so, it would be refreshing to see the name Nigantha

7 <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mahāvīra> (consulted 15 February 2015).

8 http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Buddhism_and_Jainism (consulted 15 February 2015).

9 <http://www.jainworld.com/literature/jainhistory/chapter3.asp> (consulted 15 February 2015).

Nātaputta (or its equivalent in an Indian language other than Pāli used in a non-Buddhist text to refer unambiguously to the founder of Jainism).

The names of pre-Mahāvīra tīrthaṅkaras do show up in the Buddhist texts, transliterated into Pali form and suitably reinterpreted as pacekkabuddhas or yakkhas. In the Isigili Sutta¹⁰, for example, we find Ariṭṭha mentioned as one of the early pacekkabuddhas, which may be a reference to the Jain tīrthaṅkara Ariṣṭanemi/Nemi Natha¹¹. One does not wish to stress the coincidences of such names too far. After all, Mahāvīra was supposedly the son of one Siddhārta, and he had a disciple named Gautama. But the name Vardhamāna is conspicuous only by its absence.

The epithet that does appear in the earliest stratum of Jain texts is ‘Nāyaputta’, analogous to the Pāli ‘Nātaputta’. This is hardly a unique identifier, as it seems to refer to an entire warrior clan, known as Jñāta in Sanskrit (Dundas 2002:25). Just to muddy the water a little further, ‘Mahāvīra’ is also one of the lesser known titles of the Buddha (Bokhale 1994:73), just as ‘Buddha’ is an epithet of Mahāvīra¹², so even if we were to find a Buddhist text that declared that Nigantha Nātaputta was ‘a Mahāvīra’ that would be inconclusive evidence. It might show a grudging admiration for the founder of a rival sect, but it would not necessarily mean that that sect was directly related to what we today call Jainism.

The common titles and names among the two religions were noticed as far back as 1884, when Jacobi contested a view, current at the time, that Buddhism was an offshoot of Jainism by pointing out that “The most natural construction we can put on the facts is that there was and is at all times a number of honorific adjectives and substantives applicable to persons of exalted virtue .. used as epithets in their original meaning by all sects”¹³. To

10 Majjhima Nikāya 116, see <http://www.accesstoinight.org/tipitaka/mn/mn.116.piya.html> for a contemporary English translation (consulted 05 April 2013).

11 More common occurrences of names from the Jain tīrthaṅkara and Buddhist pacekkabuddha lineages are mentioned at http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Buddhism_and_Jainism (consulted 05 April 2013).

12 See, for example, the list of epithets in the Kalpa Sutra listed in the quotation from Jacobi in the next section of this article.

13 <http://www.sacred-texts.com/jai/sbe22/sbe2202.htm> (consulted 15 February 2015).

give a modern equivalent, western Buddhists have appropriated terms like ‘minister’ and ‘chaplain’

The naming issue is a lynchpin in the identification of Nigantha Nātaputta and Mahāvīra, but the argument draws data from only one side of the literature and is inconclusive even then. Let us move on and investigate the individuals who were said to bear these names.

The Character Issue

The descriptions that, respectively, the Pāli Canon gives of Nigantha Nātaputta, and that the Jain scriptures give us of Mahāvīra are a more serious issue. Let us first look at what the Jains have to say about their founder. We find this in the Akarāṅga-sūtra:

I.3. For a year and a month he did not leave off his robe. Since that time the Venerable One, giving up his robe, was a naked, world-relinquishing, houseless (sage).

7. For some it is not easy (to do what he did), not to answer those who salute; he was beaten with sticks, and struck by sinful people.

16. Practising the sinless abstinence from killing, he did no acts, neither himself, nor with the assistance of others ...

III.7. Ceasing to use the stick (i.e. cruelty) against living beings, abandoning the care of the body, the Houseless (Mahāvīra) the Venerable One endures the thorns of the villages (i.e. The abusive language of the peasants), (being) perfectly enlightened).

9. When he who is free from desires approached the village, the inhabitants met him on the outside, and attacked him, saying, ‘Get away from here’.

10. He was struck with a stick, the fist, a lance, hit with a fruit, a cold, a potsherd. Beating him again and again, many cried.

11. When he once (sat) without moving his body, they cut his flesh, tore his hair under pains, or covered him with dust.

12. Throwing him up, they let him fall, or disturbed him in his religious postures; abandoning the care of his body, the Venerable One

humbled himself and bore pain, free from desire (Eliade 1977:463-465)¹⁴.

We could go on, but the above selection gives the general picture of Mahāvīra as a saintly, endlessly patient and forbearing teacher, far above mere worldly affairs. Now let us see what the early Buddhists reported about Nigantha Nātaputta.

Nigantha Nātaputta was not above sending his disciples to the Buddha with loaded questions. In the Kula section of the Gāmiṇī Saṃyutta¹⁵, he sends a village headman to ask the Buddha how he can accept alms when the area is being ravaged by a famine? So far, this is just part of the general rough-and-tumble of Indian philosophical engagement, and the Buddha, as one would expect to find in a Buddhist text, gets the better of the encounter. The commentarial tradition, however, holds that Nigantha Nātaputta went further, publicly disparaging the Buddha for attending a feast given by Prince Sīha at which meat was served (Malalasekera 1974:63), leading to the pronouncement of the Telovāda Jātaka¹⁶.

However, it is in the Upāli Sutta¹⁷ that we find the greatest divergence between the respective demeanours of Mahāvīra and Nigantha Nātaputta, as described by the respective traditions' texts. In this text, the wealthy householder Upāli¹⁸, a prominent follower of Nigantha Nātaputta, sets out to engage the Buddha in debate. The Buddha wins the encounter and Upāli switches allegiances and becomes a lay Buddhist.

14 This quotation is from Jacobi's original 1884 translation, which may also be found here: www.sacred-texts.com/jai/sbe22/sbe2201.htm (consulted 15 February 2015).

15 Samyutta Nikāya 4, see <http://metta.lk/tipitaka/2Sutta-Pitaka/3Samyutta-Nikaya/Samyutta4/41-Gamini-Samyutta/01-Gamanivaggo-e.html> for a contemporary English translation (consulted 15 February 2015).

16 Jataka 246, Khuddaka Nikāya.

17 Majjhima Nikāya 56, see <http://www.metta.lk/tipitaka/2Sutta-Pitaka/2Majjhima-Nikaya/Majjhima2/056-upali-e1.html> for a contemporary English translation (consulted 08 April 2013).

18 Not the same person as Upāli the barber, who became one of the Buddha's most senior monks.

In Buddhist circles, this text is commonly used to emphasise the Buddha's ecumenical spirit, for what happens next is that he instructs Upāli to continue giving almsfood to his former associates. Upāli obeys, but adds a little condition of his own. He instructs his gatekeeper to bar the doors of his house to any of Nigantha Nātaputta's followers, allowing only Buddhist monks and nuns to enter. If niganthas are to arrive on alms-rounds, food is to be brought to the doorstep for them. When Nigantha Nātaputta himself arrives, Upāli explains his change of allegiance and 'then Nigantha Nātaputta, not able to hear the honour accorded to the Blessed One then and there vomited hot blood'¹⁹. A burst ulcer? This is all the actual text has to say, but the subsequent Buddhist commentarial tradition expands it considerably: 'The discovery of the apostasy of Upāli prostrated him with grief; he vomited hot blood and had to be carried away on a littler from Bālaka ... to Pāvā. There, soon after, he died ... (Malalasekera 1974:63). The suggestion is that Upāli's defection is directly responsible for causing the old teacher's death'²⁰.

And what does the Jain tradition say about their teacher's death? The Kalpa Sutra puts it as follows:

In that period, in that age the Venerable Ascetic Mahāvīra lived thirty years as a householder, more than full twelve years in a state inferior to perfection, something less than thirty years as a Kevalin, forty-two years as a monk, and seventy-two years on the whole. When his Karman which produces Vedanīya (or what one has to experience in this world), Âyus (length of life), name, and family, had been exhausted, when in this Avasarpinî era the greater part of the Duhshamasushamâ period had elapsed and only three years and eight and a half months were left, when the moon was in conjunction with the asterism Svâti, at the time of early morning, in the town of Pâpâ, and in king Hastipâla's office of the writers, (Mahāvīra) single and alone, sitting in the Samparyañka posture, reciting the fifty-five

19 Atha kho niganṭhassa nātaputtassa bhagavato sakkāraṃ asahamānassa tattheva uṇhaṃ lohitaṃ mukhato uggacchīti.

20 That Nigantha Nātaputta predeceased the Buddha is independently verified by the Pāsādika Sutta (DN 29), the Saṅgiti Sutta (DN 33) and the Sāmagama Sutta (MN 104), although they differ on details such as the Buddha's whereabouts at the time.

lectures which detail the results of Karman, and the thirty-six unasked questions, when he just explained the chief lecture (that of Marudeva) he died, went off, quitted the world, cut asunder the ties of birth, old age, and death; became a Siddha, a Buddha, a Mukta, a maker of the end (to all misery), finally liberated, freed from all pains (Jacobi 1884:269).

Allowing for sound shifts between Pāli and Jain Prakrit and changes in romanisation practices of Indian texts, we may stipulate that the venue of the sage's death (Pāvā/Pāpā) is the same. But here we see nothing about the loss of a prominent lay disciple having such a devastating effect that the old teacher ends up vomiting blood and has to be transported on a litter. *This* Mahāvīra dies in the approved manner of a major yogi, fully composed physically and mentally and taking the time to recite some of his major teachings before dying.

Human nature being what it is, even if that nature is supposedly close to enlightenment, we should not be too surprised if the early Jains tended to idealise their founder and if the early Buddhists had no reason to say anything complimentary about the founder of a rival sect. Nor should it surprise us if the early Jains wished to excise a prominent defector like Upāli from their history. But even discounting that, the contrast here is just too glaring. Can we really be talking about the same person? Is the bickering, sour old man in the Buddhist texts really the same person as the saintly figure described in the Jain literature?

The Succession Issue

The Buddhist literature specifically recounts what happened after the death of Nigantha Nātaputta in the Sāmagāmasutta:

When he died the Nigaṇṭhas had split and were quarrelling, fighting and attacking each other with the weapon in their mouths. They were saying things like these. ‘You do not know this Teaching and Discipline, I know it. What do you know of it? You have fallen to the wrong method. I have fallen to the right method with reasons. You say the first things last, the last things first. Your dispute is not thought

out, it is reversed and made up and should be rebuked. Go! Dispute and find your way, if possible'. The dispensation of Nigaṇṭha Nātaputta had gone to destruction. The lay disciples of Nigaṇṭha Nātaputta, who wore white clothes too were broken up, uninterested, hindered and without refuge as it happens in a Dispensation, not well taught, by one not rightfully enlightened²¹.

Jains have no recollection of such a chaos upon the death of Mahāvīra. There are some Digambaras who believe that Gautama was the immediate follower of Mahāvīra, but the majority opinion, and the better-attested scriptural tradition, is that of the Śvētāmbaras, who maintain that Mahāvīra was succeeded by his chief disciple, Sudhamma:

Mahavira's principal disciple Sudhamma succeeded him as the head of the Church. His name was later Sanskritized to Sudharman. ... We know many of the teachings of Mahavira in the version in which Sudharman taught them to his principal disciple Jambusvamin. Many lessons in the Jain canonical works start with the words of Sudharman: 'Now Jambusvamin' Sudharman survived Mahavira by twenty years. He is said to have become a Kevalin (omnipotent) twelve years after Mahavira's Nirvana, and then lived on for eight years more, reaching the age of 100 at the time of his death. Jambu, his principal disciple, succeeded him to the pontificate. Jambu's principal disciple Prabhava succeeded him on his death forty-four years later in 64 AV. Thus, for several generations, the supreme dignity and power of the Jain Church devolved from teacher to disciple²².

By itself, this would be inconclusive. At most, we could say that the Early Buddhist texts may have grossly exaggerated a power struggle within Jain ranks, or that the early Jain texts have tried to make that struggle disappear

21 Majjhima Nikāya, sutta 104. Direct quotation in translation taken from the version of the sutta available at <http://www.metta.lk/tipitaka/2Sutta-Pitaka/2Majjhima-Nikaya/Majjhima3/104-samagama-e.html>. Accessed 18 August 2013.

22 http://www.jainworld.com/jainbooks/images/18/The_Jain_Church_After_Mahav.htm, accessed 18 August 2013.

from the record entirely. However, when we read this alongside the name issue and the character issue, it strengthens our suspicion that the easy identification of Nigantha Nātaputta with Mahāvīra may be something that requires reconsideration.

Conclusion

It is generally difficult, if not actually impossible, to prove a negative, and I make no claim that I have proven conclusively that Nigantha Nātaputta definitely was not Mahāvīra. However, I believe that I have shown that there is reason to doubt the identity of the two figures as the respective sets of texts present them. Nigantha Nātaputta may well have been a Jain of some sort, perhaps the founder of a now-forgotten offshoot from the main body of Jain development. He might have been the Jain equivalent of Devadatta, a would-be-usurper who attempted to set up an alternative saṃgha and was written out of the official Jain historiography for his pains. If so, the later attempts to use him to prove the historicity of Mahāvīra is doubly ironic. Or he may have been an independent ancient Indian sage whose life and teachings were somewhat parallel to Mahāvīra's.

Or Nigantha Nātaputta as we have him today may be a composite person, one aspect of which may well be the historical Mahāvīra, but with a character ascription that has grown out of a more dramatically interesting contemporary of the Buddha's. In all likelihood, we will never know for certain who these persons were in a historical sense. But we now have reason to state who they were *not*. It will still be possible to say that these two have traditionally been identified, but it becomes difficult to state categorically that they were the same person.

Does it really matter? I believe it does. This is not merely a question for Buddhist and Jain historians. There are two major religions involved here, and the issue has not only academic, but religious implications.

For Buddhism, the results are slight. If we report the events in the Upālisutta purely as the conversion of a prominent member of the sect of Nigantha Nātaputta, without bringing Mahāvīra into it, does the story lose any of its ability to impress us with the Buddha's tolerance for other religious practitioners? While the historicity of Mahāvīra has been established on that of the Buddha, the reverse is not the case. Buddhists and scholars of

Buddhism lose nothing when they take a more critical approach to the identification of Nigantha Nātaputta and Mahāvīra. Indeed, dropping the identification and regarding Nigantha Nātaputta as just one more obscure Indian figure might help improve Buddhist/Jain relations, at least from the Buddhist side.

Jains and Jain scholars have more to lose. The scholars, in particular, have been using the Buddhist references in an attempt to apply firm dates to Mahāvīra's life. But even the Buddha's own chronological positioning is a matter for continuing debate, with opinions ranging over at least two centuries (Prebish 2008). To anchor one historically uncertain figure to the provisional dates set out for another equally uncertain one does not appear to be a fruitful strategy. But if it is to be adopted, then it is also incumbent on Jain scholarship to adopt the entire picture of Nigantha Nātaputta/Mahāvīra given in the Buddhist literature.

There is little evidence of this happening. Nigantha Nātaputta's appearance is used for dating purposes only and then largely ignored. If Jain scholarship were to inspect the issues raised here, it might not be so easy to adopt the traditional identification between Nigantha Nātaputta and Mahāvīra. It is of course the case that a text that is accurate on one count may be inaccurate on another. Jesus Seminar scholars, for example, seek to create a picture of the historical Jesus while discounting references to miracles. But this is not the case here. Jain scholarship has uncritically accepted a traditional, religious identification, while failing to note discrepancies that call that identification into question. If the identification is false then so is the dating of Mahāvīra. Both issues are at stake. For Buddhist scholars, the historicity and identity of Nigantha Nātaputta is a minor irritant. Jain scholarship has bound itself to this flimsy identification as a major component in its search for the historical Mahāvīra.

Jain scholarship would no doubt survive the process. For Jain adherents, however, the idea that Mahāvīra's supposed appearance in the Buddhist texts might somehow lend historical respectability to their faith would be undermined by the severely negative portrayals of Nigantha Nātaputta in those texts. If we could have assurance that the two figures were in fact one and the same, it would still be the responsible thing to do to present these findings to the Jain community and let that community deal with it. But we have no such assurance, only a traditional acceptance of the identification that scholarship has incorporated uncritically and which we

now have reason to doubt. Perhaps it is better to let Mahāvīra exist as an undateable, quasi-historical figure. The validity of his teachings, in the religious sense of the term, are borne out in the generations of Jains that have lived and died within its embrace over the centuries.

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