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"Reading Medieval Latin with the Legend of Barlaam and Josaphat"
Donka D. Markus
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Introduction

1. *The Cross-Cultural Nature of the Legend*

1.1. THE JOURNEY OF BARLAAM AND JOSAPHAT THROUGH TIME AND PLACE

The legend of Prince Josaphat and his teacher Barlaam has a distinct appeal and relevance today. It is a paradigmatic tale about a young person's quest for truth through a convoluted labyrinth of lies, deceptive narratives, and fake characters. Josaphat's father, a powerful king, fearing that his son will become a Christian ascetic, raises Josaphat in the artificial and treacherous environment of an isolated pleasure palace. To prevent his son from embarking on a quest for answers to life's excruciating questions about illness, suffering, old age, and death, the king educates him within the fragile bubble of a fake narrative that attempts to erase life's most painful and shocking facts from his lived experience. Predictably, the false construct collapses at the young man's first field trip outside the palace. It is at this point that a sage appears and starts to instruct the prince in his search for answers. The lessons of the sage, expressed in parables, end with the conversion of the prince and his renunciation of an earthly kingdom in favor of a heavenly one.

The legend's link to the life-story of the Buddha became widely known only in the middle of the 19th century,¹ but research shows that most of its signature elements are absent from the oldest version of Buddha's life and are, therefore, later additions.² Both the life of the Buddha and the legend of Barlaam and Josaphat share motifs that belong to the universal bank of wisdom-tales transmitted from culture to culture and from religion to religion through storytelling over time. As Lopez and McCracken aptly comment, "religions circulate among stories."³ We are dealing "with a work in which the ideals

1. Isolated individuals had knowledge of this as early as the 15th century. Cf. the commentary to chapter 1.

2. Cf. Lopez and McCracken (2014) 221.

3. Lopez and McCracken (2014) 13.

of renunciation and the ascetic way of life are woven around certain salient features of the traditional life of the Buddha-elect, a whole series of extraneous fables and parables being inserted from other Indian and oriental sources in the course of the work's transmission.”⁴

This appealing story was an object of creative retelling even before it made its way to the West, and when it arrived to the Middle East and Europe, the momentum of its movement did not slow down, but continues to our day. From two Arabic, then two Georgian and finally a Greek version, it was translated into Latin, which paved the way to its remarkable influence in Europe.

The Middle High German poet Rudolf von Elms wrote a romance in verse called *Barlaam and Josaphat* (ca. 1220).⁵ It is around the same time that Gui de Cambrai produced his Old French version of *Barlaam and Josaphat* in verse,⁶ one of two other Old French renditions in verse and seven more in prose.⁷ Also in the early 13th century, Abraham ibn Hasdāy in Barcelona produced a Hebrew version of the legend, called *The Book of the Prince and the Hermit*. It became widespread in the Jewish world with two editions appearing in the 16th century, which were translated into German and Polish in the 18th century. The legend reemerged again in a Yiddish rendition in the 19th century.⁸ In Spain, the 16th–17th-century dramatist Lope de Vega turned the legend into a dramatic play.⁹

Many of the individual fables included in the legend acquired a life of their own and became part of sermons, historical and moral compilations, and collections of stories throughout the pre-modern period.¹⁰ A variation on the fable about the four chests appears in Boccacio's *Decameron* (Day 10, first tale).¹¹ William Shakespeare turned the four chests into three caskets in his *Merchant of Venice* (act 2, scene 9), probably using William Caxton's 15th-century rendition of Barlaam and Josaphat into English.¹²

In the 20th century, the Harvard theologian W. C. Smith called *Barlaam and Josaphat* an example of “world theology,” noting that the story, making its way from Buddhists to Manicheans to Muslims to Christians, had inspired Tolstoy, who wrote about it in his *Confession*.¹³ The famous Russian aristocrat and writer Leo Tolstoy (1828–1910) experienced a drastic spiritual conversion

4. Lang (1958) 12–13, cited in Almond (1987) 397.

5. Schulz (1981) 136–37.

6. Now available in a contemporary English translation by McCracken (2014).

7. McCracken (2014) xv.

8. Smith (1981) 10. Cf. Lopez and McCracken (2014) 170–71.

9. Lopez and McCracken (2014) 11.

10. Almond (1987) 292.

11. Bolton (1958) 359 fn. 2.

12. Almond (1987) 291.

13. Lopez and McCracken (2014) 207.

after reading the legend of Barlaam and Josaphat. He was most impressed by the allegory of the man in the well. Just like Josaphat in the legend, he "turned from worldly success to the ascetic life of non-violence, poverty and social service."¹⁴ Tolstoy's work, in turn, greatly influenced the young Mohandas Gandhi (1869–1948), leader of the Indian independence movement against British rule, and inspiration behind many nonviolent civil disobedience movements across the world.¹⁵ Thus, the legend, which started out in the East, kept circulating between East and West. Gandhi's contemporary, the German writer Herman Hesse (1877–1962), based his literary masterpiece *Siddhartha* (1922) on this legend.

1.2. VERSIONS OF THE LEGEND

The origin of the legend of Barlaam and Josaphat has been the object of painstaking research by generations of scholars since the middle of the 19th century, and here I offer just a brief glimpse into the findings of this research to date.

The journey of the legend through time and place involved linguistic changes to the name of its main protagonist. He starts out as the *bodhisattva* in Sanskrit. *Bodhisattva*, which in Sankrit means "one who aspires to enlightenment," is the main epithet of Prince Siddhārtha, the future Buddha ("one who is awake"). *Bodhisattva* appears as Bodisaf in the Manichean versions¹⁶ and as Būdhāsaf in the Arabic ones where al-Budd is a prophet whose teachings and life Būdhāsaf wants to emulate. Būdhāsaf becomes Iodasaph in the Georgian version, which erases al-Budd. Then Iodasaph becomes Ioasaph in Greek and Iosaphat in Latin.¹⁷ In English, we spell the name of the protagonist as "Josaphat."

1.2.1. The Indian Buddhist Version about Prince Siddhārtha (*bodhisattva*, known later as the Buddha)¹⁸

The Buddha lived and taught in northern India in the 5th century BCE. There are many versions of his life. However, none of these versions can be conclusively identified as the original Buddhist source of the Barlaam and Josaphat legend.¹⁹

14. Smith (1981) 6.

15. Lopez and McCracken (2014) 207, cf. Smith (1981) 10–11.

16. Smith (1981) 9. Manichaeism was a gnostic dualistic sect that had its own prophet Mani (216–247 CE). It was one of the large world religions between the 3rd and the 7th centuries CE and spread from the Roman Empire in the West as far as China in the East.

17. Cf. Lopez and McCracken (2014) 54ff, 90ff, 122ff.

18. Cf. Lopez and McCracken (2014) 14–53.

19. Lopez (2014) xii, introduction to McCracken's translation of Gui de Cambrai's *Barlaam and Josaphat*.

For those wishing to compare Jacobus de Voragine's Christianized version with the best-known Buddhist versions of the life of the Buddha, I outline below those episodes of Buddha's life that differ from the plot of the legend included in this reader:²⁰

- The future Buddha's father is not an ideological enemy. He does not persecute anyone and is not an ardent defender of idolatry. Instead, he just wants to ensure successful succession to his throne.
- Prince Siddhārtha grows up surrounded by all kinds of pleasures, including the company of attractive women, but after his discovery of disease, old age, and death, he is unable to enjoy these temporary pleasures. His response to them is that of detached piety rather than conflicted desire. In the later versions, the protagonists struggle against temptation while Siddhārtha's advanced spiritual state makes him impassive toward all enticements due to his realization of the decay and death beneath every beautiful appearance.
- Prince Siddhārtha is not celibate but has a wife. To show his virility, he begets a son before he renounces his luxurious life in search of enlightenment at age twenty-nine.
- He practices severe forms of asceticism and self-mortification for six years in the company of five other ascetics and nearly starves himself to death without attaining his goal. He realizes that he could die without attaining enlightenment, so he begs for alms in the nearby village and regains his strength and health. His companions leave him, thinking that he has given up.
- The Bodhisatva continues his search for enlightenment and attains it at age thirty-five under the sacred Bodhi tree, following his victory over Lust, Craving, and Discontent, the three daughters of Māra, the deity of desire and death.
- The enlightened Buddha preaches the middle way between harsh self-mortification and excessive self-gratification. He founds a monastic order and "although Buddhist monasticism might be seen, at least in its textual renditions, as a form of asceticism,"²¹ the middle way between extremes remains central to the Buddhist tradition. The later versions of the legend emphasize ascetic piety without reference to the middle way.
- Prince Siddhārtha does not have a teacher similar to Barlaam, who is mentoring Josaphat. He receives instruction from two meditation teachers but quickly surpasses their attainments.

20. For more details, consult Lopez and McCracken (2014) 15–53.

21. Cf. Lopez and McCracken (2014) 222.

1.2.2. The Arabic Version of the Bilawhar and Būdhāsaf Legend

Buddhism spread not just to the North but also to the West, to Persia where the Indian legend travelled along the Silk Road. The Manicheans between the 3rd and 7th centuries were familiar with the tale, for “fragments of the story have been found in early collections of Manichean manuscripts.”²² At some point the legend was translated from the original Sanskrit or another Indian language into Middle Persian (Pahlavi). The now lost Persian translation was rendered into two Arabic versions sometime between 750 and 900.²³

As it travelled from India to the Middle East, the legend underwent adaptations to accord with monotheistic beliefs.²⁴ Incremental changes, listed below, started creeping in and set the Arabic version of the legend apart from its earlier iterations:

- Both father and son are devoted to the prophet al-Budd and both believe that they are his true followers. They differ in their interpretation of al-Budd’s teachings. The king believes that the prophet taught charity and goodness but did not require renunciation of the world.²⁵ By contrast, his son endorses “the people of the Religion” who profess an ascetic renunciation of worldly values.
- The father persecutes the ascetics, the followers of “the Religion.” His son supports them.
- The figure of the teacher appears. The teacher is a monotheist. Much of the story consists of didactic exchanges between prince and teacher and then prince and father.
- The teacher exalts martyrdom and promotes ascetic values. He emphasizes the conflict of loyalty to an earthly king and to a spiritual lord. He also preaches adherence to a spiritual lineage that can be attained only through the rejection of the body.
- There is an episode of Būdhāsaf attaining enlightenment under a huge tree, but the description of that enlightenment is brief and vague.²⁶
- Virginity and chastity are not as central to this version as to the Christian ones, but the prince fends off lust here as well. Būdhāsaf eventually begets a son who is to succeed his father on the throne while he can renounce the world.

22. Cf. Lopez and McCracken (2014) 222.

23. Cf. Lopez (2014) xi, introduction to McCracken’s translation of Gui de Cambrai’s *Barlaam and Josaphat*.

24. For more detail, cf. Lopez and McCracken (2014) 54–89.

25. Lopez and McCracken (2014) 75.

26. MacQueen (2001) 156.

1.2.3. The Georgian Version, the *Balavariani* about Balavhar and Iodasaph

After the Muslim conquest of Georgia (Iberia) in the 7th century, a period of turmoil and resistance to the conquerors followed. To escape the fighting, some Georgians travelled to Palestine and established monasteries there. Georgian monks from the monastery of St. Sabas in Jerusalem translated the legend from Arabic into Georgian in the 9th–10th century. An abridged version was created in the 11th century. Saints Balavhar and Iodasaph became part of the Georgian orthodox calendar as early as the 10th century.²⁷ The feast day of the two saints is May 19.

This is the first Christianized version of the legend and the new elements are as follows:

- Balavhar and Iodasaph become Christian saints.
- The prophet al-Budd is erased from this version.
- The enlightenment scene is also erased from this version.²⁸
- The father (King Abenes) is an idol worshipper and a fierce persecutor of Christians. He is also extremely self-indulgent and given to pleasures. The conflict between the idolatrous king and his Christian son becomes very intense.
- The story is politicized as a revenge fantasy against the Arabic occupiers of Georgia who persecuted Christians.

1.2.4. The Greek Version of the Barlaam and Ioasaph Legend

The translation from Georgian into Greek is the work of an 11th-century anonymous Greek monk, possibly the Georgian St. Euthymius (d. 1028) from Mount Athos.²⁹ The beginning of the Greek version of the legend erroneously cites John the monk from the monastery of St. Sabas as its author. This John was identified with John of Damascus (Iohannes Damascenus) because many themes from the writings of the 8th-century saint and theologian can be found in the theological digressions of the Greek version of the legend. No one in the 11th century suspected that the legend had its origin in India. People believed in the authorship of John of Damascus until the 19th century because it gave authority and credibility to the legend.

John of Damascus died in 749, long before the Greek translation was made,³⁰ and therefore he could not have been the translator or the author. Whoever he

27. Almond (1987) 394.

28. MacQueen (2001) 156.

29. Cf. Lopez and McCracken (2014) 131.

30. Lopez and McCracken (2014) 127–30.

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was, the monk who translated and adapted the legend to Greek acknowledges the significant role of oral transmission. He admits that he heard the legend from others: "Here ends this history, which I have written, to the best of my ability, even as I heard it from the truthful lips of worthy men who delivered it onto me."³¹

The storyline of the Greek version, as we now know, came from a Georgian original. The anonymous Georgian monks had already Christianized the Arabic tale. "The contribution of the Greek monk was to theologize it."³² The Greek version weaves many theological treatises into Barlaam's instruction of Josaphat, into the debates between father and son (Abenner and Ioasaph), and into the debates between fake Barlaam (Nachor) and the king's orators (rhetors). The similarity of these theological elements with the writings of John of Damascus suggests that the translator from the Georgian version into Greek was familiar with the writings of the 8th-century saint.³³

The monk who created the Greek version of the legend was also a masterful interpolator. He transmitted the *Apology of Aristides*, believed lost for centuries, to the readers of this legend. He inserted the *Apology* (i.e., "defense" from Greek *apologia*) into the speeches of fake Barlaam, the pagan magus Nachor who masterfully defends Christianity despite his original hostility to it (cf. commentary to chapters 213–219). The *Apology of Aristides*, mentioned in the 4th century by Eusebius of Caesarea and by Jerome, was believed lost for 1,500 years until it was rediscovered at the end of the 19th century and identified with Nachor's defense of the Christian faith in Barlaam and Ioasaph.³⁴ Thus, it turned out that thanks to the Greek interpolator, the *Apology of Aristides* had never been truly lost. The philosopher Aristides, a convert to Christianity, had delivered the *Apology* in defense of his faith before the Emperor Hadrian in Athens in 125 CE. The emperor was so impressed that he issued an order stopping the persecution of Christians without proper investigation and trial.³⁵ The *Apologia*, spanning eight pages in the Greek version and its Latin translations, is compressed to six sentences in Jacobus de Voragine's abridged version (chapters 213–219).

With such a long oral tradition behind them and theological teachings to support them, Barlaam and Josaphat could claim a legitimate place in the church calendar. The two saints are worshipped by the Russian Orthodox Church on November 19 and by the Greek Orthodox Church on August 26. While they

31. Woodward and Mattingly (1997) 609.

32. Lopez and McCracken (2014) 133.

33. Almond (1987) 401.

34. For the adventurous discovery of the *Apology of Aristides*, cf. Lopez and McCracken (2014) 134–36.

35. Lopez and McCracken (2014) 134.

were not officially canonized as saints in the Roman Catholic Church, they had a feast day that was celebrated on November 27 since at least the 16th century.³⁶ The legend enjoyed tremendous popularity between the 12th and the 16th centuries and the large number of its Latin versions attest to that.

1.2.5. The Latin Versions of the Barlaam and Iosaphat Legend

There are eleven Latin versions of the legend ranging from the 12th to the 16th century.³⁷ I listed here only the versions that preceded Jacobus de Voragine's 13th-century summary of the legend included in this reader. The first two versions are more or less faithful translations of the original Greek with minimal modifications to the content:

1. The monks in Amalfi (Italy) who were in close contact with Byzantium translated the Greek version into Latin as early as 1047 or 1048.³⁸ This translation was not circulated widely and only one manuscript of it survives today in Naples (the Neapolitan version), which cites Euphemius as its translator.³⁹
2. A second anonymous Latin translation from the Greek, called *Vulgata*, made a century later (12th century) became widely read and formed the basis for all subsequent Latin versions, including the one of Jacobus de Voragine.⁴⁰
3. Vincent de Beauvais (1190–1264), Jacobus de Voragine's older contemporary, wrote *Speculum Maius*, the main encyclopedia used in the Middle Ages. In the section on history (*Speculum Historiale*), he devoted more than half of entry XV to the life of Barlaam and Josaphat (chapters 1–64), followed by the sayings of the Desert Fathers of the 4th century CE (chapters 65–100).⁴¹ His encyclopedic entry is about six times shorter than the anonymous Latin translation of the 12th century.
4. Jacobus de Voragine (1230–98) abridged the legend even further in comparison to the encyclopedic entry of Vincent de Beauvais. Because his

36. Almond (1987) 394.

37. They are listed in Sonet's edition (1949) 73, cf. de la Cruz Palma (2001) 31.

38. Cf. Lopez and McCracken (2014) 137.

39. Sonet (1949) 73.

40. There was one more translation of the legend from the original Greek into Latin by the 16th-century French theologian Jacque de Billy (cf. Sonet (1949) 97).

41. Beauvais's *Speculum maius* does not have a modern reprinting. Chapter 15 in the fourth volume of Vincent de Beauvais (1964), a facsimile reprint of a 17th-century *incunabulum*, contains the Barlaam and Josaphat legend. Vincent de Beauvais's Latin version of Barlaam and Josaphat can also be accessed online in a 1494 Venetian edition (Vincentius Bellovacensis, *Speculum historiale*. Venetiis: Hermannus Liechtenstein).

version is about thirty times shorter than the unabridged Latin versions and five to six times shorter than the version of Vincent de Beauvais, some of the transitions from one episode to another are awkward. Inconsistencies creep in. For example, in chapter 274, there is a mention of the sign of the cross that Josaphat made, but the episode where he made it is omitted; in chapter 279, we hear the name of Barachias for the first time, although it is assumed that the reader knows who he is. The missing elements can be recovered from the complete versions. This commentary provides help with the awkward transitions and omissions, which are very few.

2. Author and Work

2.1. JACOBUS DE VORAGINE (1230–98)

Jacobus de Voragine, also known as Giacomo da Varazze, was born in Italy in the town of Varazze near Genoa. At the age of fourteen (in 1244), he entered the Dominican Order of Preachers charged with fighting heresies. Jacobus rose through the ranks to become archbishop of Genoa (1292). He acquired a reputation for holiness⁴² and was known as “peacemaker and father to the poor.”⁴³ He was beatified in 1816 and is venerated as a saint in Genoa.

He wrote *Chronicle on the History of Genoa* (*Chronicon januense*) and many sermons, but he is best known for his *Golden Legend* (*Legenda Aurea*), which he completed before reaching the age of forty.⁴⁴

2.2. THE GOLDEN LEGEND (LEGENDA AUREA) COLLECTION

The *Golden Legend* (*Legenda Aurea*), originally called *Legenda Sanctorum* or *Readings on the Saints*,⁴⁵ is a hagiographical collection consisting of 181 lives of saints (hagiographies) arranged according to the religious calendar. The *legenda* in the title (gerundive from Latin *lego*) is intended to convey that these lives were essential, required readings. The legend of Barlaam and Josaphat is toward the end of the collection (item 180), but its length gives it an unusual prominence. Only four lives are longer than the life of Saints Barlaam and Josaphat. These are the lives of Saint Paul, Saint Gregory the Great, Saint Augustine, and Saint Dominic, the founder of Jacobus’s religious order.⁴⁶

Jacobus was not a creative thinker. His originality lay in his gift for

42. Reames (1985) 15.

43. Ryan (1993) xiii.

44. Reames (1985) 193.

45. Ryan (1993) xiii.

46. MacQueen (2001) 159.

compilation from some 130 sources, dated between the 2nd and the 13th century.⁴⁷ His reluctance to innovate and change the received tradition is of the greatest value to us because he faithfully reproduces earlier stories which otherwise would have been lost.⁴⁸ The contemporary English translator of the *Legenda* summarizes the main emphasis of the work as follows:

His overall subject was the dealings of God with humankind—with salvation history as it revealed itself in God's agents and instruments, the saints.⁴⁹

The *Golden Legend* is a history of God's saving power working through those most receptive to him. But it also became a popular reading and a source of religious inspiration. Between the 13th and early 16th century, it was the equivalent of a medieval best-seller, with over one thousand manuscripts of it surviving today.⁵⁰ It also had 156 printed editions between 1470 and 1500 alone.⁵¹ The fact that "the cult of the saints reached a major turning point around the year 1270"⁵² was a contributing factor to the work's popularity.

The *Golden Legend* suggests that in salvation history fiction can be more persuasive than fact. This very much applies to Barlaam and Josaphat, who had never lived outside the pages of their entertaining story. Still, their legend was one of the best-known lives of saints in the Latin West. A prominent theme in the legend is the conflict between secular and religious authority. Josaphat has to negotiate his relationship to his powerful father, King Avenir, on the one hand, and his teacher Barlaam wielding spiritual power over him, on the other. For the medieval reader, the conflict between king and papacy was a historical reality.

If evaluated with the scientific standards of historical accuracy and faithfulness to its sources, Jacobus's *Golden Legend* will be found sorely lacking. A number of church historians and theologians in the 17th century already realized that it was a spiritual fiction, a story, not history.⁵³ Jacobus drew a lot of criticism from all sides, but his defenders and admirers argue that he ought to be evaluated "as educator of the laity rather than as a historian."⁵⁴ After all, the genre of the work is legend, "compounded in large part of the repetition, from one generation to the next, of supposed truths which no one has quite bothered

47. Ryan (1993) xiv.

48. Ryan (1993) xv.

49. Ryan (1993) xiv.

50. MacQueen (2001) 159e.

51. Reames (1985) 4. Cf. MacQueen (2001) 159.

52. Reames (1985) 198.

53. Almond (1987) 395.

54. Reames (1985) 25.

to verify."⁵⁵ Still, these unverified supposed truths inspired and sustained the hope and faith of generations of storytellers, readers, and audiences. Calling the *Legenda* "almost a cultural institution"⁵⁶ captures well its pervasive influence. It was translated and adapted to a number of European languages: Old French, Spanish, Italian, Provencal, English, Dutch, High and Low German, Bohemian, and so on. It became an integral part of the dramatic and visual arts and today is a valuable source for students of "medieval mystery plays and miracle plays" and "for the study of medieval statuary and stained glass."⁵⁷

In light of Jacobus's role as transmitter of ancient cultural treasures and lore and in light of the tremendous influence of his work, the modern reader has to overlook the limitations in his intellectual profile that S. L. Reames, a modern historian of the *Golden Legend*, extracts from a thorough analysis of his sermons:

He does not seem to have an appreciation of other perspectives, other value systems, besides the essentially monastic one he celebrates. . . . He also lacks empathy with Christians who must live in the world and with weaker souls who care about earthly blessings. . . . Even his model sermons, which are less extreme than the *Legenda* in most respects, exhibit a noticeable disregard for the everyday needs and concerns of the laity who would hear them. This characteristic of Jacobus' work becomes more understandable when one recalls that he cannot have seen very much of the world before he renounced it in 1244, at the age of fourteen or thereabouts. And the increasingly militant stance of the order in the ensuing years was hardly calculated to sway a young convert towards open-mindedness.⁵⁸

His spirituality can seem harsh to modern readers. The image of God as a loving, accessible Father did not play any role in his works and probably did not figure prominently in his spiritual outlook either. As S. L. Reames says,

His theological imagination appears to have been adversarial and puritan rather than inclusive and humanistic. Perhaps the most telling evidence in this regard is his tendency to equate sanctity with isolation, joylessness, virtual sterility, and contempt for the values of lesser men.⁵⁹

Nevertheless, the fact that of all eleven Latin versions of the legend, Jacobus's

55. Reames (1985) 25.

56. Reames (1985) 3–4.

57. Ryan (1993) xv.

58. Reames (1985) 194.

59. Reames (1985) 195.

was the most read and the most enjoyed for many centuries by those who understood Latin demonstrates his skill to select material that would appeal to a broad spectrum of tastes. Throughout the *Legenda*, his intent was “to humanize and dramatize the doctrinal point made.”⁶⁰ This was the approach that he took to the abridgement of the legend of Saints Barlaam and Josaphat as well.

2.3. JACOBUS DE VORAGINE IN THE TRANSMISSION CHAIN OF BARLAAM AND JOSAPHAT’S LEGEND

In the process of “humanizing and dramatizing” the legend, Jacobus excised the lengthy theological debates that were the distinct characteristic of the Greek version and that were left intact in the unabridged Latin versions. His aim was to create a vivid narrative, which would resonate with his readers because of its exotic setting, the dramatic conversion story of an Indian prince, and the drama of the clash between a pagan father and a Christian son who successfully cuts through many lies, resists sexual temptations, and converts both his father and his entire Indian kingdom from idol-worship to Christianity.

By taking the lengthy theological debates out and putting the parables of the hermit Barlaam at the core of his version, Jacobus weakened the emphasis on Christian dogma as conveyed through the theological treatises in the unabridged versions. He even omitted the parable of the Sower,⁶¹ the only parable of Christian origin that the unabridged Latin versions include.⁶² As a result, the ethical and philosophical messages in the most ancient layers of the legend receive greater prominence.

Jacobus no doubt followed the earlier Christianized versions of the legend. The heroic Buddha, who experiences a life-transforming insight about the inevitability of recurring suffering and transcends it in the attainment of enlightenment under the sacred Bodhi tree, yields place to the Christian Saint Josaphat, who submits to the word of God coming to him through his teacher Barlaam. He does not seek out the teacher; the teacher comes to him when the reality of suffering and death awakens his spiritual yearning. Yet, Jacobus’s Josaphat “has some of the subjectivity and initiative of a hero” and “has more individuality than the typical saint in the *Golden Legend*.⁶³ Josaphat both engages in action and cultivates receptivity to God, so he has the qualities of both a hero and a saint.⁶⁴ The defining moment of enlightenment, namely the

60. Ryan (1993) xvi.

61. Matthew 13:1–23, Mark 4:1–20, and Luke 8:1–15.

62. Cruz Palma (2001) chapter 39, p. 162.

63. MacQueen (2001) 162.

64. Cf. MacQueen (2001) 161.

complete understanding of "how ignorance leads to suffering and rebirth,"⁶⁵ accompanied by the extinction of all attachment and desire is the central event in all the Asian lives of the Buddha. This event was omitted already from the first Christianized version of the legend, the Georgian one. Still, we can detect traces of the heroic Buddha in the Christian Saint Josaphat. Jacobus's abridged version removes some of the layers added to the legend in the process of Christianization and thus foregrounds its oldest strata.

All three episodes from the life of Prince Siddhārtha (Buddha), as told in Asia, receive prominent place in Jacobus's version: the father's consultation with astrologers, the chariot rides, and the sexual temptations.⁶⁶ These shared scenes are used, of course, in different ways within the different traditions.⁶⁷

First, both in the life of the Buddha and in the Barlaam and Josaphat legend, the father consults with astrologers about the fate of his newborn son, and the outcomes of this consultation are parallel in both tales.⁶⁸ An astrologer predicts that the king's son will become a Buddha; in Jacobus's version the astrologer tells the father, who is an idol-worshipper and persecutor of the Christians, not only that the child will become a Christian one day but that he will reject his father's earthly kingdom in favor of a heavenly one. The father responds in the same way in both versions: he builds an isolated pleasure palace for his son where no one is allowed to mention sickness, old age, suffering, or death to him (chapters 20–27). In Jacobus's version, no one is allowed to mention Christianity to him either.

Second, when the young man grows up, he ventures out on several chariot rides outside the palace and encounters sickness, old age, and death (chapters 48–66). Prince Siddhārtha encounters a mendicant, while Josaphat meets the hermit Barlaam later. In both cases the chariot rides lead to a life-transforming insight about the vanity and unreliability of the physical world. Both protagonists respond by seeking out the causes of suffering and find them in ignorance-fueled desire for the temporary pleasures of the world, leading them to its renunciation. All Christianized versions share with the Buddhist legend a form of ascetic piety that sees the visible world as transitory and unfulfilling. The attitude of weariness with the world is a common trait of medieval Christian and Buddhist sensibilities, as Huizinga already noted at the beginning of the last century.⁶⁹

65. Lopez and McCracken (2014) 42.

66. Cf. Lopez (2014) viii, introduction to McCracken's translation of Gui de Cambrai's *Barlaam and Josaphat*.

67. Lopez and McCracken (2014) 220.

68. Lopez and McCracken (2014) 221 conclude that the scene of consultation with astrologers was inserted into the life of the Buddha long before the story made its way to Persia, but it was not part of the original life itself.

69. Huizinga (1996 [1921]) 35, cited in MacQueen (2001) 158.

The Buddha's profound life-transforming realization of the precariousness of the human condition puts him on a long path of harsh self-mortification, which only leads him to the brink of starvation and death. Realizing that this road does not lead to enlightenment and that he may die without attaining his goal, he begs for alms in the nearby village and rebuilds his strength. His companions, the five ascetics, leave him, believing that he has abandoned his commitment to the ascetic endeavor. However, he continues his search and after overcoming all attacks and temptations sent against him by the deity of desire and death, Māra, he awakens, becomes "the awakened one," the Buddha, having attained enlightenment under the sacred Bodhi tree.

As a result, he articulates "the middle way of Buddhism, in this case, the middle way between the extreme of self-indulgence, which he had known as a prince in the palace, and the extreme of self-mortification, which he had known as an ascetic in the wilderness."⁷⁰ The enlightenment and the subsequent articulation of the middle way is the Buddha's central insight captured in the four noble truths of Buddhism: "that life is qualified by suffering; that that suffering has a cause; that there is a state of the cessation of suffering called *nirvana* and that there is a path to that state of cessation."⁷¹ Here renunciation is not rejection of the world but the discarding of that which is harmful and obstructive to the attainment of a state beyond suffering and death.

Despite the emphasis on the middle way in the teachings of the Buddha, ascetic piety became over time the most universal theme in the legend:

. . . the values of renunciation, asceticism, and disdain for the world are shared by Buddhists, Muslims, Manicheans, and Christians. The common endorsement of these values explains—at least in part—the broad diffusion of the legend.⁷²

The Christian versions likewise emphasize the first two of the noble truths, the understanding of the world as theater of suffering, caused by misdirected desire for the vanity of the world that has to be renounced through the practice of asceticism. They erase the distinct interior event that the lives of the Buddha call "enlightenment."⁷³ The path to salvation in the Christian versions unfolds in the context of a life-long interaction with a teacher, while the path of the future Buddha is an individual heroic quest. After experiencing the reality of suffering, old age, and death, Prince Josaphat, just like Prince Siddhārtha, is "in

70. Lopez and McCracken (2014) 44.

71. Lopez and McCracken (2014) 44.

72. Pitts, M. B. (1989) *Barlaam et Jozaphas: Roman du XIV^e siècle en langue d'Oc*. Paris: Presses de l'Université de Paris 239, cited in Lopez and McCracken (2014) 211.

73. Cf. MacQueen (2001).

great desolation," "thinking over the sights frequently in his heart" (chapter 67). Unlike Siddārtha, however, who leaves his palace and child behind in search for enlightenment, Josaphat does not take immediate action. The hermit Barlaam finds out about his state "through the spirit" (chapter 68) and arrives to offer an alternative to the disturbing reality that Josaphat has become aware of.

Through long conversations with Barlaam, Josaphat receives confirmation of his personal insight about the dangers inherent in the world of change and deceptive appearances, and he learns of the existence of a better, permanent reality, "God's kingdom." He is not prepared to act upon his initial insight before the teacher appears. Josaphat's course of learning and instruction culminates in his conversion to the Christian faith and baptism (chapter 168). From this point his faith becomes the focus of the narrative. This faith is tested first intellectually through a theological debate, and eventually through sexual temptation. In all Christian versions, conversion, baptism, and the triumph of faith over temptation replace the defining moment of enlightenment, experienced by the Buddha under the Bodhi tree.⁷⁴ While the Buddha "must demonstrate his enlightenment by liberating other beings from ignorance and attachment . . . Josaphat must demonstrate his faith in God by passing tests."⁷⁵

The third shared element between the Buddha story and the Barlaam and Josaphat legend is the episode involving sexual temptation. After witnessing the disturbing reality of illness, old age, and death, Prince Siddhārtha is unable to enjoy the pleasures of self-gratification and becomes indifferent to the charms of attractive women. Prince Siddhārtha's attitude to such temptations "is one of detached piety rather than of conflicted desire. . . . The women's charms are no match for his determination; his impassivity is a manifestation of an advanced spiritual state that allows him to perceive decay and death beneath the women's beautiful attire."⁷⁶ Likewise, Josaphat's father surrounds him with attractive women in a desperate attempt to wean him away from his desired course of becoming a Christian monk (chapters 244–261). Unlike Siddhārtha, however, he is tormented by these temptations (chapters 245–246) and overcomes them with the help of a divine dream that reveals to him a vision of heaven and hell (chapters 263–270). It is under the influence of this dream that he succeeds in overcoming the temptations and in preserving his virginity. Siddhārtha, on the other hand, to prove his virility and to fulfill his duty to the royal lineage, fathers a son before leaving the palace in search of enlightenment. He also has a divine dream, but his dream portends his attainment of enlightenment and it comes after he makes love to his wife and begets a son.⁷⁷

74. MacQueen (2001) 164.

75. MacQueen (2001) 163.

76. Lopez and McCracken (2014) 29 and 31.

77. Lopez and McCracken (2014) 32.

Josaphat's dream is the closest approximation in the Christian versions to the enlightenment experience in the life of the Buddha. To Josaphat, the dream is an instrument through which he passes the virginity test. It also serves to strengthen his faith. It is not his prime achievement as enlightenment is for the Buddha.⁷⁸ Buddha's enlightenment in the Christian versions is replaced by Josaphat's revelations. The dream is a revelation from God, which follows other revelations guiding Josaphat to sainthood. Divine revelation alerts him to the true identity of Nachor disguised as his teacher Barlaam (chapter 174) and this allows him to overcome the first temptation to his faith, an intellectual temptation that plays out as a theological debate between the pagan orators (rhetors) and the astrologer Nachor posing as Barlaam.

Alongside revelation, however, Josaphat's own actions play a key role as well. He acts with astuteness and tact. When he first discovers the shocking realities of old age, suffering, and death in the course of his chariot rides, he wisely disguises his distress and feigns happiness before his father (chapter 67). He also desires eagerly to be "directed and taught" about life's mysteries (chapter 67). He has the patience and insight to receive his future mentor Barlaam, disguised as a merchant, without being deterred by his inferior status and strangeness. He intimidates Nachor who poses as Barlaam (chapters 202–204) and, when assaulted with temptations during the test of virginity, remembers to seek shelter in prayer (262), leading to his transformative dream-vision.

Thus, as MacQueen has noted, Jacobus's Josaphat has the traits of both a hero who acts and a saint who is receptive to divine teaching and revelation.⁷⁹ The legend in Jacobus's hands highlights the most ancient and universal layers of the main storyline by retaining Josaphat's initiative and by assigning a significant role to cognition and learning in his path to sainthood. In Jacobus's version, "cognition is in a supportive relationship with faith."⁸⁰

Even though the central attainment of the Buddha, the dramatic enlightenment experience, is missing from the legend of Barlaam and Josaphat, the theme of insight, light, and vision runs as an important thread through the entire narrative: the disturbing sights that Josaphat sees looking out of his chariot (chapters 51–66) become a life-transforming call for action and a profound insight. Without the fictional magic stone that Barlaam uses to gain access to the prince, a stone that would blind anyone who beholds it in the absence of a good moral character and clear vision (chapter 74), two-thirds of the story could not take place. The theme dominates many of the parables where various characters get into trouble for their fascination with deceptive external appearances and their inability to see below the surface of words and

78. MacQueen (2001) 162.

79. MacQueen (2001) 161.

80. MacQueen (2001) 164.

events (the four chests, the archer and the nightingale parable, and so on). In the “prince in the cave” parable, a prince is in danger of losing his physical vision. His father saves his eyesight by isolating him in a dark cave for a number of years, but in the end, his infatuation with women, whom he does not even know how to name (chapter 239), deprives him of the clarity of vision and ability to look beyond appearances, qualities that Josaphat exemplifies.

The theme of sight and vision relates to the deeper philosophical insight about the illusory nature of the visible world. The belief in the impermanence and even the nonexistence of the changing everyday world is of Buddhist origin,⁸¹ faithfully preserved in the Christianized versions.⁸² It was compatible with Christianity through the familiar passage from Ecclesiastes 12:8 (*Vanity of vanities . . . all is vanity*) and the statement of St Paul “the things which are seen are temporal; but the things which are not seen are eternal” (2 Corinthians 4:18). In this view, all that we see with our physical eyes has no permanent existence, and yet it is an object of misguided desire and short-lived pleasure. All threads of the legend, no matter how loosely connected to the main narrative they might seem, support this theme, beginning with the opening episode, which refers to a time before Josaphat’s birth. King Avenir’s former friend, a newly converted Christian, informs the king that his two greatest enemies are anger and desire (chapter 9) and that the king needs to discard them. He explains to King Avenir that he chose the ascetic way of life in order to learn how to distinguish the real from the unreal and thus how to cease desiring the unreal:

Fools despise the things that are real as if they did not exist; on the other hand, they try to comprehend and grasp the things that do not truly exist as if they were real. The person of the sort who has not tasted the sweetness of the things that are real, will not be able to comprehend the truth about⁸³ the things that have no existence. (chapters 12–14)

The unabridged Latin version of the legend (*Vulgata*) makes very explicit the meaning of “things that do not exist” and contrasts the sweetness of the temporary pleasures with the sweetness of “the things that are real”:

One who has not tasted the sweetness of the things that are real, will not be able to understand the nature of the things that do not exist and will not know how to despise and discard them. The discourse has called real the eternal and unchangeable things. It has called unreal the present

81. Cf. Almond (1987) 399.

82. MacQueen (2001) 157.

83. The Georgian version puts it more clearly: “will not be able to cast out” instead of “will not be able to comprehend the truth about . . .” Cf. Almond (1987) 399.

life, the delights and the false prosperity to which your heart, o king, is unfortunately, severely addicted.⁸⁴

Another friend, a knight who is secretly a Christian, also tries to convert King Avenir with the same message, "recounting the vanities of the world . . ." (chapter 37). So before Barlaam even shows up on the scene, there have been two side episodes that describe failed attempts to convey this message to King Avenir, Josaphat's father. This fact underscores Josaphat's agency, in that unlike his father, he will show remarkable receptivity to this message and will act on it.

Despising temporary pleasures is central to Barlaam's teaching given to Josaphat: "He began to speak against the deceptive pleasures and vanities of the world, adducing many examples in support of this point" (chapter 113). The deluded love for these short-lived pleasures comes alive with the allegory of the man in the well who savors the drops of honey that drip from an upper branch of a tree that he is holding to, forgetting about the mice gnawing at his branch and about the beast beneath waiting to devour him (chapters 113–122). They are also symbolized by the enticing charms of women. Women are invested with a sinister power in the legend and are even called "demons who lead men astray" (chapter 239) because they make men lose power over themselves. Thus women symbolize desire for the world that the legend rejects.

There is an exception to the negative portrayal of women, where a maiden symbolizes the one desire that the legend endorses. This occurs in the episode of the rich youth and the poor maiden (chapters 146–168), Barlaam's last parable that concludes the series of teaching stories addressed to Josaphat. The young man in the parable falls in love with a poor maiden because he sees her as an embodiment of *prudentia*, spiritual wisdom (chapter 153). Similarly, Josaphat falls in love with Barlaam's spiritual wisdom. The wise poor maiden is a symbol of the positive desire for wisdom and self-control.

The Christian adapters strove to Christianize the ancient fables but did not always succeed in doing so seamlessly. For example, the archer and the nightingale parable (chapters 96–112) serves as an illustration of the gullibility of idol-worshippers, but the story can likewise be viewed as an excellent illustration of how the archer's greed and desire for the precious stone clouds his ability to think critically and distinguish reality from falsehood.

The attack on idol-worshippers, artificially tacked onto the archer and the nightingale story, exposes one of the many ironies and paradoxes surrounding this legend.⁸⁵ We know today that the fictional character of Josaphat, the enemy of idols, has his origins in the Buddha, who was worshipped as an idol under

84. *Vulgata* chapter 12 in Cruz Palma (2001) 118.

85. I am paraphrasing here Lopez (2014) xiv, introduction to McCracken's translation of Gui de Cambrai's *Barlaam and Josaphat*.

many names across many countries and continents. But until the 19th century, the opposite was held true, namely that "Budāo (i.e., Buddha) . . . was in fact Josaphat and that over the centuries the people of India had forgotten the true identity of the Christian saint,"⁸⁶ as a Portuguese writer of the 16th century claims. There were even attempts to locate in India the palace that King Avenir built for his son.⁸⁷

Today, the legend about Josaphat and his fictional conversion of India to Christianity retains its appeal to a great extent due to the tradition that traces it back to the Buddha.⁸⁸ Because of its connection to the life of the founder of a major world religion, it remains an exciting object of study not only for scholars but also for lovers of stories and truths that transcend the confines of cultures and religions.

By transmitting this legend to us in a substantially shortened form and by thus exposing its deepest bedrock of ancient material that was reinterpreted and adapted to many cultural and religious contexts, Jacobus gives the modern reader an opportunity to continue reinterpreting it and to step into the legend's long history of creative transmission.

3. *The Context and Storyline of Jacobus de Voragine's Barlaam and Josaphat*

The legend consists of a frame narrative with a series of teaching stories or parables embedded into the dialogue between the pious Prince Josaphat and his teacher Barlaam. Just as the entire legend is a parable (*exemplum*) for the edification of the reading or listening audience, the embedded stories are intended to teach not just Josaphat but also various other characters in the story.⁸⁹ The teacher Barlaam clearly spells out the allegorical meaning of his parables.

I have divided Jacobus de Voragine's abridged version of the legend into ten parts:

Part 1: Introduction to the characters and the setting.

Parts 2–4: Josaphat faces the facts about the human condition and the problem of the unpredictable and unsatisfactory nature of the world.

Part 5: Barlaam arrives to confirm Josaphat's insight and to orient his

86. The quote is by Diogo de Couto cited in Lopez (2014) xiii, introduction to McCracken's translation of Gui de Cambrai's *Barlaam and Josaphat*.

87. Lopez and McCracken (2014) 229.

88. Cf. Lopez (2014) xiv, introduction to McCracken's translation of Gui de Cambrai's *Barlaam and Josaphat*.

89. Bolton (1958) 360.

efforts toward finding a solution. He conveys his teachings in six parables, which take up more than a third of Jacobus's version. At the end of this course of instruction, Josaphat converts to Christianity and is baptized by Barlaam.

Part 6–9: Josaphat's faith is put to two major tests. The first is an intellectual test meant to determine whether he has turned his back on idolatry and whether he can defend his Christian faith before learned pagan orators (rhetors). Divine revelation assists him in passing this test (Parts 6–7). The second test is the test of will where he is subjected to a series of sexual temptations but succeeds in preserving his virginity with the help of a divine dream (Parts 8–9).

Part 10: Josaphat ascends to the throne, then he renounces his kingdom and retreats to the desert where he attains to sainthood.

3.1. THE GENRE

The legend of Barlaam and Josaphat is both hagiography and romance⁹⁰ due to its fictional plotline filled with intrigue, suspense, and sexual temptations. Because it focuses on Barlaam's spiritual and moral instruction of Josaphat, the legend also falls within the homiletic tradition, namely it is a public discourse on a religious subject. It contains a dramatic conversion story and strikes the right balance between edification and entertainment, which may have been one of the secrets to its popularity.

3.2. THE SETTING

The fictional life of Barlaam and Josaphat takes place outside of time and place, but most versions mention India in their introductory paragraphs. The other place name they mention is the land of Senaar (chapter 68 in Jacobus's version). Barlaam comes from this land, which the Georgian version identifies with Ceylon,⁹¹ the Greek version—with the land between the Tigris and Euphrates, known then as Chaldea or Babylonia.⁹² The Greek version evinces confusion regarding Ethiopia and India, which is typical in medieval Western texts.⁹³ It introduces the legend in the following way:

An edifying story from the inner land of the Ethiopians, called the land of the Indians. . . .⁹⁴

90. It is called *romanzo* (Italian) by Maggioni (2007) 1707 and *roman* (French) by Sonet (1949). Lang (introduction to Woodward and Mattingly (1997) xxvi) calls it *romance*.

91. Almond (1987) 393.

92. Woodward and Mattingly (1997) 624 (index).

93. Lopez and McCracken (2014) 123.

94. Woodward and Mattingly (1997) 3.

It goes on to describe the location of this land in greater detail:

The country of the Indians, as it is called, is vast and populous, lying far beyond Egypt. On the side of Egypt, it is washed by seas and navigable gulfs, but on the mainland it marches with the borders of Persia, a land formerly darkened with the gloom of idolatry. . . .⁹⁵

The unabridged Latin versions say that Prince Josaphat was educated "in all the learning of the Ethiopians and the Persians."⁹⁶ India does get conflated indeed with Ethiopia.

In terms of time, the Greek version situates the events in the story several centuries after Apostle Thomas converted India to Christianity:

... one of the company of Christ's Twelve Apostles, most holy Thomas, was sent out to the land of the Indians, preaching the Gospel of Salvation.⁹⁷

After the mission of Saint Thomas was complete, India (in this scenario) relapsed into idolatry with the passage of time. A new surge of enthusiasm for ascetic monasticism came about through the inspiring example of the Egyptian Desert Fathers whose fame had reached India. The Greek version states:

Now when monasteries began to be formed in Egypt, and numbers of monks banded themselves together, and when the fame of their virtues and Angelic conversation "was gone out into all the ends of the world"⁹⁸ and came to the Indians, it stirred them up also to the like zeal, insomuch that many of them forsook everything and withdrew to the deserts.⁹⁹

Desert monasticism (4th century CE) was a historical phenomenon that marked the beginning of Christian monasticism in the deserts of Egypt, Palestine, and Syria.¹⁰⁰

The unabridged Latin version omits much of the background available in the Greek version and begins with the monastic revival *without* mentioning Egypt. Thus it implies that Christian monasticism (unspecified as to location) exerted its influence upon the Indian desert monks:

95. Woodward and Mattingly (1997) 7.

96. *Vulgata* chapter 29 in Cruz Palma (2001) 146.

97. Woodward-Mattingly (1997) 9.

98. Language from *Psalm XIX.4*.

99. Woodward-Mattingly (1997) 9.

100. For more on the Desert Fathers, cf. Harmless (2004) *passim* and on Mothers *ibidem* 440 ff.

When monasteries began to be built and multitudes of monks began to gather and the blessed rumor about their fame and angelic conversation filled the world and reached to the Indians, it inspired them to a similar zeal such that many of them abandoned everything and sought the deserts and while in a mortal body, began associating with the angels.¹⁰¹

Jacobus de Voragine begins abruptly with no mention of the external influences that sparked the surge of monastic zeal in India. He introduces king Avenir right away:

When all of India was full of Christians and monks, a certain very powerful king rose to power, called Avenir who intensely persecuted the Christians and especially all the monks. (chapter 2)

Although Jacobus left out most details about background from the beginning of his abridged version, he still linked the legend to desert monasticism. At the end of his version of the legend (chapter 290), he gives a date for the death of Barlaam, which is absent from all earlier versions and which he evidently invented. Even Vincent de Beauvais did not venture a date in his encyclopedic entry on the two saints. Jacobus gives the fictional date of 380 CE as the year of the death of Josaphat's teacher, thus closely associating Barlaam with the time period of the Desert Fathers. Anthony the Great, saint and model for desert asceticism, died in 356 CE, about twenty-five years before the alleged date of the death of Barlaam.

In all Christianized versions of the legend, there is one main obstacle that prevents India from adopting Christianity despite the vigorous monastic revival mentioned at the beginning of the narrative. This obstacle is King Avenir, who worships idols, lives in enjoyment of royal luxury, and therefore persecutes the monastics in his kingdom. King Avenir is the focus of attention from the start of Jacobus's version of the legend.

3.3. THE STORYLINE

Part 1: King Avenir Encounters Christianity at His Own Court (2–18)

Even though the King persecutes the monks, the irresistible attraction of the monastic way of life makes a convert out of one of his friends, a nobleman who gives up his luxurious lifestyle and retreats to the desert. The king captures him and brings him back. A short exchange follows in which the friend, now monk, identifies anger and desire as the king's greatest enemies. The king has to

¹⁰¹ My translation from the Latin of the unabridged version (*Vulgata*) in de la Cruz Palma (2001) 108.

give those up temporarily in order to enter into a debate with him. The debate ends with the king expelling the nobleman. Having hoped to provoke the king's anger, to be killed by him, and thus to become a martyr for his faith, the Christian nobleman departs disappointed. During this encounter, King Avenir learns about the faith that one day his yet-unborn son will embrace.

Part 2: The Birth of Prince Josaphat (19–27)

A son is born to King Avenir whom he names Josaphat. An astrologer predicts that the young prince will become devoted to the Christian religion and will exchange his earthly kingdom for a heavenly one (23). The alarmed Avenir builds a remote pleasure palace for his son to prevent this from happening. He thinks that if his son lives surrounded by pleasures that would keep him happy, he will not be inclined to leave his comfortable palace and pursue the ascetic life of a poor monk. The king brings him up there in an artificial environment that shields the child from witnessing pain, sickness, old age, and death.

Part 3: The Christian Knight and the Word-Mender (28–47)

This episode is loosely linked to the rest of the narrative and appears to be a digression showing the ubiquitous appeal of Christianity that keeps infiltrating Avenir's palace. However, it sets up a major theme within the legend, that of "the conflict between loyalty to an earthly king and obedience to a spiritual lord" and is probably based upon an Arabic tale.¹⁰² It illustrates the rewarding nature of charity and the admirable quality of handling difficult situations and fake narratives with tact and wit.

A certain knight (anonymous) enjoyed King Avenir's respect and friendship. However, since he was secretly Christian and he had to carefully hide his religious leanings in view of Avenir's hostility toward this religion. One day, out of kindness, he offered hospitality to a self-proclaimed "word-mender," a "doctor of words," and helped him recover from his wounds received in a hunting accident. This will be the reader's first encounter with the intricate net of deceptions, pretenses, and fake narratives that permeate this legend. In a conversation with the knight, the king pretends to be interested in Christianity to test the knight's reaction to this feigned change of heart. The knight naïvely falls into the king's trap. The "word-mender" saves the knight with advice on how to extricate himself from the complicated intrigues of the jealous courtiers who had set this trap for him, trying to trick him into confessing his Christianity to the king and thus losing his excellent standing in the court hierarchy.

The knight hides his Christianity just as Josaphat will have to hide his. The

^{102.} Lopez and McCracken (2014) 64.

conflict between duty to his royal father Avenir and attraction to his spiritual father Barlaam encapsulates Josaphat's predicament throughout the legend and this predicament is foreshadowed in this episode.

Part 4: Prince Josaphat's Chariot Rides (48–66)

We are now back in the main storyline. Josaphat is confronted with the reality of pain, illness, old age, and death when he encounters a leper, a blind man, and an old man during his chariot rides outside his palace. He is shocked by these discoveries and eager to learn more about the mortal condition, but he wisely disguises his feelings and feigns happiness before his father. Josaphat does not only make these discoveries but also desires to learn their cause. The witnessing of suffering and death is not simply a shocking experience for him, but a life-transforming revelation. He perceives it as a sign that awakens in him the desire to "be directed and taught," namely he becomes a seeker. This turns his otherwise unremarkable discovery into an insight that determines the course of the rest of his life.

Part 5: Barlaam Arrives and Starts to Instruct Prince Josaphat (67–76)

Barlaam, disguised as merchant, arrives at the palace of the prince and seeks audience with him. He gains admittance under the pretext that he has a magic stone, which can give sight to the blind, hearing to the deaf, voice to the dumb, and wisdom to fools. Since the stone is metaphorical and he cannot show it to Josaphat's current tutor, who demands to see it in order to give him access to the prince, Barlaam adds another property to the other magic qualities of the stone: it would blind anyone whose eyes and character are not pure, if that person were to look at it. Conscious of his impure character, the tutor loses interest in seeing the stone and grants Barlaam admission to the prince. The "magic stone" stands for Barlaam's teaching, which is not meant for everyone but only for the prince, who is in a receptive state of mind. His conversion will cure his spiritual sight, deafness, and lack of wisdom.

5.1. Barlaam's First Parable: The Herald of Death and the Four Chests (77–95)

Barlaam uses this parable to compliment Josaphat for admitting him and listening to him despite his lower status and inability to produce a visible "magic stone." With his first parable, he gives the prince two allegorical lessons in the value of distinguishing between outer appearance and inner reality. The king in Barlaam's parable is god-fearing and respectful toward people of lower status.

He bows before some unkempt poor persons (probably monks). Because his brother and his courtiers reproach him for that, he teaches them two practical lessons about the deceptive nature of appearances.

The first practical lesson involves a herald of death. The king decides to scare his brother into believing that he wishes to execute him, a variation on an ancient story attested in the lore around the Indian King Aśoka.¹⁰³

The fable of the four chests is the second practical lesson. The courtiers are asked to choose from four chests, some covered with pitch but containing gems and pearls, and the others covered with gold but containing rot.

The brother reads the herald of death literally rather than figuratively. He is foolish to take at face value the message of the herald, sent by his own brother whom he had not offended, while berating the king for fearing the symbolic heralds of God, namely the poor monks; the courtiers who only see the surface of the gilded chests are made to look like those chests, glittering on the outside but rotten on the inside. The poor monks, on the other hand, whose appearance is homely, are full of inner riches.

5.2. Barlaam's Second Parable: The Archer and the Nightingale (96–112)

The Christianization of the legend, which started with the Georgian version, is far from seamless. Some parables are artificially harnessed to a specific ideological agenda, which does not sit well with the original story. The incongruity between the frame narrative and the ancient folk-stories that fill it is best exemplified by the fable of the archer and the nightingale. The parable is supposed to illustrate the gullibility of idol-worshippers, but actually it illustrates the archer's lack of critical thinking caused by greed. Through contrast, it aims to show the opposite side of an important theme in the legend: the ability to distinguish true from false, real from fake.

An archer captures a nightingale that talks to him, promising to give him three useful mandates if he lets it go. When the bird regains its freedom, the archer receives three basic maxims: do not try to get something that is beyond your reach; do not cry over spilt milk; if something sounds too good, do not trust it. The bird then presents a series of false claims to the archer, but he fails to see through the nightingale's lies. By being unable to understand and apply the nightingale's three basic maxims, the gullible archer remains empty-handed. He turns into a cautionary tale that illustrates the plight of any person who loses the ability to think critically under the influence of greed rather than the gullibility of idol-worshippers specifically.

¹⁰³. Lopez and McCracken (2014) 223; cf. Almond (1987) 398.

5.3. Barlaam's Third Parable: The Man in the Well (113–122)

This parable is an allegorical representation of human life. It was quite popular long before Jacobus included it in his legend. An illustration of it appears above the south portal of the Baptistry in Parma, some 140 miles east of Jacobus's birthplace, Varazze (see fig. 1). The carved relief is the work of an artist who died in the same year in which Jacobus was born.

The allegory is meant to illustrate the condition of those who are thoughtlessly immersed in the sweetness of transitory pleasures. They are compared to a man who was chased by a unicorn symbolizing Death. While trying to escape, he fell into a deep well. There he landed on a platform consisting of four vipers (aspis); while holding onto two branches with his hands, he noticed that those branches were being eaten away by a black mouse and a white mouse, symbols of night and day, constantly cutting his life shorter. Looking down, he saw a dragon with an open mouth, waiting to devour him. However, he noticed a drip of honey trickling down from above and enticed by its sweetness, forgot about the predicament he was in. With this parable, Barlaam vividly illustrates the precariousness of the human condition, which human beings, blinded by the sweetness of temporary pleasures, ignore. The allegory is included in the Indian *Mahābhārata*¹⁰⁴ and *Pantschatantra*¹⁰⁵ as well as in Jain writings.¹⁰⁶ This means that the tale predates Buddhism and that Buddhists themselves incorporated the fable into the story of their savior from an earlier Hindu or Jain source.¹⁰⁷

Figure 1 shows the earliest sculpted version of the parable about the man in the well.¹⁰⁸ The choice of this theme is unusual in the context of the sculptures on the other portals that represent the Virgin (north) and the Last Judgment (west).¹⁰⁹ The personifications of the sun and the moon appear on the left and the right of the tree that symbolizes human life, first on a chariot and again above each chariot. The sun and the moon are common in ancient Roman monuments, as for example on the arch of Constantine.¹¹⁰ However, for those familiar with the Barlaam and Josaphat legend, the sun and the moon on both sides of the tree support the symbolism of the black and white mice gnawing at the roots of the tree. As the mice in the parable, so also the sun and the moon, added by the artist, stand for the passage of day and night that are cutting human life shorter with each passing day.

104. Lopez and McCracken (2014) 100.

105. Almond (1987) 395.

106. Almond (1987) 398.

107. Cf. Smith (1981) 9.

108. Glass (2015) 277.

109. Glass (2015) 256.

110. Glass (2015) 280.



Fig. 1. Antelami, Benedetto (fl. 1150–c. 1230). Legend of Barlaam and Josaphat. Romanesque. Relief on the tympanon of the south portal of the Baptistry, Parma, Italy.

Photo courtesy Scala/ Art Resource, NY.

5.4. Barlaam's Fourth Parable: The Man and His Three Friends (123–138)

The value of kindness, friendship, and compassion is the focus of this parable, which illustrates the unreliable and transitory companionship of wealth and family, as well as the lasting companionship of trust, hope, and charity.

5.5. Barlaam's Fifth Parable: The King for One Year (139–145)

The value of charity and building treasures in heaven (Matthew 6:19–21) is the exclusive focus of this parable about a man who arrived to a town that had strange customs. The citizens would enthrone a visiting stranger and make him a king for a year, but after the year was over they would banish him to a deserted island where he would suffer from hunger and cold. However, the man in the parable learns of this custom and plans ahead by sending treasures and supplies to that island during the time when he is still king. The meaning of the parable

is that while one can take nothing with oneself to the other world, one can send ahead riches for oneself to the beyond through "the hands of the poor."

This parable has a strong Christian overtone, but it is also found in the Arabic version that may have received it from the Buddhist source.¹¹¹

5.6. Barlaam's Sixth Parable: The Rich Youth and the Poor Maiden. Josaphat Receives Baptism (146–168)

After hearing these inspiring illustrations, Josaphat wants to follow Barlaam into the desert immediately. Barlaam cautions him against such a hasty action, which would only enrage the king and provoke him to persecute the monks more fiercely. However, he encourages Josaphat's resolve with a parable of a noble youth who, just like Josaphat, learned to look beyond appearances and to prefer lasting inner virtues to transitory superficial advantages.

The youth in Barlaam's parable refuses to marry the rich bride that his father has chosen for him. He meets a poor maiden who works hard and at the same time praises God with gratitude for all the gifts he has bestowed upon her. The youth falls in love with her because of her *prudentia*, spiritual wisdom, and asks to marry her, but her father refuses to let her go, demanding that the youth live with the family in their poor hut. The youth agrees and later discovers that her father is actually very rich.

The youth in the parable mirrors Josaphat who had fallen in love with spiritual wisdom, symbolized by the poor maiden, the embodiment of wisdom in the parable. The rich bride that the youth rejected is the kingdom that Josaphat will reject for a more lasting one that he will pursue through the inconspicuous life of a desert hermit. After baptizing Josaphat, Barlaam disappears into the desert.

Part 6: King Avenir's Effort to Bring the Prince Back to Idol-Worship with the Help of Fake Barlaam (169–192)

Enraged by the news of his son's baptism, King Avenir tries to reason with his son, but to no avail. Thus, he takes advice from a friend, called Arachis, to resort to a deceptive scheme that includes a fake Barlaam. This Barlaam in disguise is actually the pagan priest Nachor, the teacher of Arachis. The king will stage a theological debate between disguised Barlaam (Nachor) and the orators at his court (rhetors). The desired outcome of the debate is this: Nachor would let himself be defeated; the defeat would publicly discredit Barlaam and his Christianity; as a result, Prince Josaphat, disappointed with Barlaam, would return to idolatry.

¹¹¹. Lopez and McCracken (2014) 224

Part 7: The Debate between Fake Barlaam (Nachor) and the Pagan Orators (193–229)

Through divine revelation (chapter 174), Prince Josaphat has already discovered the deception and has realized that Nachor disguised as Barlaam was not his teacher. He threatens Nachor with punishment and death if he does not win the debate. Nachor, caught between a rock and a hard place, masterfully defends Christianity and wins the debate. Jacobus compresses Nachor's defense of Christianity into six sentences (chapters 213–219). The same defense (Greek *apologia*) takes eight pages in the unabridged Latin version. This defense, coming from the mouth of a pagan magus, is an important historical source inserted into the legend. It is now dated to 125 CE and is known as the *Apology of Aristides* because the philosopher Aristides, a convert to Christianity, delivered it before Emperor Hadrian in Athens (see the commentary to these chapters). The double identity of Aristides, who continued to wear his philosopher's robes after his conversion,¹¹² matches well the double identity of Nachor disguised as Barlaam.

The king is furious at the collapse of his scheme and dismisses the public debate, but allows Nachor, still disguised as Barlaam, to stay with Josaphat. Josaphat discloses to Nachor his knowledge of Nachor's true identity and converts him to Christianity. Nachor takes up the monastic vocation after his conversion.

Part 8: The Prince in the Cave Allegory and Josaphat's Sexual Temptations (230–261)

The magician Theodas approaches the exasperated and furious king with another plan to divert Josaphat from the ascetic way of life. He suggests filling the palace with seductive women who will surely tempt the prince. He illustrates his point with a fable, the last one in Jacobus's version of the legend and the only one not spoken by Barlaam. The message of this fable negates Barlaam's parables in that it illustrates the irresistible power of sexual desire that transcends language. The fable celebrates the power of seductive appearance and the impossibility to shield oneself from it.

Theodas's fable is Josaphat's life-story turned upside down. In it, there is a prince who had to spend the first ten years of his life in a dark cave, for he was fated to lose his eyesight if he were to see the sun before that. When the prince reached an age when it was safe for him to see the sun, he started learning the names of things. Someone jokingly told him that the name of women is

^{112.} Lopez and McCracken (2014) 134.

"demons who lead men astray," and when his father asked what he liked best from the things seen during the day, the prince responded that the "demons who lead men astray" excited him the most. The prince in the fable serves as a foil to Josaphat. While he is entirely literal-minded and enthusiastically chooses the love of the senses, Josaphat will look for a reality and joy deeper than the instant gratification of the physical senses.

At this point it is not Josaphat's Christianity that is under attack but his extreme practice of it, namely sexual abstinence and the observance of celibacy. A beautiful orphan princess comes close to swaying Josaphat to have sex with her. She inflames him with passion and argues that Christians are allowed to have wives. She says that she would convert to Christianity if the prince sleeps with her and thus he will gain merit in heaven for converting a sinner (chapters 251–257).

Part 9: Josaphat's Divine Dream and King Avenir's Conversion (262–277)

Josaphat seeks comfort in prayer and a divine dream saves him from the temptations. In the dream, he sees the delights of heaven and the disgusting corners of hell. When he awakens, both the beautiful princess and the other women sent to tempt him appear repulsive to him. In an unexpected turn of events, Josaphat converts the magus Theodas to Christianity as well. King Avenir admits defeat and upon the advice of his friends yields half of his kingdom to his son, who builds churches and monasteries on his portion of the territory.

Part 10: Josaphat Becomes a Saint (278–292)

King Avenir himself also converts to Christianity and dies peacefully. Josaphat now sees an opportunity to fulfill his dream of withdrawing to the desert. He appoints a loyal friend Barachias to govern the entire kingdom and puts on the habit of a monk. He spends a life of struggle, battling the devil, but is eventually reunited with his teacher Barlaam. Following the death of his teacher, he continues his ascetic feats in the desert and attains sainthood. Eventually, he is buried in the same tomb where Barlaam rests. Miracles happen around the burial site of the two saints and Barachias transfers their remains to his capital city.

The ending contains many details that were first added to the Greek version: the fact that Josaphat was twenty-five when he renounced his kingdom, that he spent thirty-five years in the desert, that he was buried next to his teacher Barlaam, that their remains were transferred to the capital city, and that many miracles happened around their tomb. Since medieval audiences had a distinct taste for narratives about intense struggles for the attainment of sainthood

and for miracles surrounding past saints, the elaborate ending was among the factors that contributed to the enduring popularity of the legend in subsequent centuries.¹¹³

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