



Saint Josaphat of India Announcing his Departure, from a thirteenth century Greek MS. Credit: Wikipedia

THE WONDEROUS TALE OF BARLAAM AND JOSAPHAT

Thomas M. Prymak

University of Toronto

In Eastern Europe in the 1620s, in particular, in the eastern part of the old Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, then the geographically largest state entirely in Europe, a religious conflict of momentous proportions was playing out. This conflict involved a struggle between Roman Catholics and Eastern Orthodox Christians, and it engaged most of the peoples of the Commonwealth, today known as Poles, Lithuanians, Ukrainians, and Belarusians. Some years before, the Polish government, concerned about a possible unfriendly Muscovite influence over the Orthodox population of the state, had promoted a church union between the Roman Catholics and the Orthodox, in which the Orthodox would acknowledge the supremacy of Rome, but retain their own rites and traditions, and also be given an increased say in political life. This Union, declared at the town of Brest, near the informal cultural border between the Catholics and the Orthodox, was meant to promote unity and peace between the two major churches. But as such ambitious projects often go, it was not everywhere popular and was rejected, firstly by much of the Orthodox population, and then, in part, by some of the more privileged Roman Catholics, who were reluctant to make to various political concessions to the Orthodox. Consequently, this led to widespread quarrels over the possession of bishoprics, parishes, and church property.

These untoward conflicts reached their sorrowful nadir when Josaphat Kuntsevych, the Archbishop of Polotsk, in what is today Belarus, tried to take possession of church property in his “eparchy” or diocese. Spurred on by certain agitators, seemingly both Protestant and

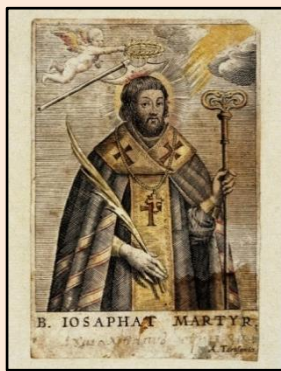
Orthodox, the local population was inflamed against him. On November 12, 1623, this reached a climax. In his *History of Ukraine: The Land and Its Peoples*, Paul Robert Magocsi quotes an eye-witness as to what happened next:

The ringing of cathedral bells and the bells of other churches spread. This was the signal and call to insurrection. From all sides of town masses of people – men, women, and children – gathered with stones and attacked the archbishop’s residence. The masses attacked and injured the servants and assistants of the archbishop, and broke into the room where he was alone. One hit him on the head with a stick, another split it with an axe, and when Kutsevych fell, they started beating him. They looted his home, dragged his body to the plaza, and cursed him – even women and children. They dragged him naked through the streets of the city all the way to the hill overlooking the River Dvina.

Finally, tying stones to the dead body, they threw him into the Dvina at its deepest.

Eventually, the civil authorities restored order and Kuntsevych’s body was recovered. But controversy over that church union, which established what some today consider to be “an Orthodox Church in Communion with Rome,” continued for centuries. It was this Church Union to which today’s Ukrainian Catholic, Belarusian Catholic, and Byzantine Catholic churches (sometimes called “Greek” Catholic churches) ultimately trace their roots.

Josaphat Kuntsevych himself seems to have been a very pious and self-effacing cleric. It is said that he was in the habit of performing at length his daily *poklons* or prayerful prostrations, with his head touching the ground; he fasted much, never ate meat, wore an uncomfortable hair shirt, and chastised his body until the blood flowed. In 1643, Josaphat was officially beatified, and on June 29, 1867, was canonized, or officially declared a “saint” of the Catholic Church. His feast day is November 25 (November 12, Old Style, the day of his assassination), and his bones are presently interred in Rome. Both in Western Ukraine, and wherever significant Ukrainian immigrant communities exist, all over Europe and the Americas, are scattered the occasional Ukrainian Catholic church, school, or seminary bearing his name: “Saint Josaphat,” that is, Saint Josaphat Kuntsevych.



The Blessed Josephat Kuntsevych as martyr. Copper engraving by Oleksander Tarasevych. Dated 23 January, 1660. Tarasevych was probably born in Transcarpathia, but he studied metal engraving in Augsburg, Germany, and returned to Eastern Europe to work in Hlusk in Belarus, and then Kiev, where he took monastic vows and helped with the press of the Kievan Cave Monastery. Credit: Polish language Wikipedia.

Of course, sainthood in today’s various modern, religiously plural, multicultural, and poly-ethnic societies does not go without question. In recent years, the Catholic Church has acknowledged that Saint Christopher, the much esteemed patron saint of travelers, may not have even existed, and in 1970, he was removed from the Roman Calendar of Saints; for many years now, the lives of many other saints have been re-examined, and even the much admired Pope John Paul II, whose numerous supporters insisted upon a very hurried canonization process, is now (justly or not) criticized for hushing up the widespread sexual transgressions of the clergy during his stunningly transformative reign.

With regard to Josaphat Kuntsevych, the controversial Welsh historian of Poland, Norman Davies writes that “Archbishop Kunceovich [Polish spelling] was no man of peace, and

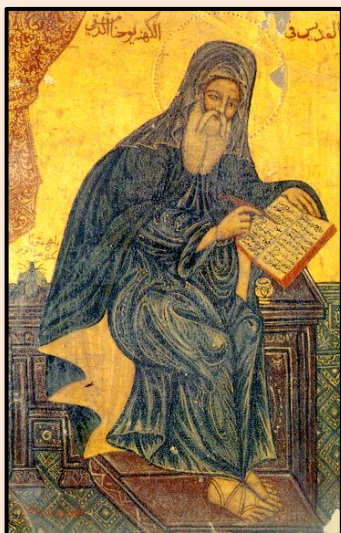
had been involved in all manner of oppressions, including that most offensive of petty persecutions – the refusal to allow the Orthodox peasants to bury their dead in sacred ground.” His official canonization in Rome, writes John Paul Himka, a historian of western Ukraine, was largely politically motivated, and occurred in the aftermath of the great Polish uprising of 1864-65 against the Russian Empire. It was seen as moral support for those Poles, who for the most part were at the same time denying Ukrainians and others their own national aspirations. The uprising and canonization, he continues, were followed by severe repressions of the Eastern Catholic Church in Russia, and by the forced conversion of the bishopric of Chełm/Kholm to Orthodoxy.

Moreover, on the Catholic side, these events were directed by an extreme political reactionary at the very top: Pope Pius IX, who opposed liberalism and democracy in all its forms, and was otherwise totally unsympathetic to the Slavonic peoples, even coming close to denying them any significant place at the First Vatican Council. So the name Saint “Josaphat” Kuntsevych remains somewhat controversial to the present day.

But what a strange and unfamiliar name it is, even to Ukrainians and other East Europeans!

That was not always the case. In medieval and early modern times, the name “Josaphat” was much better known than it is today. It was especially well-known in the eastern Christian lands, where several different holy men, bishops, and other churchmen, bore the name Josaphat. In spite of an outward appearance, that name had nothing to do with the more common Biblical name “Joseph,” nor even with King “Jehosaphat,” a minor figure in the Old Testament, later of “Jumpin’ Jehosaphat” fame in American popular culture.

Rather “Josaphat” was one of the two widely venerated and important figures, in fact, the most important, in the medieval story of *Barlaam and Josaphat*. That edifying tale was said to have been written by Saint John of Damascus (c. 675-749), one of the most important of the Greek/Syrian Fathers of the Church, and it can be found in various versions in all of the major and some of the minor languages and literatures of Europe, and, as well, far from Europe, among the Christians of the Levant, Ethiopia, and India. In the 1700s, it was even translated into Tagalog, the major literary language of the Philippines.



Saint John of Damascus. Nineteenth century icon attributed to Ne'meh Naser Homsî. The inscription is in Arabic. During the Omayyad Caliphate, John was born in Damascus into a prestigious Christian family, but he spent much of his life at the monastery of Saint Sava in Palestine. He wrote tracts attacking the iconoclasts and Muslims and was long thought to have been the author of *The Lives of Saints Barlaam and Josaphat*. Credit: Wikipedia.

The story goes thus: An ancient pagan king of India named Abenner or Avenier was known as a persecutor of Christianity, which had been brought to India by the Apostle Thomas many years before. But King Avenier was childless and wanted an heir. Finally, he did acquire a son, and a very handsome and attractive youth he became. His name was “Josaphat.” When this child was born, the king, who was a worshiper of idols, asked his astrologers

what his fate would be. All but one predicted a long and happy reign. But that sage who dissented, predicted that Josaphat would accept a persecuted religion and stipulated that his kingdom would not be of this world.

Avenier was greatly upset by this and ordered that a great palace be built for Josaphat to shield him from the troubles of the world. In this way, the king hoped to distract him from other faiths. Avenier filled the palace with comforts of all sorts and only young and healthy people could enter it. So young Josaphat knew nothing of sorrow, sickness, aging, or death.

But he eventually tired of such a life and wished to see something of the outside world. The king attempted to dissuade him, but in the end had to give in. He allowed Josaphat out of the palace, but only along a route cleansed of poverty, sickness and problems. However, Josaphat by chance eventually came across a blind man, a sick man, and then an old and infirm man approaching death. He asked how the latter had become like this, and was told that old age, infirmity, and death, in particular, was the fate of all human beings. Needless to say, Josaphat was confused and deeply disturbed by this.

So eventually an elderly Christian hermit dressed in rags named Barlaam was inspired to relieve Josaphat of his confused condition, and came to him from far away. Barlaam told him of a beautiful gem that would give him knowledge, help the blind to see, the deaf to hear, cure the sick, bestow wisdom upon its owner, and give him eternal life. Seeing his progress in knowledge, Barlaam then related to Josaphat various parables from the Bible and from Eastern traditions and revealed to him the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Josaphat was in this way inspired to become a Christian, for Christianity was that precious gem. Before leaving for his home abroad, Barlaam left Josaphat his ragged clothing.



The ragged Hermit Barlaam teaches young Prince Josaphat about the precious gem that is Christianity. Notice the tulips in the foreground and the doves on the ledge behind Josaphat. This Pre-Raphaelite drawing by Henry Ryland is taken from the Frontispiece of Joseph Jacobs, *English Lives of Buddha* (London, 1896). Credit: Wikipedia.

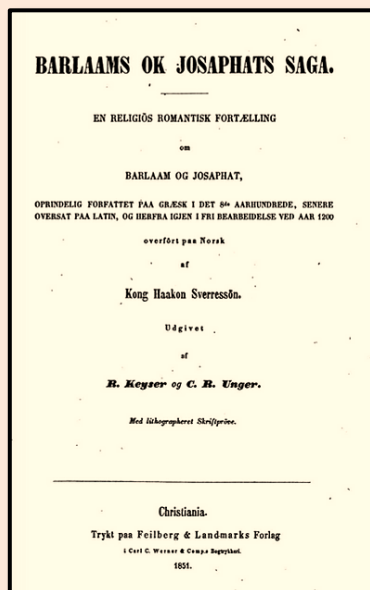
Avenier of course, liked none of this and tried to get Josaphat to abjure his new religion, and he pursued Barlaam; but the holy man had already escaped to his own country. The king tried to tempt his son through beautiful women and other delights, but again it did not work. Eventually, Avenier was compelled to accept the inevitable and allowed Josaphat to share his rule with him. The young king ruled so well that all of his subjects were happy, and even King Avenier himself, shortly before his death, became a Christian. After several years of wise rule, Josaphat sought to retire, give his throne to another, and join Barlaam in his country. But Josaphat's subjects were firmly opposed to this. Finally, he secretly departed in disguise, wearing the rags that Barlaam had left him so many years before. After a long search, he found his friend, and they lived happily until Barlaam died. Josaphat joined him a while later, and his remains were brought back to India, where his memory lived on. So ends the story of the hermit Barlaam and Prince Josaphat.

This was the core of the tale that was told in so many languages across Europe and western Asia and was traced back to Saint John of Damascus. Of course, its medieval translators



The Dominican Friar Vincent de Beauvais (1194-1264) working on his massive encyclopedia called the *Speculum historiale* (A Mirror of History), which was supported by the King of France, Louis IX. This work was widely read across Western Europe throughout the later Middle Ages and familiarized many readers with the legend of Barlaam and Josaphat, which is summarized in it. Fresco by Tommaso da Modena in the church of San Nicolo, Treviso, Italy. Fourteenth century. Credit: Wikipedia.

and interpreters would add a detail here or there and embellish the story with parables and details of their own. But there always remained three major themes: the prince in his palace, the discovery of the troubles of the world, and the elderly holy man who saves him. The entire story is retold in the great medieval encyclopedia of Vincent de Beauvais titled *Speculum Historiale*; the German Cistercian, Bishop Otto of Friesing, knew the story and compared Barlaam to Saint Anthony of Egypt, the Father of the Christian monastic movement in ancient times; and the German poet Rudolf von Ems, turned it into Middle High German verse. Rudolf adds that Josaphat's aide, one Barachias, succeeded him as king, and when he learned of his death in a place called Sennar (Sinai?), he had his sweetly smelling corpse returned to India, and then had his story recorded by a historian. Rudolf assures us that Saint John of Damascus read this version and translated it from Greek into Latin, and he (meaning Rudolf himself) got it from Abbot Wido of Kappel (Capelle) in Switzerland. The poet concludes that it was from this manuscript that he composed his High German version. This statement was an interesting, if highly improbable embellishment on the provenance of the work.

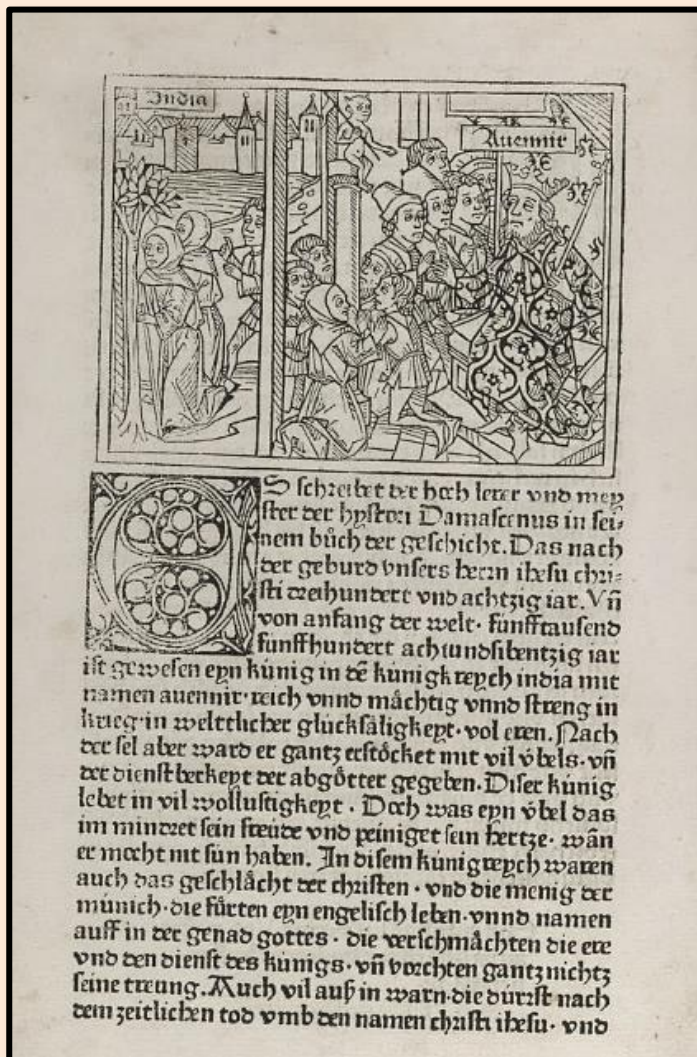


A modern Scandinavian contribution to the Literature: *The Saga of Barlaam and Josaphat: A Religious Romantic Legend* printed at Christiania, in Norway, 1851. Credit: Norsk Filologisk Institutt, via Wikipedia.

About this same time (c. 1240), Gui de Cambrai in northern France composed his lengthy French version, which was aimed at a noble audience and filled with feudal allusions and ethics. Gui even has a war break out between Josaphat and his father, and this war takes on the spirit of the thirteenth century Crusades to the Holy Land. Other versions appeared in Italian, Middle English, and even Old Norse, a language close to modern Icelandic. The Old Norse translation was commissioned by King Haakon Haakonsøn (1204-1263) of Norway, who was intrigued by the tale. In the late thirteenth century, Jacob of Voragine put a summary of the Latin version into his popular Latin compilation of the lives of the saints called *The Golden Legend*, which itself was also widely translated. And in 1571, the Doge of Venice, who, of course, had close commercial connections with the east, presented what were thought to have been the bones of Saint Josaphat to King Sebastian of Portugal; these were later transferred to a monastery in

Antwerp in the Low Countries. Finally, from the sixteenth century, there existed a Church of Saint Josaphat in Palermo, the major metropolitan centre of Sicily, which under Arab and then Norman rule during medieval times had been a focal point for the transfer of Arabic learning to Europe.

Meanwhile in Eastern Europe, Slavonic versions began to appear, some of them quite early. So an East Slavic version was first composed in the book language of Kievan Rus' in the eleventh century, that is, about the same time as the first Latin version, which is dated 1048. A second Slavic version was introduced to Kievan Rus' at the time of the so-called Second South Slavic Wave of literature in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. Meanwhile, in the Balkans itself, one Theodosius wrote a life of the Serbian national hero Saint Sava, and used the story of Barlaam and Josaphat as a model, a monk from Mount Athos playing the part of Barlaam, who comes to the court of Sava's father, the king of Serbia, and Josaphat being the model for Sava himself. Outside Europe, there were versions in Ethiopic and Arabic, Armenian and Georgian. In all, about 130 different versions of the story may be found in some thirty different languages.



With regard to printed editions, these too appeared quite early. The Library of Congress in Washington DC possesses an edition which it titles in Latin simply *Barlaam et Josaphat*. It was printed by Günter Zainer in Augsburg in about 1476, that is, very shortly after the very first books printed from moveable type rolled off the presses of their German inventor, Johannes Gutenberg. The entire volume is now freely available on-line at the Library of Congress website.

The image on the left is the opening page of what is believed to be one of the first printed versions of the story of Barlaam and Josaphat, from the collection of the Library of Congress. The actual title reads in German: *Eyn gar loblich ... Cronica sagend von eynem heyligen Künig mit Namen Josaphat, wie der ward bekeret von eynem heyligen Vatter vñd Aynsideln genant Barlaam*. (A Right Praiseworthy Story told of a Holy King named Josaphat, as also a Holy Father and Hermit named Barlaam by whom he was Converted.) The woodcut displays a characterization of India on the left, and King Avenier seated on his throne on the right. The king is surrounded by courtiers, while some of his people kneel before a pillar, on which sits a tiny horned devil.

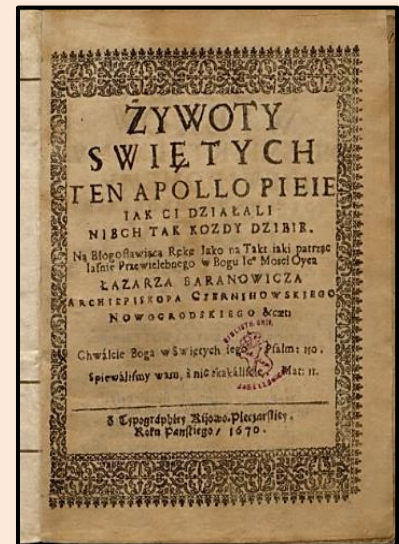


Left: Woodcut of the Holy Hermit Barlaam explaining to Prince Josaphat the beauties of the gem that is Christianity. This story is an echo of the Parable of the Pearl (Mat. 13: 45-46). The image is taken from the first printed edition of the story in an East Slavic language titled: *Historiia albo pravdyvoe vypysanie sviatoho ioanna Damaskyna o zhytii sviatykh prepodobnykh otets Barlaama i Osafa i o naverneniu Indiian* (A History or True Account by the Holy John of Damascus about the Lives of the Blessed Fathers Varlaam and Osaf and the Conversion of the Indians) (Kutein, [Grand Duchy of Lithuania], 1637). 9 + 363 pp. Credit: Wikipedia.

However, it was not until some two centuries later in 1637 that the first version in an East Slavic language, a mixture of Church Slavonic with Belarusian and Ukrainian elements, was printed. This was produced at a monastery near the town of Orsha in the Grand Duchy of Lithuania, today in Belarus. (See above.) In 1670, the influential Ukrainian churchman, Rector of the Kievan Academy and Bishop of Chernihiv, and strong proponent of Ukrainian ecclesiastical independence, Lazar Baranovych, who knew the versions of *The Golden Legend* in Latin and the interpretations of the Polish Jesuit, Piotr Skarga, published a Polish version consonant with his strongly Orthodox views in a work titled *Lives of the Saints*; and in 1680, Simeon Polotsky, also from the Commonwealth, published a Church Slavonic version in Moscow. In 1689, Dmytro



Left: Lazar Baranovych (1620-1693), who published the story of Barlaam and Josaphat in his *Lives of the Saints* in Polish at the Monastery of the Caves in Kiev. Right: Title page of that edition, dated 1670. Credit: Polish language Wikipedia.

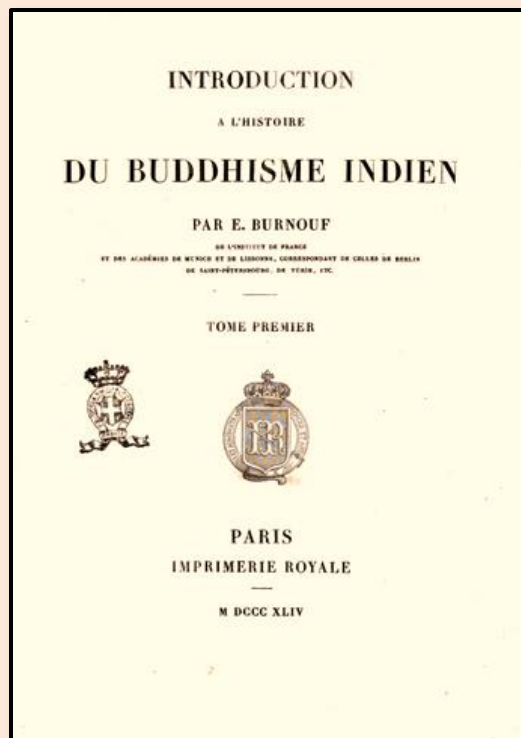


Tuptalo also published the story in his Middle Ukrainian/East Slavic version of the *Lives of the Saints*, which came out as well at the Monastery of the Caves in Kiev. He placed the story in the first part of the book titled: “Readings for Saints Days.”

By then, monks, hermits and churchmen of all sorts bore the name of one or the other of these two famous saints. Hymns, wall paintings, and icons were produced in their honour. In fact, in its article on “Barlaam and Josaphat,” the multi-volume Russian language *Orthodox Encyclopedia* goes into considerable detail on what it calls the “Hymnology” and the “Iconology” of the tale. In this way, the figures of the pious monk Barlaam, and the virtuous Prince Josaphat, entered not only the literatures of medieval Europe, but also the prayers and artistic life of all Christendom, and for about a thousand years, were venerated as a very real part of Christian culture in its two major forms: Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox.

So it is not surprising that, when Marco Polo’s *Description of the World*, written at the beginning of the fourteenth century, became widely-known, it should come into the hands of a scholar who was already well aware of the story. On his way back to Europe from Cathay, Marco visited both India and Ceylon, and in his description of Ceylon, gave much attention to the local “idolaters,” who were very devoted to representations of the figure that he believed was their God. The Mongols called him Sakyamuni Burkan.

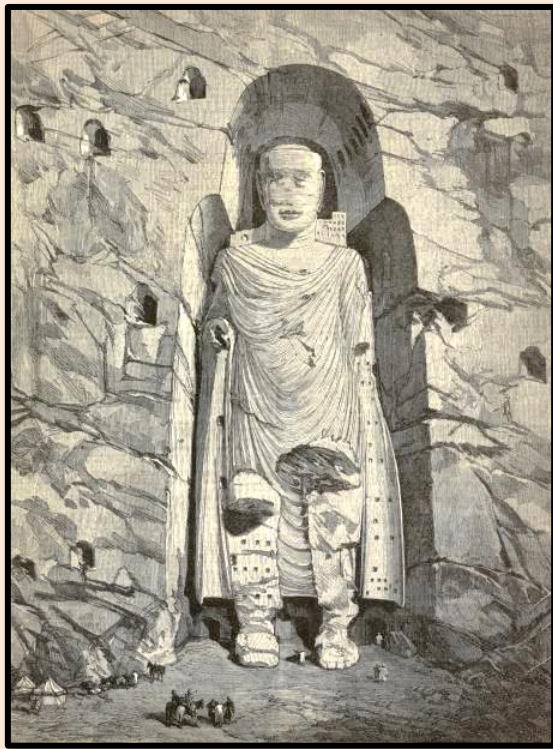
Marco also gave a brief but accurate account of the traditional life of Prince Sakyamuni, in which his Venetian editor of about a century later, that is, in 1446, made a first connection with the life of Saint Josaphat. He specifically wrote: “This is like the life of Saint Josaphat who was the son of King Avenier of these parts of India and was converted to the Christian faith by means of Barlaam, as is read in the life and legend of the Holy Fathers” (Moule and Pelliot, ed., 1939: 410). However, at that time it was still some decades before the Portuguese explorer Vasco da Gama would sail around the Cape of Good Hope to India, and there was no knowledge in Europe that those “idolaters” of Ceylon, Cathay, and Mongolia (in theory at least) “worshiped” no idols whatsoever, but rather simply “venerated” (to use a Catholic/Orthodox expression), and tried to imitate, the “Enlightened One,” or “the Buddha.”



Europeans in the next centuries set out on the discovery of the entire world, and were encountering such “idolaters” in the many countries of south and east Asia. But of Sakyamuni himself little substantial was known to the mid-nineteenth century, when a Frenchman named Eugène Burnouf (1801-1852) wrote a book on his life based on authentic Oriental sources, especially Sanskrit, which was by then known and studied in Europe. It was Burnouf, who in his massive 645 page volume first published in 1844, *Introduction to the history of Indian Buddhism*, first exposed Europeans in some detail to the name “Buddha,” gave its meaning as “the Enlightened One,” and noted that though he was a king’s son, the Buddha was nevertheless no God, but very much a mere human being. Moreover, Burnouf most especially outlined the fundamentals of his biography and non-theistic religion, ethics, and philosophy. The result was a real revolution in European understanding of Asia.

Shortly, the term “Idolatry” nearly disappeared from scholarly writings on Asia, and the newer terms Buddhism, Confucianism, and some years later, eventually “Hinduism,” came into common use. Within a decade or so of the publication of Burnouf’s book, three different scholars, one English, one French, and another German, speculated that the life of the Buddha, as told in Sanskrit and Pali literatures, and written according to several centuries of Asian oral tradition, was actually the ultimate source of the story of Saints Barlaam and Josaphat, and that Josaphat was indeed none other than the Buddha himself.

In following years, it became known that “Josaphat” was by origin no Christian name at all, but rather was derived from the Mahayana Buddhist term *Bodhisattva* (a “Blessed one,” or Buddha to be), who put off attaining Nirvana to help others on their paths to Enlightenment. (More recently, Siegfried A. Schulz adds that “Barlaam” is probably derived through the Arabic “Balauhar,” ultimately from the Indian term *Bhagwan* meaning “Lord.”) Indeed, in the Slavonic world in particular, once the family connection between the languages of Europe and northern India was recognized (the “Indo-European family,” earlier known as the Aryan family of languages) the significance of the word “Buddha” was especially felt, for that word – to “awaken,” or become “enlightened” -- was clearly recognisable in the Slavic word “to awaken” (*budyty* in Ukrainian), and, indeed, the word for a modern alarm clock in Russian is *budilnik!*



The larger of the two giant Buddhas of Bamiyan in central Afghanistan (55 meters), as it appeared in the nineteenth century. Note the tiny human figures with horses and tents on the lower left. The Buddha was carved out of the sandstone cliff sometime after 591 AD and shows the influence of many cultural traditions, including those of Gupta India, Zoroastrian and Mithrian Iran, and Greece. The latter shows particularly in the Buddha’s drapery. Colourful paintings of the Sun God in his chariot, Bodhisattvas, a king, pilgrims, and other figures, still adorn the top of the interior of the grotto. On April 30, 630 AD, in the course of his pilgrimage to India, the Chinese monk Xuanzang (pronounced Shu-an zang) visited Bamiyan and has left us a detailed description of the three giant Buddhas that were then visible to him. The third of these, a reclining Buddha, which was covered and forgotten for centuries, has recently been excavated. In March, 2001, on the eve of the 9/11 attacks on New York and Washington DC, against the will of most of the local population, who are Shia Muslim, the Taliban, an Afghan Sunni Muslim sect, destroyed the statue seen here. This drawing was first published in the *Illustrated London News*, November 6, 1886. Credit: Wikipedia.

The manifold linguistic and literary connections between India and Europe were by then quite clear. But exactly how did the story of Barlaam and Josaphat get to the West from India? Obviously, Saint John of Damascus, pondering the truths of eternity in the monastery of Saint Sava in Palestine, did not make it up entirely on his own. Rather the story is much more complicated than that, and to the present day, some of the exact connections remain obscure, and are openly debated by scholars, though there seems to be constant progress in filling in the blanks.

As the end of the twentieth century neared, the American scholars, Monique Pitts, J. P. Asmussen and others summarized current knowledge of the matter in the following way. Firstly, the life of the Buddha (d. 483 BC) as codified and, finally, written down in the second and third centuries AD, primarily in the Sanskrit *Lalita Vistara* (The Vast Game) and the Pali language *Jakata Tales* (Buddha Birth Stories), were the major sources for both the general outline and many unmistakable details of the legend of Barlaam and Josaphat as known in Europe, where, as mentioned above, the oldest Latin manuscript is dated to 1048. The one major difference, of course, was that in India, the young Prince Siddhartha, the Buddha-to-be, was able to find Enlightenment on his own and had no need of a Barlaam to inspire him. That would come later in the chain of transmission to the West.

Secondly, during what in Europe is called Late Antiquity, the story was carried to central Asia by Buddhists, who then converted to their religion much of the eastern Iranian world, including what are today Afghanistan, Uzbekistan, and the autonomous Xingjian Province of China (formerly Eastern Turkestan). In that vast region, today solidly Muslim, there was in early medieval times a lively intercourse of various religions and cultures, which both influenced and competed with each other. These included Buddhism, Manichaeism, Zoroasterianism, Taoism, and Christianity. (Islam had not yet made its appearance.) Though the Europeans did not yet know it, that was the only place in the world that Manichaeism, transferred from the Iranian to the Turkic world, managed to become a state religion for several centuries.



Manichaean scribes, dressed in their white robes symbolizing light and purity, writing. Some religious values, if not all, are shared. The text reads: "If a person considers himself an unbeliever, if a person believes that which contains false teaching, if it is a question of envy and greedy desires, then one must recognise that all is lost." From a surviving page of an otherwise unknown Manichaean book discovered near Turfan on the north side of the Taklimakan Desert in today's Xinjiang province of China (formerly Eastern Turkestan). The text is in an eastern form of Turkic, an ancestor of modern Uighur. But the Manichaean script was also used for many other languages in central Asia, including the Iranian languages called Parthian, Sogdian, Middle Persian, and even an early variant of New Persian (Farsi). Although Manichaean script was a derivative of various forms of Aramaic script, it was closer to the spoken languages that used it than were most of its competitors, and so was much more easily understood. Fragments of the story of *Barlaam and Josaphat*, or its predecessors, were preserved in this script at Turfan in both Sogdian and eastern Turkic. Credit: Department of Turfan Research, Berlin-Brandenburgische Akademie der Wissenschaften.

And so, it happened that at the beginning of the twentieth century, on the eastern edge of the great central Asian Taklimakan Desert, in the famed Cave of the Thousand Buddhas, firstly, the British agent Aurel Stein, and then secondly, the French orientalist Paul Pelliot, discovered an enormous library of ancient manuscripts and books. These included an excellently preserved copy of the first dated printed book yet known; it was a wood-cut printed copy of the legendary *Diamond Sutra* (868 AD) about the teachings of the Buddha. In the same region, near the town

of Turfan further to the north-west, Russian and German expeditions made other exciting discoveries. Among the new treasures from the Turfan district were found what are believed to be several very old fragments from the legend of Barlaam and Josaphat.

Those fragments, similarly preserved through the ages by the aridity of the central Asian desert, had been translated into some of the languages of the region, including Sogdian, an eastern Iranian language (today almost extinct), and an eastern form of Turkic, thought to be an ancestor of modern Uighur, the official language of Xingjian Autonomous Province in the People's Republic of China. The fragments, all in the Manichaean script, still contained no traces of indisputably Christian theology. But it is well-known that the prophet Mani himself (died circa 275 AD), who was a Persian by origin, was ascetic by nature and freely adopted elements for his teachings from older religions, including Christianity and Buddhism; he would necessarily have been interested in these tales of the Buddha. It is also believed that a version of the tale was about the same time, or shortly later, translated into Pahlavi/Persian, the language of the Sasanian Empire in Iran proper further west. But, writes the Iranian languages specialist Walter Sundermann, it was the Sogdian-speaking Manichaeans of Central Asia who “were the first to modify and further diffuse the Buddha legend.”

Our story now moves still further west, to early Islamic Bagdad in what is today Iraq. From its foundation, Bagdad was known as the “God-given city,” from Old Persian *Bag* (God) and Old Persian *dad* (given). (The Slavs have a parallel personal name in *Bogdan* (Russian and Polish) and *Bohdan* (Ukrainian) with exactly the same meaning.) At that time, Bagdad was the capital of the Abbasid Caliphate and a great city known for its scholarship and famed *Bayt al-Hikmah* (House of Wisdom), where many of the classics of ancient Greece, and to some extent, also Iran and India, were translated into Syriac or Arabic.

5) The Greek version, *Barlaam and Ioasaph*,¹⁰ seems to derive from the Georgian. It is now dated from the eleventh century and attributed, not to St. John Damascene, but to St. Euthymus who translated it from Georgian into Greek at the Iviron monastery on Mount Athos.¹¹ The transformation of the name Būdāsaf into Ioasaph is thus explained:

Arabic	بورداسف	Būdāsaf
	يورداسف	Iūdāsaf (two diacritical dots instead of one)
Greek	Ἰωσῆφ	Ioasaph

After the eleventh century the legend spread considerably. The Greek version is the source of all Christian versions in the Romance,¹² Germanic and Slavic languages, and the Ethiopian version *Baralām and Yēwāsēf*;¹³ the last one, in turn, inspired the Christian Arabic text.¹⁴

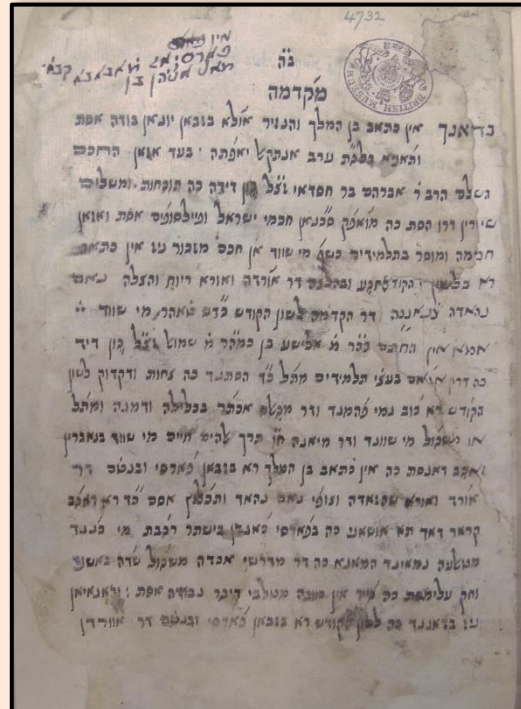
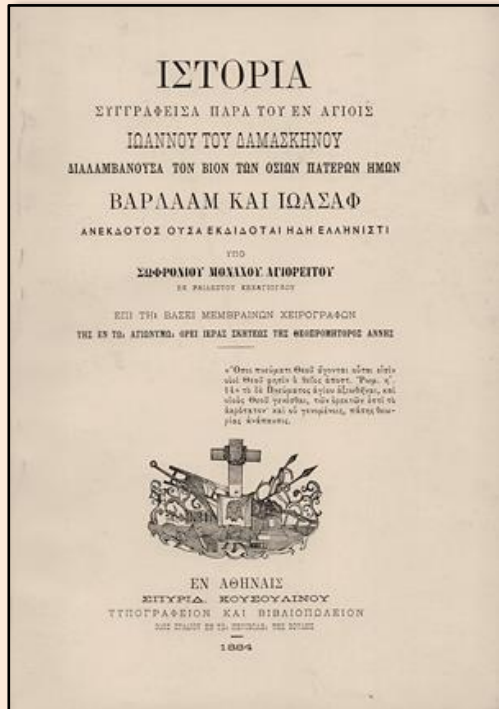
Monique B. Pitts's summary of Georgian specialist, David M. Lang's theory, now commonly accepted, of how the *Legend of Barlaam and Josaphat* traveled west. Note the “s” in the Arabic in this example is missing the three upward “teeth,” or spikes that normally distinguish it in printed texts, and is here flattened horizontally before the final “f.” Pitts omits an example of the important Georgian intermediary

between Arabic and Greek, which was discovered by the noted Georgian scholar, N. J. Marr, near the end of the 19th century. In later years, Marr became a major Soviet Orientalist, and his theories about the origin of speech became officially accepted and mandatory “scientific truth” in the USSR. But when his fellow Georgian, Joseph Stalin, who had earlier awarded him the Order of Lenin, changed his mind on that issue, Marr was officially disgraced, his writings suppressed, and his theories banned. Thankfully, he had already died a natural death.

In its early days, Bagdad was also the main centre of the western part of the Manichaean Church, and one Arab authority even connected the translator Ebn al-Moqaffa with the Arabic version of the *Kitab Belawhar wa Budasaf* (The Book of Barlaam and Josaphat). That particular translation is presently lost, but it gave rise to several other Arabic versions and became the basis

for a free rendering into Hebrew by Abraham ibn Hasdai. This version was eventually also translated into Judeo-Persian as *Shahzadeh va Sufi* (The King's Son and the Dervish), and years later, into Yiddish, in which form it became popular among the Jews of Eastern Europe. Modern editions of these varied works were printed in Istanbul (1518), Frankfort on the Main (1769), and later in Zholkva, Lemberg (that is, Lviv), Zhytomyr, and Warsaw, among other places.

As to the Greek version, one of those early Arabic examples was evidently the source of a Georgian version created or used by Euthymius the Georgian of Athos, who also translated it into Greek in the mid-eleventh century. Seemingly, it was Euthymius and/or his Georgian source, who added new Christian elements to the story, including Avenier's hostility to



Christianity. (Above Left: Greek version, printed at Athens, 1884; Right: Judeo-Persian MS. in Hebrew Script. Credit: British Museum.) He also added an ancient Greek work, a Christian polemic against the Greek, Egyptian, and “Chaldean” pagans and the Jews, called *The Apology of Aristides*, which is referred to by Eusebius in his *Ecclesiastical History*, but otherwise lost. It was this Greek version and not anything by Saint John of Damascus (who had lived three centuries earlier) that was the true source of both the Latin version and Slavonic version. J. P. Asmussen, writing in the *Encyclopaedia Iranica* called it “the Mother Text of all later Christian versions.” So two prominent Christian saints, commemorated on the Church Calendars, and venerated for about a millennium across the entire Christian world, had as their main source the *Life of the Buddha*, most probably transmitted by the Sogdian followers of Mani in central Asia, and other of his followers in Bagdad, and then mediated through Arabic and Georgian to Greek, and then Latin and Slavonic.

Though it might be surprising to the uninitiated, such borrowings are not without precedent. Scholars have long known that certain parts of the Bible, purported to be the oldest books, were, in fact, not compiled in Palestine in Deep Antiquity, but rather put together, edited, and re-written in Babylon during and after the famed Babylonian captivity of the Jews, where

they not only had come under ancient Mesopotamian influences (examples being the Flood Story and the Tower of Babel), but also Zoroastrian/Persian influences. The ancient religion of the Iranian Prophet Zoroaster, sometimes called Mazdaism, seemingly formulated much earlier than the Babylonian Captivity of the Jews, had been prominent in Achaemenian Persia (the ancient Iran of Cyrus, liberator of the Jews, Herodotus the historian, and Alexander the Great). But it most clearly became a state religion under the Sasanian Dynasty (224-651 AD), the last pre-Islamic dynasty ruling Persia. The Iran specialist Richard Foltz lists as examples of Persian influence on the composition of the Bible, a firm belief in the End Days, the Last Judgement, a devil, a saviour figure, and a very real (rather than a more shadowy) form of the afterlife.

Other scholars speculate about a number of Buddhist *exempla* and *topoi* that can be found in the New Testament. For example, S. A. Schulz in his study of *Barlaam and Josaphat* describes a *Therigata* story about a Buddhist nun who is pursued by a young man. She refuses him, saying to him that even the eye is merely a bit of repulsive flesh. She then plucks out her own eye and offers it to the young man, who is immediately crushed and asks for forgiveness. Fortunately, she can go to the Buddha, who praises her determination and virtue, and restores her eyesight.

Schulz sees a parallel or influence, if not a direct borrowing, in Matthew 16: 9. “If thine eye offends thee, pluck it out and cast it from thee. It is better for thee to enter into life with one eye rather than to have two eyes and be cast into hellfire.” And, of course, the obvious parallels between Buddhist and Christian monastic life have long led to speculation about possible eastern influences upon the first Christian monks, the Desert Fathers of ancient Egypt.



Left: Arabic version. King Abbener consulting astrologers for the casting of his son's horoscope. The tale is intended as inspirational reading for Arabic-speaking Christians. Though the script is Arabic, the illustration seems very much influenced by European art. From: *The History of Barlaam and Josaphat*, Cairo, 1778. MS. Bibliothèque nationale, R.F. Credit: @GallicaBnF.fr/ark:/12148/btv via Wikipedia.

However, unlike in the informed but undocumented speculations about Matthew the Evangelist, or Saint Anthony of Egypt and the other Desert Fathers, the case of Barlaam and Josaphat is quite clear. It is fairly well documented in the literary chain, and this chain extends all the way from India in the east to Iceland in the west. It is reflected in the design, plot, ethical basis, order, and even vocabulary of the tale. So there can be little doubt that those sprinklings of Ukrainian and other religious institutions, which exist to the present day, and bear the unusual name of “Saint Josaphat,” remind us not only of the very historical Saint Josaphat Kuntsevych of Eastern Europe, but even of that nearly forgotten tale of Saints Barlaam and Josaphat which, as Schulz so succinctly put it, was

once “a genuine piece of world literature.”

Furthermore, this cosmopolitan character of the tale, which was once seen by sceptics and critics of the church as some kind of untoward weakness or embarrassment, can now also be viewed as yet another truly ecumenical and inter-faith document, which points to how certain universal questions about life, its purpose, and its ending, have been approached. It also reveals something about how, in spite of the trivial nature of certain externals, the essence of religious inspiration remains universal and lasting.



Left: “The Parable of the Unicorn” from *Barlaam and Josaphat*. In this story, a young man is pursued by a ferocious unicorn and inadvertently falls into a pit. But he saves himself temporarily by hanging onto a branch. At the same time, the branch is being gnawed at by two mice, one black and one white, and there is a fiery dragon reaching up at him from below. Four poisonous snakes spit at him from all directions. But in spite of all this, he is distracted by a smaller branch, from which honey is dripping, and he reaches out to taste it.

The unicorn is death, the dragon hell, the mice are time, night and day, which constantly presses on, and the honey represents the temptations of the world, which distract him from the danger all around. Like the general core, this parable is preserved from the Indian original of our tale, and was carried all the way to Europe, where it became an admonition to think of eternal rather than temporal things. Engraving by Boëtius Adamsz. Bolswert, ‘Allegorie op de wereld’ ca. 1616. Credit: Jonathan Pater, “A Man Fleeing from a Unicorn Falls into a Well with a Dragon: Parables in the Legend of Barlaam and Josaphat.” “Parable blog” in Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam. (www.rijksmuseum.nl) via Wikipedia.

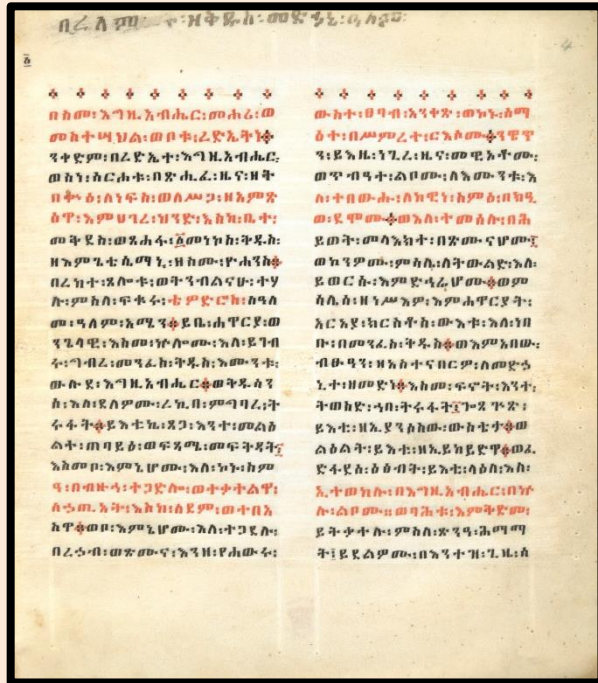
BIBLIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

There is one recent book almost exactly on our theme. See Donald S. Lopez and Peggy McCracken, *In Search of the Christian Buddha: How an Asian Sage became a Medieval Saint* (New York: Norton, 2014). 262 pp. There are many other general works, including translations of various versions of the *Legend of Barlaam and Josaphat*, available in English. One of the latest is the French version by Gui de Cambrai, *Barlaam and Josaphat: A Christian Tale of the Buddha*, edited and trans. Peggy McCracken (London: Penguin, 2014), xx+197 pp. This substantial volume contains a well written and well informed introduction by Donald S. Lopez, who here more succinctly describes the history and context of the work. The Greek text attributed to Saint John of Damascus, together with an English translation, is available in the Loeb Library series. Many excerpts, and in places, the whole tale, is available on-line.

A classic and still much respected analysis of the tale may be found in the formidable history of Byzantine literature by Karl Krumbacher, the founder of modern Byzantine studies in Europe. See his *Geschichte der byzantinischen Litteratur von Justinian bis zum Ende des oströmischen Reiches 727-1453* [History of Byzantine Literature from Justinian to the End of the East Roman Empire, 727-1453] (Munich: C. H. Beck, 1891), especially pp. 466-70. Krumbacher

puts this story in a class with the apocryphal history of Adam and Eve, Noah, Abraham, and the renowned sage Solomon, and also the legend of Prester John (a famed but fabulous Christian King of Asia), as standing in the great tradition of literature coming from the East. Krumbacher maintains that they all mixed with Byzantine elements to form a new genre. He even compares it with that highlight of medieval Byzantine folk literature, “The Life and Deeds of Digenis Akritas,” the half-Greek, half-Arab warrior of the borderlands, who enthralled Greece from medieval to modern times. (pp. 26-27).

With regard to India, Krumbacher says that *Barlaam and Josaphat* stands together with the stories of *Sinbad the Sailor* and *Kalilah and Dimnah* as Indian by ultimate origin (p. 466).



Left: Handwritten version of *Barlaam and Josaphat* in Ge'ez (Ethiopic) with the title 'Baralam and Yewasef', believed to have been copied around 1746-55 from an older version. Credit: British Library, [Or. 699 f. 4](https://www.britishlibrary.org/Or.699.f.4) Ge'ez script is not alphabetic, writing letters, but rather writes entire syllables, and is therefore called a “syllabary.” The Ge'ez language is the major traditional literary language of Ethiopia and is used today mostly either for solemn public announcements, or for liturgical purposes by the various Ethiopian and Eritrean churches, and by the Falasha Jews of Israel, who migrated there from Ethiopia in the late twentieth century. The script is more phonetic than “abjads,” or scripts, that do not write short vowels, such as Arabic and Syriac. But, like them, the language is a member of the Semitic family. A large literature from ancient and medieval times is preserved in Ge'ez, including many old Christian works that have been lost in other languages. This even includes some Biblical Apocrypha.

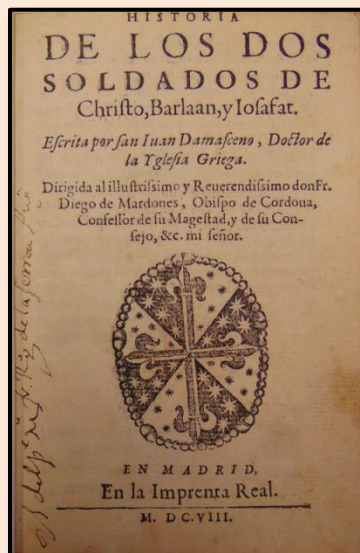
For those seeking a general introduction to the topic, the article on “Barlaam and Josaphat” in the English language Wikipedia contains useful links to more specialized encyclopedias, but it is the work of many different hands, and reads very unevenly. Among the many links that it recommends, however, is the article by Francis Mersman in the *Catholic Encyclopedia* (1913 edition), which is surprisingly good for its age, and very balanced as compared to its counterpart in the 1960s *New Catholic Encyclopedia*.

Other specialized encyclopedia articles that I found useful were those of Richard Gottheil and Joseph Jacobs in the *Jewish Encyclopedia* (1906 edition), and by J. P. Asmussen, “Barlaam and Iosaph,” in the *Encyclopaedia Iranica* (1988). As noted above, Jacobs was the author of a pioneering book on the transmission of the story from Arabic and then Georgian, to Greek. Gottheil and Jacobs are also informative on editions of the tale in three major Jewish languages: Hebrew, Judeo-Persian, and Yiddish. I also found the article by the philologist/linguist Walter Sundermann, “Bodhisattva,” in the *Encyclopaedia Iranica* to be of some use. Sundermann particularly summarizes the researches and conclusions of W. B. Henning, which are important for today’s students of Persian literature. He maintains that a poetic version of the *Barlaam and Josaphat* tale, preserved down the centuries in the Central Asian desert, in fact, constitutes the oldest surviving manuscript of New Persian (Farsi) verse.

The skeleton of the present article was formed by three easily read but well-informed sources:

- 1) The Donald Lopez “Introduction” to Gui de Cambrai’s creation mentioned above.
- 2) Monique B. Pitts, “Barlaam and Josaphat: A Legend for All Seasons,” *Journal of South Asian Literature*, XVI, 1, part 1 (1981), 3-16.
- 3) Siegfried A. Schulz, “Two Christian Saints? The Barlaam and Josaphat Legend,” *India International Centre Quarterly*, VIII, 2 (1981), 131-43.

On Burnouf and his importance for the history of Buddhist studies, see his great work in English translation by Katia Buttrille and Donald S. Lopez, *Introduction to the History of Indian Buddhism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015). Again, I read Lopez’s Introduction to this volume by with some interest. His general thesis is also outlined in his presentation at Harvard in 2012. See: “A Christian Buddha: The Medieval Tale of Barlaam and Josaphat.” Available on-line at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=v0isDs6EAU0> Accessed 12/10/2020. In this lecture, Lopez mentions the roles of Theodore Benfey (1853), Eduard Laboulaye (1859) and Felix Liebrecht (1860) in discovering the Buddha/Buddhist link of the *Barlaam and Josaphat* tale for modern scholarship and today’s western world. He believes that connection naturally followed Burnouf’s revolutionary new interpretations of Buddhism.



Barlaam and Josaphat

Left: Title page of the Spanish language *History of the Two Soldiers of Christ, Barlaam and Josafat* (sic). Written by Saint John of Damascus, Doctor of the Greek Church, and Dedicated to the Illustrious and Very Reverend Brother Diego de Mardones, Bishop of Cordova, Councilor to His Majesty, &c. Printed at Madrid at the Royal Printing house, 1608. Credit: British Library. 4823.a.13.

Persian:

برلم و ژوزف (بلوهر و بوداسف)	Barlam va Joseph
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For the story of *Barlaam and Josaphat* in the Eastern Slavonic world, one must turn to literature in the Russian and Ukrainian languages. For my purposes, Mykhailo Vozniak, *Istoriia ukrainskoi literatury* [History of Ukrainian Literature], 2 vols. (Lviv: Svit, 1992), I, 119-21, was quite useful. Vozniak approvingly quotes the great historian of Byzantine literature, Karl Krumbacher as follows: “There is no doubt as to the esthetic quality of this heated apology for the Christian life, where the struggle against worldly corruption is drawn with such a convincing passion. The structure of the work is remarkable [and] the contradictory feelings and lives are beautifully portrayed. For that reason, the book necessarily made an enormous impression on the faithful [Christian] peoples of all Europe.”

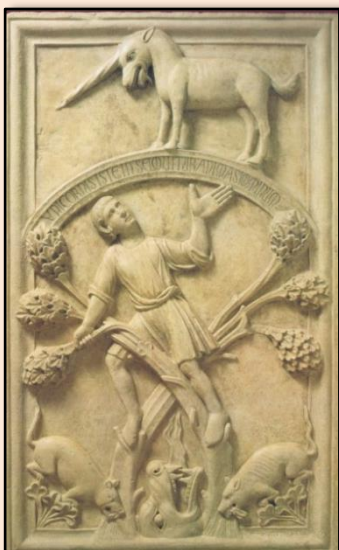
As to the various editions and accounts of them in Ukrainian and some other Slavic literatures, see *Ukrainski pysmennyky: Bio-bibliohrafichnyi slovnyk* [Ukrainian Writers: A Bio-bibliographical Dictionary], vol. I (Kiev: Khudozhna literatura, 1960), pp. 780-89.

Also, a substantial article on “Barlaam i Ioasaf ili Iosafat,” [Barlaam and Ioasaf or Iosafat] appeared in the *Entsilopedicheskii slovar* [Encyclopedic Dictionary], vol. X (Saint Petersburg: Brokgauz-Efron, 1892; repr. Terra, 1990), pp. 527-28, which informs us that a Czech translation was done as early as the 14th century. As mentioned above, Piotr Skarga popularized the work in Polish, and this influenced Lazar Baranovych in Kiev and Chernihiv. The story was by then mentioned in several Polish books of lives of the saints. A full Polish translation by Sebastian Jan Piskorski, Rector of the Academy in Cracow, was printed in his *Żywoty Ojców, albo dzieje duchowne powieści starców zakonników, pustelników wschodnich*, [Lives of the Fathers, or, the Story of the Elders among the Monks and the Eastern Hermits] (Cracow, 1688), pp. 183-294. A new critical edition of the *Żywot Barlaama i Jozafata* [The Lives of Barlaam and Josaphat], edited and introduced by J. Janów was published in Lwów/Lviv in 1935 in interwar Poland.

In the 1890s, the Ukrainian writer, Ivan Franko (an iconic figure in Ukrainian history himself), made *Barlaam and Josaphat* the subject of both his master’s and doctoral dissertations at the University of Vienna, and these works were both printed at the time. See his *Zibrannia tvoriv v 50 tomakh* [Collected works in Fifty Volumes], vol. XXX (Lviv: Naukova dumka, 1981).

In these studies, Franko stressed European ignorance of world geography in medieval times, and pointed out that the tale seems to portray India and Ethiopia as being neighbours. Franko detailed the reception of the tale in Slavonic lands, referenced translations, and early Slavonic editions from Czech to Ukrainian. He knew the literature on the chain of transmission from India to and across Europe.

But he was especially intrigued by the “Parable of the Unicorn” as told in the tale. He wrote a special study of that subject (pp. 541-93), and, later on, even reworked it into his own literary creations, especially his “Parable about Life” (*Prychta pro zhyttia*) in the collection of poetry titled *Mii izmarahd* (My Emerald). In this way, he turned what some thought of as “A Parable about Death” into its opposite, seeing paradise “in the splendour of love, the desire for brotherhood, and in hope, and the struggle for a higher, more pure realm.”



Left: “Parable of the Unicorn.” Relief from the Museo della Cattedrale, Ferrara. The unicorn and the dragon are both shown in this stone relief, as are the two mice, which in this image appear rather large, more like ravenous swine. The snakes, however, and the branch dripping honey, are missing. In some Indian tellings of the tale, it is a wild elephant, and not a unicorn, that is chasing the man. Of course, both have large appendices protruding from their heads. The parable is told in very old Hindu as well as Buddhist and Christian literature. The Hindu version occurs in the *Mahabharata*. However, as Buddha scholar Donald Lopez points out, its absolute contrast between worldly pleasure and renunciation runs at odds with the more fundamental Buddha principle of “the middle way.” He therefore proposes that it probably does not go back to the Buddha himself. Photo credit: Jonathan Pater, citing [petrus.agricola](https://www.flickr.com/photos/28433765@N07/8705375208) on Flickr (<https://www.flickr.com/photos/28433765@N07/8705375208>) Via Wikipedia.



Fragment of an unidentified Arabic MS on the subject of “Barlaam and Josaphat,” posted on the website of the Norwegian Institute of Philology: <https://www.philology.no/barlaam> Accessed: 12/20/2020. It shows young Prince Josaphat on the left and the elderly Barlaam on the right. Both of their heads are enveloped by halos. The halo occurs in both Christian and Muslim art (in the latter sometimes as a fiery circle reaching upward), though traditional Muslim art does not depict human faces, especially those of the prophets. Halos also occur often in Buddhist art. The halo seems to have its most ancient origins in Persian Zoroastrian traditions, in which light and fire are sacred and deeply revered symbols.

Among the on-line museum/library blogs on *Barlaam and Josaphat* that I found useful (including for images) were that of the British Library in London, and that of the Rijks Museum in Amsterdam. Both are amply illustrated, and provide further references to recent literature of a non-specialist nature. For the British Library, see: <https://blogs.bl.uk/asian-and-african/2019/07/the-buddhas-long-journey-to-europe-and-africa.html> and for the Rijks Museum, see: <https://parabelproject.nl/a-man-fleeing-from-a-unicorn-falls-into-a-well-with-a-dragon-parable-in-the-legend-of-barlaam-and-josaphat-2/> Accessed 12/14/2020. As mentioned in the text, I also used the website of the Library of Congress in Washington DC, which posted that early printed German version of the tale in its entirety. As for the illustration of the Arabic version (reproduced with the link above on this page), it comes from the Barlaam and Josaphat Project page of the Norwegian Academy of Sciences, Institute of Philology, Oslo.

Finally, the Website of the Berlin-Brandenburg Academy of Sciences is important, in fact, indispensable for the history of the discoveries at Turfan in the modern Xinjiang Autonomous Province of China, in which, at the start of the twentieth century, the Berlin Academy was a pioneer. See especially this well-illustrated essay (unfortunately available only in German), posted by its Turfan Research Department, from which I used that image of the Manichaean scribes dressed in their white robes:

http://turfan.bbaw.de/bilder/Turfan_deutsch_07-Druck.pdf#page=17&zoom=180,-65,646
Accessed 12/14/2020.



THOMAS M. PRYMAK, PhD, is a Research Associate at the Chair of Ukrainian Studies in the Departments of History and Political Science in the University of Toronto. He is the author of a number of books and articles on political and cultural history, and is the author of many printed and on-line titles, including several scholarly monographs, numerous research articles, and many lesser works of popularization. These include essays and articles on political and cultural history, language and etymology, ethnic studies, folklore, and art history.

Finis