Варлаам и Йоасаф: Пътят на Буда през християнския наратив?

Barlaam and Josaphat: The Journey of the Buddha through the Christian Narrative?

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Resume:
The paper explores the medieval Christian hagiography of Barlaam and Josaphat, arguing that it is a transformed adaptation of the Buddha's life story. It traces the narrative's evolution from Buddhist origins through Manichaean and Arabic versions to Georgian and Greek Christian retellings, highlighting deliberate scholarly efforts to embed Buddhist motifs within Christian theology. Central to the analysis is the recognition of how religious narratives migrate and adapt across cultural and geographic boundaries, facilitated by historical trade routes like the Silk Road and intellectual exchanges in multicultural centers such as Baghdad. The paper details the linguistic and thematic transformations, including the renaming of characters (e.g., Bodhisattva to Josaphat) and the incorporation of Christian theological elements by translators such as St. Euthymius of Athos. This process reflects a broader pattern of religious syncretism and cultural negotiation, where sacred stories are reshaped to resonate with new audiences and doctrinal frameworks. By examining the historical context of religious transmission, translation practices, and institutional support for such adaptations, the study demonstrates that the Barlaam and Josaphat narrative is not a mere accidental fusion but a purposeful reworking. Ultimately, the paper highlights the fluidity and dynamism of religious traditions, emphasizing how the shared human quest for spiritual understanding transcends distinct faiths and epochs through the continuous reinvention of sacred stories.

Резюме:
Статията изследва средновековната християнска агиография за Варлаам и Йоасаф, като аргументира, че тя представлява трансформирана адаптация на житието на Буда. Проследява еволюцията на този наратив от будистките му корени през манихейски и арабски версии до грузински и гръцки християнски преразкази, като подчертава целенасочените научни усилия за вграждане на будистки мотиви в християнската теология. В центъра на анализа е разпознаването на начина, по който религиозните наративи мигрират и се адаптират през културни и географски граници, улеснени от исторически търговски пътища като Пътя на коприната и интелектуални взаимодействия в мултикултурни центрове като Багдад. Статията представя подробно езиковите и тематичните трансформации, включително преименуването на персонажи (напр. Бодисатва на Йоасаф) и интегрирането на християнски богословски

елементи от преводачи като св. Евтимий Атонски. Този процес отразява по-широка закономерност на религиозен синкретизъм и културно договаряне, при която свещени истории се преформулират, за да отговорят на нови публики и доктринални рамки. Чрез изследване на историческия контекст на религиозното предаване, преводаческите практики и институционалната подкрепа за такива адаптации, изследването показва, че наративът за Варлаам и Йоасаф не е просто случайно сливане, а умишлено преработване. В крайна сметка статията откроява пластичността и динамиката на религиозните традиции, като подчертава как общият човешки стремеж към духовно разбиране надхвърля отделните вери и епохи чрез непрекъснатото преосмисляне на свещените разкази.

1. Introduction

"What if I told you that a Christian saint might actually be a reimagined version of the Buddha?" This provocative suggestion lies at the core of the medieval story of Barlaam and Josaphat, a Christian hagiography that provides a striking example of how religious narratives migrate, transform, and sometimes lose their original identities when they cross cultural and temporal boundaries. Far from being a mere legend, this tale exemplifies the complex processes of religious adaptation and cultural exchange that shaped medieval spirituality and storytelling in the Middle Ages.

This paper undertakes a comprehensive analysis of the story of Barlaam and Josaphat, tracing its narrative structure and thematic parallels with the life of Siddhartha Gautama, the Buddha. By examining how this Christianized adaptation reshaped Buddhist motifs to fit the medieval Christian worldview, this paper tries to reveal the mechanisms through which religious ideas traveled across geographic and cultural boundaries during the medieval period. It explores the historical and cultural contexts that facilitated such cross-religious exchanges, highlighting the fluidity of sacred narratives and their capacity to be reinterpreted to resonate with new audiences and within new theological frameworks.

This study aims to illuminate broader patterns of cultural interaction and syncretism, demonstrating how religious storytelling serves as a dynamic medium for negotiating identity, belief, and meaning across traditions. The analysis of Barlaam and Josaphat not only enriches our understanding of medieval religious history but also offers insight into the enduring human quest for spiritual truth that transcends individual faith and epochs.

2. Historical context of cultural exchange

Religious traditions rarely develop in isolation from one another. Throughout history, religions have borrowed, reinterpreted, and sometimes misinterpreted each other's ideas from one another. The earliest encounters between Buddhism and Christianity can be traced as far back as the 1st century CE, facilitated by trade routes such as the Silk Road. Buddhist ideas traveled westward, while Christian ideas, especially through missionary movements, traveled eastward. It is within this historical context that narrative transformations such as that of

Barlaam and Josaphat may have occurred. According to Friedrich Heiler in his work “Buddhism and Christianity” (1928), “the boundary between East and West has not always been as sharply defined as we often imagine. Religious ideas pass across these boundaries with remarkable fluidity, leading to hybridized forms of faith” (Heiler, 1928). One significant interaction took place between the 8th and 10th centuries during the Abbasid Caliphate, especially in places like Baghdad, where Muslim, Christian, and Buddhist scholars gathered to translate sacred texts into Arabic. During this period, many Buddhist writings were translated into Arabic, which may have influenced later Christian retellings. Thomas E. Burman, in “Reading the Qur’an in Latin Christendom” (2007), emphasizes how scholars in this period engaged with foreign texts not only to understand them, but also to adapt them to their own traditions, stating: “When confronted with foreign religious texts, medieval scholars were as interested in finding points of connection as in refuting them” (Burman, 2007). This suggests a climate in which ideas could be reshaped to fit a new contex

2.1 The Silk Road as a Network of Religious Transmission

The process of borrowing and interpretation/reinterpretation accelerated dramatically along the Silk Road in pre-modern times. Foltz emphasizes that the Silk Road "existed first and foremost to facilitate trade, at the same time provided a means of cultural exchange that connected peoples over much of the world, conveying not just goods but fashions, traditions, and ideas" (Foltz 2010: 5-6). This network represents an accelerated form of patterns going back more than 3,000 years and constitutes what modern scholars might call pre-modern globalization. However, as Moffett notes, "though the road was open in those critical early years of the Christian church, it was Buddhist missionaries from India who used it, not Christians from Jerusalem or Antioch or Edessa, and the missionary faith that flowed along it, putting down deep roots in eastern Asia, was not Christianity but Buddhism" (Moffett 1998: 14-15). This early Buddhist advantage in eastward expansion had significant consequences for how religions subsequently adapted and transformed across Asia.

It is not a coincidence that religious ideas traveled along commercial networks. Foltz observes that "traveling businessmen do not simply convey, sell, and acquire goods and move on. They socialize, interact, and observe while on the road, and they take their impressions home with them" (Foltz 2010: 7-8). Nevertheless, merchants were not the only facilitators of religious exchange. Foltz notes that "with the appearance of proselytizing religions came missionaries. First Buddhists, then Christians and Manicheans, and finally Sufi Muslims latched onto caravans that would take them and their 'spiritual goods' into new lands" (Foltz 2010: 8-9). This created an interconnected system where "as new religious traditions carried by the Silk Road disseminated eastwards and took root along the way, travelers were increasingly able to find coreligionists in even the most far-flung and out-of-the-way places who could provide them with assistance and fellowship"(Foltz 2010: 8-9).

2.2 The Organic and Transformative Nature of Religious Traditions

Religious traditions are dynamic and constantly evolving rather than being fixed or isolated entities. Foltz (2010) explains that religions develop like living organisms: they originate at specific points in time, grow, experience various influences, and adapt to their

environments. This perspective is particularly useful for understanding how stories such as the Buddha's were transformed into Christian narratives like the tale of Barlaam and Josaphat. He further highlights that the Silk Road functioned as more than a mere route for the spread of religions; it acted as a significant and transformative journey during which no religion remained the same. This concept is essential for understanding how the Buddha's life story could be adapted into a Christian hagiography, as the journey itself required transformation.

The role of translation in religious transmission also cannot be overstated. When Buddhism spread to China, "from its earliest penetration into Chinese culture, Buddhism had begun to blend with and adapt itself to local religion"(Foltz 2010: 48-49). A clear example concerns language policy: the practice of translating Buddhist texts into local vernacular languages was influenced by the Chinese language. Before the sixth century, when Buddhist texts began to be translated into Central Asian languages, Central Asians primarily read these texts in Indian languages. This shift to vernacular translations significantly affected the spread and adaptation of the religion.

In the context of medieval Christian scholarship, similar translation strategies enabled religious re-interpretation. Burman (2007) demonstrates that when Latin Christians engaged with foreign religious texts, they did so not only to understand them but also to adapt them to their own traditions. This approach created a climate in which ideas could be systematically reshaped to fit new theological contexts. The medieval period witnessed remarkable instances of religious blending in India. Eastern Central Asia became "a melting pot of religious traditions because it served as a remote refuge for heterodox beliefs, and that well into the Mongol period it was one of the most religiously diverse places on the globe" (Foltz 2010: 7-8). In such contexts, "religions are like organisms" that "quibble with their neighbors, experience periods of painful soul searching" and at various points "may split like cells, each taking on a new life"In such contexts, "religions are like organisms" that "quibble with their neighbors, experience periods of painful soul searching" and at various points "may split like cells, each taking on a new life" (Foltz 2010: 8-9).

3. The Story of Barlaam and Joasaph

The story of Barlaam and Josaphat originated in Buddhist narrative traditions that circulated among Manichaean communities in Central Asia from the third century onward, eventually appearing in Arabic versions in 8th-century Baghdad, likely between 767 and 815 CE, as the Kitāb Balauhar wa Būdhāsaf (Book of Balauhar and Budhasaf). The story passed through a Georgian Christian adaptation created sometime between 800 and 900 CE, where it acquired its Christian framework while maintaining proper names close to the Arabic versions and incorporating a selection of parables that would later characterize the Greek version of the tale. The Greek version, which became the definitive Western Christian form, was created around the 11th century at Mount Athos, not by St. John of Damascus as a harmful fiction claimed from the thirteenth century onward, but rather by or under Euthymius the Georgian, an attribution that scholars like P. Peeters contested in 1931 and which R. Volk definitively established in 2009. The Buddhist origins of the narrative remained unknown to Western

scholars until 1859, when Édouard Laboulaye drew attention to the parallels between Josaphat and Buddha, amplified by Felix Liebrecht in 1860, nearly two and a half centuries after the Portuguese writer Diogo do Couto had made the same observation around 1612. Yet the Barlaam romance was not a close translation of any known Buddhist text; rather, it wove the ideals of renunciation and the ascetic way of life around certain key features of the Buddha's traditional life while incorporating diverse fables and parables from Indian and Oriental sources accumulated during the work's transmission. (Lang 1957)

Throughout its transmission across languages and cultures, the hero's name underwent a remarkable transformation. The Sanskrit "Bodhisattva"—which designates a person who has set out on the path to enlightenment and also historically refers to Gautama Buddha in his previous lives, as well as in his final life as a young man before his "awakening"—became the Uighur "Bodhasaf," later the Arabic "Yudasaf," the Georgian "Yodasaf," the Greek "Iosaf," and finally the Latin "Iosaphat," while in Bulgaria it is adopted as "Joasaf." This transformation occurred partly through intentional adaptation and partly through linguistic accident; the confusion of diacritical markings in Arabic turned Budhasaf (Bodhisattva) into Yudasaf as the text passed from one tradition to another. Meanwhile, Balahvar became Barlaam, likely after the martyr Saint Barlaam of Antioch, Iodasaph became Iosaphat (meaning "The Lord gathers"), and Rakhis became Araches, each name evolving to suit the phonetic and cultural expectations of its new linguistic and religious home. From 'Iosaphat' in Greek to 'Josapha' in Latin is but a painless transition; thus, the Bodhisattva enters Western Europe as a saint of the Christian Church, venerated for centuries as a Christian saint in an incarnation that Gautama Buddha himself could never have anticipated (Lang 1957).

In brief, in this story, Josaphat, a young Indian prince, is kept secluded by his father, similar to Siddhartha Gautama. His father tries to shield him from the suffering of the world to ensure that he remains attached to the worldly pleasures. However, Josaphat ultimately meets the hermit Barlaam, who teaches him the Christian faith. Josaphat renounces his kingdom and dedicates himself to a life of spiritual asceticism. This narrative reflects the life of the Buddha, who similarly renounced his royal status after encountering the realities of old age, sickness, and death. Scholars such as David Marshall Lang in The Wisdom of Balahvar (1957) have traced this connection back to Buddhist sources: “The tale of Barlaam and Josaphat… undoubtedly derives from the legend of the Buddha, which through the Muslim world found its way into the Christian tradition” (Lang, 1957). Further research supports this connection, pointing to specific narrative elements that are consistent with Buddhist teachings. The main elements of both stories—the secluded prince, the encounter with suffering, and the renunciation of worldly life—are unmistakable parallels, suggesting something more than mere coincidence.

4. Erroneous cultural interpretation or deliberate adaptation?

While the transformation of Barlaam and Josaphat from a Buddhist narrative into Christian hagiography might appear to be the result of accidental translation, scribal confusion, and cultural misunderstanding, the historical evidence demonstrates that it was instead a deliberate and scholarly adaptation carried out by identified figures working within established institutional structures.

The systematic renaming of characters reveals a conscious theological intention rather than a mere error. The hermit's name Balahvar was intentionally changed to Barlaam, apparently inspired by St. Barlaam of Antioch, who was martyred under Diocletian and later commended by St. John Chrysostom . The prince's name Iodasaph underwent a similar deliberate transformation into Ioasaph, a name scholars have interpreted as signifying "The Lord gathers." The king's designation, Abenes, became Abenner, presumably derived from the Old Testament figure Abner, Saul's military commander (Lang, 1957). These systematic name changes were not random scribal corruptions but rather calculated choices designed to embed the Buddhist narrative within Christian hagiographic traditions and biblical authority.

The amplification of Christian theological content significantly exceeds what one would expect from a careless textual transmission. The Greek version presents Barlaam's theological exposition with considerably greater sophistication than the straightforward sermons found in the Georgian prototype. The Greek adapter demonstrated substantial knowledge of Scripture and the Church Fathers, incorporating references to figures such as Basil, Gregory of Nazianzus, Athanasius of Alexandria, Cyril of Jerusalem, John Chrysostom, John Climacus, Maximus Confessor, Nemesius of Emesa, and John Damascene (Lang, 1957). Such extensive patristic learning could only emerge from an educated monastic scholar deeply immersed in Christian intellectual traditions, making accidental transmission implausible.

The most compelling evidence of deliberate editorial work appears in the treatment of the magician Nachor's episode. The Georgian versions merely mention that Nachor's oration was eloquent, without providing the text itself. In contrast, the Greek adapter substantially expanded this reference by incorporating the Apology of Aristides as Nachor's actual speech, thereby converting a bare assertion into concrete apologetic material. This insertion strengthened the episode's theological impact and demonstrated Nachor's effectiveness against idol worshippers with concrete evidence (Lang, 1957).

The work was not performed anonymously but rather can be attributed to a documented historical personality. Multiple independent sources in three different languages attest to the Greek version's Athonite origin and consistently name the same translator. This person was St. Euthymius of Athos, flourishing approximately 955–1028, was a well-known figure whose biography survives in both Georgian and Greek. Euthymius was fluent in both Georgian and Greek and served in an official capacity at the Great Lavra Monastery of St. Athanasius on Mount Athos. His scholarly reputation extended to translating over 160 biblical and patristic texts from Greek to Georgian, demonstrating both intellectual authority and institutional standing (Lang, 1957).

The chronological distribution of manuscripts supports purposeful transmission, rather than gradual error accumulation. The earliest extant Greek versions date to 1057 and 1064, periods that correspond precisely with Euthymius's era and that of his successor George the Hagiorite (1009–1065). George the Hagiorite himself authored a liturgical hymn honoring Iodasaph, notably drawing upon Georgian hagiographical sources rather than Greek ones, thereby confirming deliberate scholarly engagement with Georgian materials . This coherent transmission chain across identified individuals demonstrates intentional scholarly continuity rather than the chaotic dispersal expected from accidental textual evolution.

Evidence of organized translation networks operating across political boundaries further supports this institutional coordination. Georgian monks maintained communication with colleagues in both Byzantine and Arab territories, while pilgrim contacts sustained connections to the Caucasian homeland. The Georgians occupied a strategic position between Gaza's Byzantine orientation and its close ties with the Arab Caliphate, positioning them as ideal intermediaries for deliberate theological and cultural transmission. The Georgian adaptation itself represents a careful rewriting of the Arabic Balauhar and Budhasaf narrative to emphasize specifically Christian doctrines. Georgian translators worked according to established conventions and possessed formal training, regularly translating directly from Arabic materials, indicating systematic professional standards rather than haphazard copying

5. Speculations and concluding thoughts

Although definitive proof that the story of Barlaam and Josaphat directly retells the life of the Buddha remains elusive, these striking parallels cannot be overlooked. The transmission of ideas along the Silk Road, coupled with medieval tendencies toward religious syncretism, strongly supports the notion that this narrative represents a transformed adaptation of Buddhist teachings.

This tale exemplifies the fluidity of religious narratives, demonstrating how they evolve and acquire new meanings as they traverse cultural and geographical boundaries. Whether through conscious adaptation or inadvertent blending, it highlights the ongoing process by which religious traditions reshape themselves to resonate within diverse cultural contexts.

So, was Saint Josaphat actually the disguised Buddha? Perhaps. Yet, what is even more compelling is the extraordinary journey these ideas have undertaken, transcending not only temporal and spatial boundaries but also religious and cultural divides. This narrative’s transformation illustrates the remarkable capacity of stories to be reinterpreted and reshaped, reflecting the values, beliefs, and needs of diverse communities over centuries. This highlights the dynamic nature of religious traditions as living, evolving entities that continuously negotiate identity and meaning in new contexts. The ongoing reinvention of this tale underscores the profound interconnectedness of human cultures and the shared quest for spiritual understanding that transcends distinct religious frameworks.

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