Narratives on World Tours and Detours. The Buddha Disguised and the Parable of the Man in the Well

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The Buddha Disguised

The Christian Josaphat

In 1583 two legendary Christians were accepted in the *Roman Martyrology* and they were given their feast days in the Roman-Catholic as well as in the Christian-Orthodox calendars. The two saints are Barlaam and Josaphat.

Their legend tells the life of the Indian prince Josaphat. He was the son of a pagan king who abhorred the Christian faith and persecuted Christians in his realm. When Josaphat was born it was foretold that he would become a Christian. The father tried to prevent and counteract this prophesy by enclosing his son in a magnificent palace and warding off all bitter aspects of life. However, at some point Josaphat began questioning this overprotected life and succeeded in being permitted to cast a glance outside the palace. Although the father had kept the environment around the palace like an idyllic, entirely joyful world, Josaphat encountered a leper, a blind man and a white-haired, toothless man bent by old age. In this way he learned about disease and impending death. While Josaphat reflected on these experiences and pondered the impermanence of life, a Christian ascetic Barlaam visited him, disguised as a jewel merchant. Barlaam told him parables about the human situation and taught him the Christian doctrine of salvation. He then converted Josaphat, much to the grief of his father. Moreover, Josaphat decided to lead the life of an ascetic. The father tried even harder to win back his son by involving him in doctrinal discussions and also over-pouring the prince with worldly temptations. Josaphat was however adamant and he then led a virtuous and chaste life, ending up as a hermit in the desert.

This is the bare outline of the hagiographical novel *Barlaam and Ioasaph*, written in Greek in the 10th century by Euthymios of Mount Athos. It became a most cherished story in the European Middle Ages, translated into more than twenty languages and retold in many versions in verse as well as prose. It was dramatised by the Jesuits[1] and visually depicted in book paintings and frescoes. This edifying story gave an answer to the question about the meaning of life by offering the ideal of asceticism; it pointed out the victory of the Christian faith and it was used as a conversion story by the Christian missionaries, for example in Japan in the 16th century.

Josaphat or Buddha?

Although there were a few rather tentative observations by some editors and translators of the Christian versions that associated Josaphat with the Buddha, the legend was celebrated as a medieval European hagiography of the two eminent Christian saints. One example of this kind of reception is Diogo de Couto's reading of Marco Polo's account of Buddha Śākyamuni in Ceylon: Marco Polo related it in his travel reminiscences (*Il Milione* 1298/99)[2] and talked about prince Sergamoni Borchan, who was brought up by his father, the king, in a well protected happy environment, unburdened by the realities of death and old age. Yet, after he encountered a dead person and a man stricken with old age he became an ascetic. Marco Polo added that, if Sergamoni Borchan would have been a Christian he would have been a great Christian saint. This account was glossed in the late 16th century by the Portuguese Dominican friar and historian Diogo do Couto who noticed the great similarity in the biographies of the Buddha and Josaphat. As a man

from the occident and a pious Christian, he concluded that the Buddha was modelled by the heathens after saint Josaphat.[3] This observation, however, was a rather unnoticed gloss and only around 1859 was it recognized that Prince Siddhārta's protected upbringing and his four decisive encounters with old age, sickness, death and a renouncer are the nucleus for Josaphat's story. The discovery was prepared by Stanislas Julien's translations of the *Avadānas* from the Chinese[4] and Barthélemy Saint-Hilaire's book about *Buddha and his religion*.[5] The scholars Édouard Laboulaye (1859) and Felix Liebrecht (1860) independently noted the Indian origin of the Barlaam and Josaphat legend.[6] This discovery was the beginning of a wide and prolific research into the sources and the history of the transmission of the story.[7]

The Ways of the Story Through Cultures, Religions and Languages

Before the Buddha legend travelled to the occident and was clad in a Christian garb it went through Manichean (probably Middle-Persian and then Old Turkish) and Ismā'īlī-Islamic (Arabic) versions. The *Kitāb Bilawhar wa Bûḏâsf* was the source material for the oldest Christian version in the Georgian language, that is the *Balavariani*. With it the legend entered the Christian realm. The Hebrew verse-novel *Sefer Ben ha-Melech we-ha-Nasir* of the 13th century is based on an Islamic-Arabic version.

The Greek novel written by Euthymios mentioned above is based on the *Balavariani* and serves as a model for an Christian-Arabic translation, followed by an Ethiopian one (*Baralam wa-Yewasaf*). Translations into Latin led to further versions in many European languages. In the second millennium Christian missionaries translated the story into Chinese. The prominent Jesuit Matteo Ricci who died in 1610 refers to a Chinese translation of Barlaam and Josaphat in his *Opere storiche* and in 1645 the Ioasaph legend was published with wood-cuts under the title *Shêng Jo-sa-fa shi-mo*, translated by the Jesuit Nicolo Longobardi.[8] In the late 16th century a shorter version of the Barlaam and Josaphat story was spread by the missionaries in Japan.[9] The missionary zeal in the Philippines brought forth a translation in the Philippine language Tagalog which was published by Antonio de Borja in Manila in 1712.[10]

The tours of the Buddha legend are reflected in the various related proper names of the protagonists:
Bodhisattva: Bûḏḏâsf (Arabic); Iodasaph (Georgian); Ioasaph (Greek); Josaphatus (Latin).
Bhagavan: Bilauhar (Arabic); Balavar (Georgian); Barlaam (Greek, Latin etc.).

What a successful tale!

The adventures of the Buddha legend on its way from India to Europe and to East Asia, the 'trade' of the plot disregarding any copyright, the use that it was made of by different religions for illustrating their tenets and spreading their messages, the fact that one plot served several masters, the late discovery of the Buddhist model for the Islamic protagonists and the Christian saints and the copious research and reflections of these features in the 20th and 21th centuries, all these moments of this story single it out as a treasure of humanity. Admittedly, different aspects of the story were emphasized in the different cultural and religious realms and the different faiths altered the *personae* and their actions to suit their own system and their didactic intentions. Prince Siddhārta appears as a man who renounced worldly life after having experienced it and, stirred by the sight of old age, disease, death and asceticism, he set out in search of the right path on his own. In the Islamic as well as in the Christian narrations however, the protagonists have seminal ascetic teachers and especially the Christian Josaphat is characterized by absolute chastity and faith in the Trinity. But across cultures and religions it is the the story of renunciation and enlightenment of a prince. The royal status with its power and wealth are important contrasting features to the act of renouncing precisely all that — the renunciation of a pauper would not be as impressive and exemplary. The story illustrates the essential human reflection on the right path in view of the transience of mundane happiness, the impermanence of all things and of suffering.

The Parable of the Man in the Well

It was said above that Barlaam taught Josaphat aspects of the human condition and the path to salvation through parables/apologues. One of these apologues which is found in almost all the versions of the story is the parable of the man in the well.[11] It is another example of a globetrotter story. It can be traced back to India where its oldest testimony are Buddhist reliefs from Amaravati and Nagarjunakonda from the second or third century.[12] We know the Buddhist versions only through their Chinese translations. A version of the story is told in the *Mahābhārata*[13] and we find it in several Jaina sources: Haribhadra's *Samarāiccakahā* 8th cent.; Amitagati's *Dharma Parīkṣā*[14]; and Hemacandra's *Pariśiṣṭaparvan* 13th cent. One of the most consistent renderings is the Jaina version from the *Vasudevahiṇḍi* by Saṅghadāsa probably from the 6th cent., called the "The exemplum of the honey drop as a simile for the pleasures of the senses":

> A man was travelling with a caravan through a wilderness. Robbers smashed the caravan and when the man was separated from it he erred around without orientation. A wild elephant in rut attacked him and, fleeing, the man beheld an old overgrown well. There was a huge fig tree at its edge and the terrified man grasped one of its branches which hung into the well. Holding on to the branch, he was suspended in the well and looked around him. Alas, he saw at the bottom of the well a huge boa with a wide opened mouth, threatening to devour him. On his sides were four venomous snakes wanting to bite him. Above him two mice, a black and a white one, gnawed at the branch. The elephant touched his hair with his trunk.
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> However, on the tree there was a large bee-colony. When the tree was shaken by the elephant the wind sprayed a few honey-drops into the mouth of the man; and these he relished. The bees then flew all around and wanted to sting him.
>
> Say [asks the narrator], what do you think was the happiness of this man in this situation?
>
> The honey-drops [says the listener], which he desired, these were his happiness, I think, everything else was unhappiness.
>
> So it is [says the narrator].
>
> And now the meaning of the parable:
>
> Like the man, so is the soul in the cycle of rebirths, *saṃsāra*; like the wilderness, so is the wilderness of *saṃsāra*, beset with birth, old age, disease and death; like the wild elephant, so is death; like the well, so is a rebirth as god or human being; like the boa, so is a rebirth in hell or in the realm of animals; like the other snakes, so are anger, pride, deceit and greed, the four bad passions leading to rebirth; like the branch, so the duration of life; like the two mice, so the bright and the dark halves of the month, which with the gnawing of days and nights shorten life; like the tree, so the reasons for the binding of karma, namely ignorance, attachment to sensual pleasures and wrong belief; like honey, so the sense objects: sound, object of touch, taste, form and smell; like the bees, so the diseases which attack the body and spread in it.
>
> From where does someone who finds himself in such fear and misery get his happiness? — The idea of happiness arises only from the sweetness of the taste of the honey-drop.
>
> If an accomplished, mighty, supernatural being would tell him: "Come, my dear, take my hand, so that I can pull you out", would he want that? — Why should he not like to be freed from his cage of misery? — It might well be, that he for the sake of the honey says in his folly: "Let me first be satiated by the honey and then you may pull me out."
>
> But where would there be satiation for him? If the supporting branch is severed he will fall into the mouth of the boa.1414

The parable left India via Persia. The motif was widely known in the Islamic world and used in literature through

many centuries. It was included by Borzōē in the 6th century in his introduction to his translation of the Pañcatantra, which is no longer extant but of which there is an Arabic translation Kalīla wa Dimna by Ibn al-Muqaffa. And, in another line of transmission, the parable was carried from the Islamic Orient to the Christian Occident as one of the apologues of *Kitāb Bilawhar wa Bûḍâsf*,[15] via the *Balavariani* to the Barlaam and Josaphat novel. It was widely known and told in the Middle-Ages and remained a piece of world literature even in modern times. Leo Tolstoy retold it in his *Confession*. He first referred to it as "an old eastern fable" and then praised it as "... not a fable, but a veritable, indisputable, comprehensible truth."[16]

The parable about the sweetness of the world was told already in its homeland India with slight variations and on its travels experienced some alterations through the influence of the different traditions. In some versions the elephant is replaced by a unicorn, in others by a camel or also by a lion. The man does not always seek shelter in a well but falls into a pit or stands on a tree. The snakes, which in the Jaina versions represent the four passions, are interpreted as the four elements or also the four humours of the body. The man does not always relish honey everywhere, but in some versions *manna* or sweet berries. Zen versions of the parable talk about a tiger and the man hanging from a cliff relishing strawberries. These features are found in the 18th story in *Shaseki shū* [17] and in many modern collections of Zen stories. However the literary evidences of the parable, their history in China and Japan and the question of the continuity of its tradition in East Asia are of special interest for comparative research.[18]

The views of different philosophies, religions and cultures on the *conditio humana* pointing out the imponderables of life and the impermanence of worldly matters do indeed lead to differing and even competing theories, doctrines and attitudes. Yet, the story of the transmission of the above stories across centuries and continents reveals a kind of universal appeal and efficacy of certain motifs, like e.g. the renunciant prince or the man attached to life, forgetting his precarious existential situation by relishing some drops of honey.

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1 Apart from the Jesuit-dramas staged in Europe there is evidence of a performance of a Josaphat drama in Tamil in Tanjore in 1653. Cf. Volk 2009, p. 154

2 Benedetto 1928 Cap. CLXXIX, 8–45.

3 Quoted in Yule 1903, p. 325.

4 Julien 1859.

5 Saint-Hilaire 1860

6 Laboulaye 1859, pp 2–3 mentioned it in a review of Julien's translations of the Avadānas. See also Liebrecht 1860, pp. 314–334.

7 The literature on this theme is vast and suffice it here to mention only three recent publications, which also contain elaborate bibliographies: Cordoni 2014; Lopez and McCracken 2014; Volk 2009.

8 Cf. Volk 2009, p.153.

9 "Tattoqi Confessores S. Barlan to, S. Iosaphat no Gosagueo" in: *Sanctos no Gosagueono Uchinvqigaqi*, vol. 1 (Kazusa 1591), pp. 239–274. In this volume the Barlaam story is the 16th of 17 hagiographies. Cf. Volk 2009, p. 153 and Ikegami 1999, pp. 31–65.

10 cf. Ikegami 1999, p. 31.

11 This parable was one of the clues for E. Laboulaye to ascertain the Indian/Buddhist model for the Barlaam and Josaphat novels since he found it in a French translation of the Avadānas in Chinese. Cf. fn. 6 above.

12 See the exhaustive article by Zin 2011.

13 Mahābhārata 11.5–6, pp.19–24 BORI, Poona 1956.

14 Based on the German translation from Saṅghadāsa's *Vasudevahiṇḍi* by Mette 2010, pp. 68–69.

15 Volk 2009, p. 109 observed that the *Kitāb Bilawhar wa-Būḏāsf*, the source for the Christian Barlaam and Josaphat, was probably compiled by Ibn al-Muqaffa.

16 Wiener 1904, p. 22.

17 Mujū Ichien, Shaseki shū. Transcribed by Nyogen Senzaki and Paul Reps, *101 Zen Stories*. Philadelphia 1940.

18 cf. ZIN, Monika op.cit. Pp 74-79 g cites a few pictorial representations from China (e.g. a relief in Kaiyuan temple in Quanzhou) and Japan (e.g. a scroll from the Kamakura period).