



BARLAAM AND IOSAPH

BARLAAM AND IOSAPH, Persian *Belawhar o Būdāsaf*, a Greek Christian or Christianized novel of Buddhist origins which throughout the Middle Ages and until quite recently was almost universally attributed to St. John of Damascus (ca. 675-ca. 749), e.g., in the *Martyrologium* of Pope Sixtus the Fifth (1585-90), s.d. 27 November. All the manuscripts are later than 1500. Being extremely popular it received various accretions (e.g., the lost Greek *Apology of Aristides*, see Eusebius of Caesarea, *Historia ecclesiastica* 4.3) and was often translated: into Arabic (in the 13th century) whence into Ethiopic (in the 16th century), Armenian, Latin, and from Latin into the main European languages. The book won great favor in Germany through Rudolf von Ems' epic version of it (ca. 1230) and in Scandinavia in the same century through the Old Norse translation ordered by King Haakon Haakonsøn. It was used in the *Legenda aurea* by the Dominican Jacobus de Voragine (late 13th cent.) and in the *Gesta Romanorum* and thereby gained widespread popularity in Europe. Finally, William Shakespeare borrowed from it the *Tale of the Caskets* for his *Merchant of Venice*.

The Greek version relates the story of an Indian king who learns from his astrologers that his son Iosaph will be converted to Christianity and in order to prevent him from seeing the distress and misery of human life locks him up in a palace. The plan fails, however, and the prince both sees sick, blind, and old people and witnesses death and so begins to ponder the vanity of life. When God sends him the pious hermit Barlaam, the prince is converted to Christianity. In vain his father tries to win him back, but the prince renounces



the throne, converts his father and his people, and retires as a hermit. After his death he works many miracles.

The novel is a syncretic compilation of Buddha stories ultimately derived from such works as Aśvaghoṣa's *Buddhacarita* (Career of the Buddha; 1st-2nd cents.), the *Lalitavistara* (an early Mahāyāna text), the *Mahāvastu* (from the canon of the Mahāsaṅgikas), and the Pali *Jātaka* tales (see Lang, in *EI*² I, p.1216).

The name Iosaph is a corrupt arabicized form of *bodhisattva*, in which the initial *b* was misread as *y*. The form is similar to and probably derives from the Manichean form Bwdysdf. The fact that fragments of the tale have been preserved in Manichean texts in Uigur, Parthian, and Persian in Manichean script from Turfan proves that it was the Manicheans who transmitted this Indian tale to the West (Henning, p. 92; Lang, "The Life," pp. 389-90; Asmussen, pp. 16-17). From Manichean Middle Persian the story was then translated into Arabic. In this connection we may note that Ebn al-Nadīm (*Fehrest*, p. 305.20-21), describing 'Abbasid Baghdad as a cosmopolitan center and the main town of the western Manichean church, connects the translator Ebn al-Moqaffa' and his circle with the *Ketāb Belawhar wa Būdāsaf*. (Ebn al-Moqaffa's interest in Manicheism is referred to by Birūnī, Mas'ūdī, and the *Tārīk-e gozīda*; see Asmussen, pp. 14-15; Lang in *EI*², p. 1216.) This translation is now lost but it gave rise to several other Arabic versions, some abridged, and served as the basis for a free rendering into Hebrew by Ebn Chisdai (*Book of the King's Son and the Ascetic*, ca. 1200), which was translated into Judeo-Persian by Elisha ben Samuel (*Šāhzāda wa šūft*), and was itself translated into Georgian in the ninth century. From this Georgian translation (*Life of the Blessed Iodasap*) a second Georgian translation was made (*The Wisdom of Balahvar*) and also a Greek translation by St. Euthymius the Georgian, an Athonite monk, who added the *Apology of Aristides* (Lang, "The Life," pp. 405f.; *The Wisdom*, pp.62f.). It was this Greek version that became, the mother text of all later Christian versions (see above).



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