

# **THE BALAVARIANI**

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Barlaam and Josaphat: A Tale from the  
Christian East

David Marshall Lang

DAVID MARSHALL LANG'S JOURNEY  
FROM RUSSIA TO ARMENIA VIA  
CAUCASIAN GEORGIA



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Volume 2

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Christian East

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DAVID MARSHALL LANG

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# THE BALAVARIANI

(BARLAAM AND JOSAPHAT)

A TALE FROM THE CHRISTIAN EAST  
TRANSLATED FROM THE OLD GEORGIAN

BY

DAVID MARSHALL LANG

*Professor of Caucasian Studies  
University of London*

INTRODUCTION BY

ILIA V. ABULADZE

*Director, Institute of Manuscripts  
Georgian Academy of Sciences, Tbilisi*

*London*

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# BARLAAM AND JOSAPHAT

Was Barlaam truly Josaphat,  
And Buddha truly each?  
What better parable than that  
The unity to preach—

The simple brotherhood of souls  
That seek the highest good;  
He who in kingly chariot rolls,  
Or wears the hermit's hood!

The Church mistook? These heathen once  
Among her Saints to range!  
That deed of some diviner dunce  
Our wisdom would not change.

For Culture's Pantheon they grace  
In catholic array.  
Each Saint hath had his hour and place,  
But now 'tis All Saints' Day.

October 27, 1895

ISRAEL ZANGWILL  
(1864-1926)



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## PREFACE

In the literary world of mediaeval Christendom, few worthies were more celebrated than the Indian hermit Barlaam and his royal pupil Prince Josaphat, who were supposed between them to have converted India to Christianity at some vaguely defined period of historical antiquity. The Churches celebrated their festival days with appropriate solemnity, and their relics were invested with exceptional healing power. In 1571, for instance, the Doge of Venice presented King Sebastian of Portugal with what purported to be a bone and part of the spine of St Josaphat, which later found their way to the cloister of St Salvator in Antwerp. Shakespeare adapted one of the holy Barlaam's fables for the episode of the Three Caskets in *The Merchant of Venice*, while Jesuit priests made the story the subject of edifying morality plays.

The practical influence of the story of Barlaam and Josaphat is inestimable, extending over many centuries and many countries. Its advocacy of the ascetic way of life and renunciation of the world inspired the mediaeval Albigensian heretics, to such an extent that the work has sometimes been taken to be a Cathar document. Equally striking is the story's impact on the great Leo Tolstoy, as recounted in his own *Confession*. Among the influences which determined Tolstoy to turn his back on wealth, fame and even his own family, that of the Buddha's Great Renunciation was among the most compelling. Not only does Tolstoy relate in his *Confession* some of the episodes of the Bodhisattva Prince's Renunciation, including the Four Omens, but he even quotes verbatim from the book of Barlaam and Josaphat one of the most effective of the fables whereby Barlaam (Balahvar in the Georgian text) seeks to demonstrate the valueless nature of human life on earth.

'There is an Eastern fable, told long ago, of a traveller overtaken on a plain by an enraged beast. Escaping from the beast he

gets into a dry well, but sees at the bottom of the well a dragon that has opened its jaws to engulf him. And the unfortunate man, not daring to climb out lest he should be destroyed by the enraged beast, and not daring to leap to the bottom of the well lest he should be swallowed by the dragon, seizes a twig growing in a crack in the well and clings to it. His hands are growing weaker and he feels he will soon have to resign himself to the destruction that awaits him above or below, but still he clings on. Then he sees that two mice, one black and the other white, go regularly round and round the stalk to which he is clinging and gnaw at it. And soon the twig itself will snap and he will fall into the dragon's jaws.

“The traveller sees this and knows that he must inevitably perish: but while still hanging he looks around, sees some drops of honey on the leaves of the twig, reaches them with his tongue and licks at them.—So I too clung to the twig of life, knowing that the dragon of death was inexorably awaiting me, ready to tear me to pieces: and I could not understand why I had fallen into such torment. I tried to lick the honey which formerly consoled me, but the honey no longer gave me pleasure, and the white and black mice of day and night gnawed at the branch by which I hung. I saw the dragon clearly and the honey no longer tasted sweet. I only saw the dragon from which there was no escape, and the mice, and I could not tear my gaze from them. And this is not a fable, but the real unanswerable truth, intelligible to all!”

I must here express thanks to my Californian friend Mr Tom Foley, who drew this remarkable passage to my attention: the full text of the fable, taken from the Old Georgian version, appears on pages 77-78 of the present volume.

In spite of striking similarities between the pious career of St Josaphat and the traditional lives of Gautama Buddha, it was not until a century ago that the authenticity of this Christian cult was challenged, and definite proof produced to show that Barlaam and Josaphat were not early Christian saints at all, but legendary figures whose image was based on ancient Indian stories about the Bodhisattva prince and his Great Renunciation. Since that time, a large number of articles and books have been devoted to comparative study and analysis of the many versions of the Barlaam and Josaphat story which survive in virtually all

## PREFACE

countries of Christendom from Iceland to Ethiopia, from Poland to the Philippines. Even today, traces of the legend crop up in unexpected places. For example, the Ahmadi sect in Islam have created a legend that a certain holy man named Yūz Āsaf, whom they identify with Our Lord Jesus Christ, came to Kashmir and died there; in reality, the whole Ahmadi story of 'Yūz Āsaf', as I have tried to show in a previous study, is simply based on an extract from the familiar Arabic version of the Barlaam and Josaphat romance, and has no connection with the life of Jesus Christ at all.<sup>1</sup>

In face of all this evidence of the diffusion of the Buddha's legendary life story and spiritual heritage throughout Christendom by the medium of the Barlaam and Josaphat legend, it is surprising to find writers on comparative religion who continue to devote entire volumes to listing the coincidental resemblances between Buddhism and Christianity, but without making any reference to Barlaam and Josaphat whatever.<sup>2</sup>

We should always bear in mind that the Barlaam and Josaphat romance is not a direct translation of any Indian original, but represents the result of a long migration of the life story and teaching of the Buddha through several different religious and cultural environments, until the work took on its final Christian shape and colouring. A particularly important role in this migration was played by the Manichaeans of Central Asia, and Arabic writers of Baghdad in the epoch of Harun al-Rashid. I have myself attempted to trace these eastern origins of the Barlaam and Josaphat legend in some separate articles, listed in the bibliography at the end of this volume, as well as in the introduction to my earlier book, *The Wisdom of Balahvar: A Christian Legend of the Buddha* (London: George Allen & Unwin; New York: The Macmillan Company, 1957). This work aroused interest in several countries; comments and suggestions were made which have been taken into account in the preparation of this new translation. However, no new evidence has been produced which would alter the main lines of my conclusions

<sup>1</sup> D. M. Lang, *The Wisdom of Balahvar: A Christian Legend of the Buddha*, London, Allen & Unwin, 1957, Postscript, pp. 129-30: 'Mr Graves, Mr Podro and the Kashmir Shrine'.

<sup>2</sup> The latest work of this category is Winston L. King's *Buddhism and Christianity. Some Bridges of Understanding*, London, Allen & Unwin, 1963.

## BARLAAM AND JOSAPHAT

relating to the tale's transmission through Central Asia, the Arab world, and the Caucasus. Indeed, these conclusions have been strongly confirmed by the remarkable discovery by Professor W. B. Henning and Dr Mary Boyce of two ancient manuscript fragments, bearing extracts of a Persian poetic version of the story of Bilauhar and Būdisaf (Barlaam and Josaphat), which bids fair to be the most venerable specimen of Classical Persian poetry known to us. Professor Henning has also drawn attention to the Manichaeic ideas reflected in Bilauhar's teachings about prophets and their role in the revelation of eternal truth, as contained in the Arabic versions and faithfully reflected in the Christian Georgian adaptation.<sup>1</sup> (See particularly chapter 22 of the text, below.)

It is one of the many remarkable features of the Barlaam and Josaphat legend that one of the vital links in its passage from East to West is to be sought in the literary world of mediaeval Georgia, a Christian kingdom in the Caucasus which had served since the fourth century as a bastion of Christendom among the Infidels. The Georgians, who took the story direct from the Arabs, were apparently the first to give it a specifically Christian flavour. Theirs was the first Christian Church to include St Iodasaph—in reality the Bodhisattva prince of India—in the number of its saints and celebrate his festival with hymns and anthems, dating back to the tenth and eleventh centuries. But for the existence of this Georgian version, and the translation work of St Euthymius the Georgian (955-1028) on Mount Athos, the story might never have been rendered into Greek at all, nor reached the readers who enjoyed it in so many of the other tongues of mediaeval Christendom.

The authorities of UNESCO have now included this Georgian version of the legend of Barlaam and Josaphat in their series of translations of classic works from the literatures of non-Russian nations of the Soviet Union. The text used is the new and much more complete version discovered in manuscript form in Jerusalem and edited in 1957 by my colleague Ilia Abuladze, Director of the Institute of Manuscripts of the Academy of Sciences of the Georgian S.S.R., Tbilisi. Professor Abuladze has been engaged

<sup>1</sup> See W. B. Henning, 'Persian poetical manuscripts from the time of Rudaki', in *A Locust's Leg: Studies in honour of S. H. Taqizadeh*, London, 1962, pp. 89-98.

## PREFACE

for many years in the study of the Georgian Barlaam and Josaphat romance and produced a critical edition of the abridged version, known as *The Wisdom of Balahvar*, as long ago as 1937. He was the first among Soviet scholars to evaluate the true significance of the new Jerusalem text, on which he worked for a time independently of myself. A Russian translation of the book, published at Tbilisi in 1962, was edited by him. He has now contributed a prefatory essay for this English translation; this essay I have translated into English with a few slight modifications for the benefit of English-speaking readers. I also have to thank Professor Gérard Garitte of the University of Louvain who checked the work carefully in typescript and pointed out several errors and omissions.

It is a source of deep personal pleasure to me that Ilia Abuladze and I have now been enabled to join forces in presenting to the Western public a work which illustrates to a unique degree the many common features which exist in Buddhism and Christianity, as well as throwing light on the evolution of asceticism and ascetic ideals among the Manichaeans, the Arabs and the Byzantine and Georgian Christians.

While this book was already in the press, news was received from Soviet Georgia of the recovery of yet another manuscript version of the Georgian *Balavariani*, this time in verse. The new text was found quite by chance in the Ratcha district, hidden in the trunk of a venerable yew tree, and has been described by Professor Giorgi Tsereteli in volume 108 of the Works of Tbilisi State University. The manuscript is relatively modern, dating from the eighteenth century, and adds little to our knowledge of the text. But the discovery is valuable as further evidence of the vitality and wide appeal of this truly remarkable story.

DAVID MARSHALL LANG

*School of Oriental and African Studies*  
*University of London*  
*London, W.C.1*



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## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

All but three of the illustrations are from a Greek manuscript, Iviron 463, preserved on Mount Athos. The picture of the Man and the Unicorn is from Greek Ms. 338 of King's College, Cambridge; note that the Unicorn here replaces the Elephant, which features in Fable 3 of the Georgian version. These photographs were generously supplied by Professor Sirarpie Der Nersessian, author of an important work on the illustrations of the Barlaam romance, by kind courtesy of the Collection chrétienne et byzantine of the École des Hautes Études, Paris.

The pictures of Balahvar revealing himself to Iodasaph, and King Abenes and the Ascetics, are taken from a Christian Arabic manuscript, No. B5/5 of the Monastery of Deir al-Shir, 15 miles from Beirut, Lebanon. These were first published by Father Jules Leroy in the journal *Syria*, 1955, and are reproduced here by his kind permission.

The photograph on the dust jacket shows the eleventh century church of Nikordsminda, in the Ratcha district of Georgia, and was kindly supplied by Professor V. Beridze of Tbilisi, to whom thanks are expressed.



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# INTRODUCTION

## THE ORIGINS AND HISTORY OF 'BALAVARIANI' AND ITS PLACE AMONG THE TREASURES OF WORLD LITERATURE

### 1. THE EVOLUTION AND DIFFUSION OF 'BALAVARIANI'

'Balavariani' is the Georgian name for the extremely popular early mediaeval work which circulated widely in the East and in the West, and is known in Greek literature under the title 'The Life of Barlaam and Ioasaph'.<sup>1</sup> This hagiographical work relates the feats of its two main heroes, Barlaam and Ioasaph (in Georgian: Balahvar and Iodasaph), and their efforts in the cause of India's conversion to Christianity.

Many works of hagiography tell the story of champions of the Christian religion who lived at a definite point of time, and in concrete historical circumstances. Such works usually possess a definite value for the study of the history of a given country. However, when we come to examine *Balavariani* from this standpoint, we discover that the history of India contains no such description of the country's conversion to Christianity as that given in our narrative. A detailed study of the romance shows that it is based on a freely adapted version of one of the accounts of the legendary life story of the Buddha<sup>2</sup>—a book created within India itself. Consequently, before taking on the aspect of a work of hagiography, our *Balavariani* had a long path to travel.

It was no mere coincidence which led to the selection of a particular version of the life story of the Buddha, probably the *Lalita-vistara*, for adaptation in the form of a work of hagiography

<sup>1</sup> First published at Paris in 1832 by J. F. Boissonade, *Anecdota Graeca*, tom. iv. From this edition, it was reprinted in Migne, *Patrologia Graeca*, tom. xcvi, pp. 859-1240, and also in the Loeb Classical Library, London, New York, 1914.

<sup>2</sup> See *Istoriya russkoi literatury* ('History of Russian literature'), tom. i (Literature of the tenth to eighteenth centuries), compiled and edited by the Academy of Sciences of the USSR, 1958, p. 39.