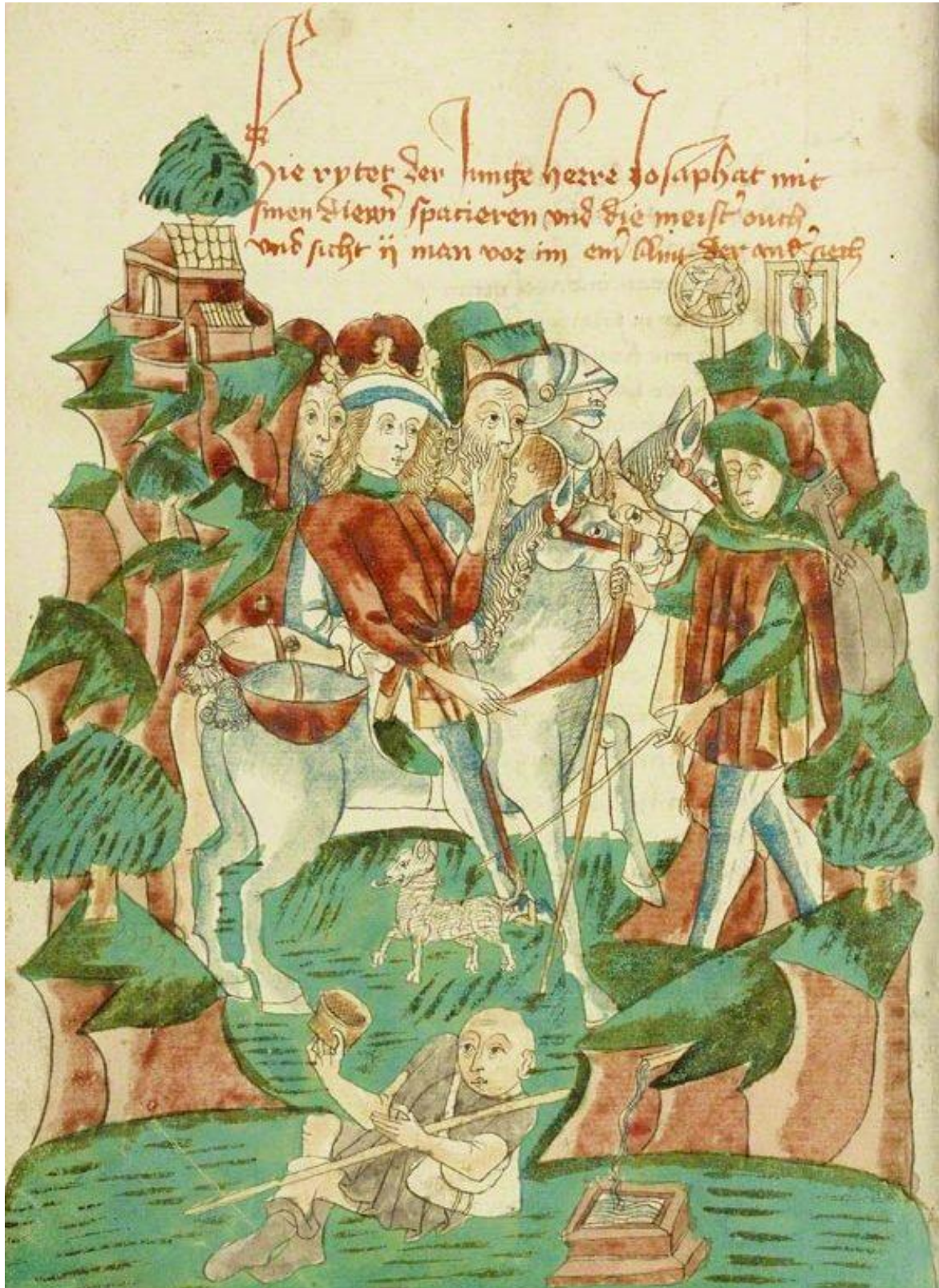


# Gautama Buddha beatified!



So true is it, that even the early Roman Catholic saint-makers, with a flippant unconcern for detection by posterity characteristic of the early periods of Christianity, claimed Him as one of their converts, and, under the pseudonym of St. Josaphat, registered him in their *Golden Legend* and *Martyrology* as an orthodox, beatified Catholic saint.

— HELENA PETROVNA BLAVATSKY<sup>1</sup>

**B**ARLAAM AND JOSAPHAT, one of the most popular and widely disseminated of medieval religious romances, which owes its importance and interest to the fact that it is a Christianized version of the story of Gautama Siddhārtha, the Buddha, with which it agrees not only in broad outline but in essential details.

The Christian story first appears in Greek among the works of John (*q.v.*) of Damascus, who flourished in the early part of the 8<sup>th</sup> century, and who, before he adopted the monastic life, had held high office at the court of the caliph Abū Ja'far al-Mansūr, as his father Sergius is said to have done before him.

The outline of the Greek story is as follows:

St Thomas had converted the people of India, and after the eremitic life originated in Egypt, many Indians adopted it. But a powerful pagan king arose who hated and persecuted the Christians, especially the ascetics. After this king, Abenner by name, had long been childless, a boy greatly desired and matchless in beauty, was born to him and received the name of Josaphat. The king, in his joy, summons astrologers to predict the child's destiny. They foretell glory and prosperity beyond those of all his predecessors. One sage, most learned of all, assents, but intimates that the scene of this glory will be, not the paternal kingdom, but another infinitely more exalted, and that the child will adopt the faith which his father persecutes.

The boy shows a thoughtful and devout turn. King Abenner, troubled by this and by the remembrance of the prediction, selects a secluded city, in which he causes a splendid palace to be built, where his son should abide, attended only by tutors and servants in the flower of youth and health. No stranger was to have access, and the boy was to be cognizant of none of the sorrows of humanity, such as poverty, disease, old age or death, but only of what was pleasant, so that he should have no inducement to think of the future life; nor was he ever to hear a word of Christ and His religion.

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<sup>1</sup> *Blavatsky Collected Writings*, ("THE LIGHT OF ASIA") II pp. 133-35. [Even "Confucius was canonized as a Saint in China by the Roman Catholics, who have thereby obtained many converts among the ignorant Confucianists." *Secret Doctrine*, I p. 441 *fn.*]

Frontispiece: Josaphat meeting a blind man and a beggar, by a follower of Hans Schilling, from Rudolf von Ems' *Barlaam and Josaphat*, Hagenau 1469. J. Paul Getty Museum, Ms. Ludwig XV 9, fol. 31v.

Prince Josaphat grows up in this seclusion, acquires all kinds of knowledge and exhibits singular endowments. At length, on his urgent prayer, the king reluctantly permits him to pass the limits of the palace, after having taken all precautions to keep painful objects out of sight. But through some neglect of orders, the prince one day encounters a leper and a blind man, and asks of his attendants with pain and astonishment what such a spectacle should mean. These, they tell him, are ills to which man is liable. Shall all men have such ills? he asks. And in the end he returns home in deep depression. Another day he falls in with a decrepit old man, and stricken with dismay at the sight, renews his questions and hears for the first time of death. And in how many years, continues the prince, does this fate befall man? and must he expect death as inevitable? Is there no way of escape? No means of eschewing this wretched state of decay? The attendants reply as may be imagined; and Josaphat goes home more pensive than ever, dwelling on the certainty of death and on what shall be thereafter.

At this time Barlaam, an eremite of great sanctity and knowledge, dwelling in the wilderness of Sennaritis, divinely warned, travels to India in the disguise of a merchant, and gains access to Prince Josaphat, to whom he imparts the Christian doctrine and commends the monastic life. Suspicion arises and Barlaam departs. But all attempts to shake the prince's convictions fail. As a last resource the king sends for Theudas, a magician, who removes the prince's attendants and substitutes seductive girls; but all their blandishments are resisted through prayer. The king abandons these efforts and associates his son in the government. The prince uses his power to promote religion, and everything prospers in his hands. At last Abenner himself yields to the faith, and after some years of penitence dies. Josaphat surrenders the kingdom to a friend called Barachias and departs for the wilderness. After two years of painful search and much buffeting by demons he finds Barlaam. The latter dies, and Josaphat survives as a hermit many years. King Barachias afterwards arrives, and transfers the bodies of the two saints to India, where they are the source of many miracles.

Now this story is, *mutatis mutandis*, the story of Buddha. It will suffice to recall the Buddha's education in a secluded palace, his encounter successively with a decrepit old man, with a man in mortal disease and poverty, with a dead body, and, lastly, with a religious recluse radiant with peace and dignity, and his consequent abandonment of his princely state for the ascetic life in the jungle. Some of the correspondences in the two stories are most minute, and even the phraseology, in which some of the details of Josaphat's history are described, almost literally renders the Sanskrit of the *Lalita Vistara*. More than that, the very word Joasaph or Josaphat (Arabic, *Yūdasatf*) is a corruption of Bodisat due to a confusion between the Arabic letters for Y and B, and Bodhisattva is a common title for the Buddha in the many birth-stories that clustered round the life of the sage. There are good reasons for thinking that the Christian story did not originate with John of Damascus, and a strong case has been made out by Zotenberg that it reflects the religious struggles and disputes of the early 7<sup>th</sup> century in Syria, and that the Greek text was edited by a monk of Saint Saba named John, his version being the source of all later texts and

translations. How much older than this the Christian story is, we cannot tell, but it is interesting to remember that it embodies in the form of a speech the “Apology” of the 2<sup>nd</sup> century philosopher Aristides. After its appearance among the writings of John of Damascus, it was incorporated with Simeon Metaphrastes’ *Lives of the Saints* (c. 950), and thence gained great vogue, being translated into almost every European language. A famous Icelandic version was made for Prince Hakon early in the 13<sup>th</sup> century. In the East, too, it took on new life and Catholic missionaries freely used it in their propaganda. Thus a Tagala (Philippine) translation was brought out at Manila in 1712. Besides furnishing the early playwrights with material for miracle plays, it has supplied episodes and apologues to many a writer, including Boccaccio, John Gower and Shakespeare. Rudolph of Ems about 1220 expanded it into a long poem of 16,000 lines, celebrating the victory of Christian over heathen teaching. The heroes of the romance have even attained saintly rank. Their names were inserted by Petrus de Natalibus in his *Catalogus Sanctorum* (c. 1380), and Cardinal Baronius included them in the official *Martyrologium* authorized by Sixtus V (1585–1590) under the date of the 27<sup>th</sup> of November. In the Orthodox Eastern Church “the holy Josaph, son of Abener, king of India” is allotted the 26<sup>th</sup> of August. Thus unwittingly Gautama the Buddha has come to official recognition as a saint in two great branches of the Catholic Church, and no one will say that he does not deserve the honour. A church dedicated *Divo Josaphat* in Palermo is probably not the only one of its kind.

The identity of the stories of Buddha and St Josaphat was recognized by the historian of Portuguese India, Diogo do Couto (1542–1616), as may be seen in his history.<sup>2</sup> In modern times the honour belongs to Laboulaye (1859), Felix Liebrecht in 1860 putting it beyond dispute. Subsequent researches have been carried out by Zotenberg, Max Müller, Rhys Davids, Braunholtz and Joseph Jacobs, who published his *Barlaam and Josaphat* in 1896.<sup>3</sup>



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<sup>2</sup> Dec. v. liv. vi. cap. 2

<sup>3</sup> *Encyclopædia Britannica* (1911), art. Barlaam and Josaphat