Gui de Cambrai’s *Barlaam and Josaphat*: A Primer of Medieval Christian Concepts for Undergraduates*

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When I teach, I look for ways to incorporate literature in my classes that can convey additional information to students about the socio-cultural practices of the period, which includes teaching them about medieval Christianity. Dante’s *Inferno* is an often-taught text that deals with medieval religion, reflecting a learned, complex tradition. One of my goals is to allow my students to see that not all medieval religious texts are quite as complex as the *Inferno*. One way I can introduce challenging religious concepts is to talk about another text with students, a text that offers an additional perspective on medieval religious practice, and one that can be offered up to undergraduates most productively by presenting it in brief excerpts in conjunction with other texts. I recommend Peggy McCracken’s translation of Gui de Cambrai’s *Barlaam and Josaphat* as an important and affordable text that can be used effectively in the undergraduate classroom for a variety of purposes.¹ I offer here a discussion of some of the most significant passages in that text as well as suggestions about the works with which *Barlaam and Josaphat* can be most successfully paired.

There are three primary reasons Gui de Cambrai’s work merits teaching. First, some concepts of medieval Christian religious practice and belief are overtly presented in *Barlaam and Josaphat*. These concepts include: pilgrimage, miracles, conversion, hagiography,
askesis/asceticism, contemptus mundi, and crusades. The work also features a number of genres, literary devices and styles that can be found in other works: homily, ubi sunt motif, fin’amors, exempla—in the form of biblical and non-biblical stories—, and examples of Boethian dialogue that assess one’s spiritual choices and standing.

Second, despite dealing with all these concepts and literary genres, McCracken’s prose translation is easily readable for undergraduates, which can make it a fitting counterpart to texts like Dante’s Inferno, the Song of Roland, and Farid ud-din Attar’s Conference of the Birds, which are all verse works in translation that can be comparatively challenging to digest. Third, at least superficially, the text showcases the intersection of East and West in the Middle Ages. Indeed, the border between these two places is troubled and marked by transgressions from the West into the East and vice versa in Barlaam and Josaphat, which is a westernized, Christianized adaptation of the life of Buddha. Josaphat, the chief hero of the work, is the Buddha figure. In Gui’s version, the Buddha is transformed into a young pagan prince who discovers the truth of Christianity and converts. Despite the eastern setting, however, the Indian people are presented in a manner that variously elides their culture with western culture and traditions—parallel to the presentation of the Muslim opponents in the Song of Roland—or that collapses their identity into the category of “Saracen,” “Turkish,” or otherwise non-Christian easterner. This confusion over Indian identity coincides with the normative dichotomy in medieval Christian texts that exists between Christians (the Self), and Non-Christians (the Others). Texts like the Song of Roland make explicit that there is an impassable gulf between Christians and Saracens—only one major non-Christian character, Bramimonde, Queen of Saragossa, converts and so lives. Barlaam and Josaphat, however, modulates the self-Other dichotomy: all the chief enemies save one convert and are accepted into Christian brotherhood.
Allowing students to examine this text alongside other medieval works illustrates the generative creativity of medieval religion as well as the syncretic blending of religious storytelling and values.

Primarily, *Barlaam and Josaphat* can be read as a spiritual journey or pilgrimage, which can be incorporated into a class that also teaches the *Inferno*. I focus on one section of Josaphat’s life: “A Debate between Josaphat’s Body and Soul,” which presents the struggle of will Josaphat undergoes allegorically. Dante’s *Divine Comedy* can be conceived of as a work that tracks the spiritual enlightenment and deepening Christianity of Dante the pilgrim, who begins his journey “in a dark wood” (I, 3).² Dante’s pilgrimage is allegorical as well, traversing a landscape of spiritual geography, while Josaphat’s spiritual pilgrimage takes place without initially transgressing any physical boundaries. Rather, Josaphat’s journey is presented to the reader as an inward journey, conducted while he is under the strict observance of his father’s men who are to keep him within the walls of a castle and keep him ignorant of the world. It is within this castle that Barlaam, a Christian hermit, introduces Josaphat to the basic tenets and principles of Christianity and then eventually baptizes him. Barlaam is ultimately suspected of being a Christian and must flee into the Indian wilderness. Toward the closure of Josaphat’s life, however, we see a deepening of this spiritual conversion: in pursuit of his spiritual father, Josaphat turns his kingdom over to another Christian, and he follows Barlaam into the wilderness. During this excursion, he wanders for two years without reliable food sources and without clothing aside from the hair shirt he received from Barlaam. In a classroom, teachers or faculty might present this as a less allegorical and more literally possible—if not historically real—pilgrimage parallel to the one Dante the pilgrim takes in *The Divine Comedy*. 
“A Debate between Josaphat’s Body and Soul” also presents in a compact way the internal dialogue that a Christian trying to resist the temptations of the world might have with him or herself. As might be predicted, in the debate Josaphat’s Body maintains that it is being cruelly punished, while his Soul argues that the asceticism the Body is being subjected to will allow him to “live forever in happiness” (178). Because Josaphat is being presented as a Western, Christian saint, the literal level of the story is superficially hagiography, and the Soul’s moral exhortations to the Body work, driving Josaphat’s Soul to conquer his Body’s desires. The Body converts, exclaiming: “I will sorrow no longer. I care for neither honor nor pride, and I will do your will since it leads to my salvation. The pain no longer hurts me and it passes quickly. I no longer regret my suffering. I am eager to serve God, and I give myself to him” (178). This conclusion, however, comes only after a protracted debate, and so reading this chapter alongside texts other than *Inferno* is also productive. For example, in a British Literature survey that covers medieval literature up through the 17th century, the debate chapter could introduce the concept of *psychomachia*, or the struggle between vice and virtue, which is externalized in Marlowe’s *Dr. Faustus* in the form of the good and bad angels. Such a pairing could allow for a discussion of morality plays and their effect on early modern drama without requiring the reading of a full morality play; thus, *Barlaam and Josaphat* excerpts can be useful in the British literature survey that is not explicitly or only medieval by acting as an introduction to texts such as *Dr. Faustus*. This introductory quality is significant for those faculty who find themselves having to teach surveys that allow less coverage of medieval works, and can also generate student interest in medieval work by prompting them to look at literary traditions that shaped Marlowe’s artistic choices.
This chapter might also work well in a medieval literature survey course to illustrate that forms such as debate poetry, for example, *The Owl and the Nightingale*, do not have to occur as free-standing poetry but can be incorporated into larger works. This interpenetration of style also reveals to students that there is stylistic overlap in religious and secular writings through their mutual use of literary devices such as the debate. This is a valuable lesson for students who often think of medieval authors as quavering in fear of the church, so much so that they have a hard time remembering that many of the texts for whom we have no author may very well have been written by clergy or others affiliated with the church in a formal way. By showing students that both secular and religious writers are using the same, or at least some similar, literary styles and forms, faculty members can highlight the idea that secular poetry might have been written by those who we might otherwise label as religious (monks, clerics, etc.), and that the division between so-called religious literature and secular literature is present, but perhaps not as solidly fixed as initially conceived. To a lesser extent, this similarity can also illustrate that medieval popes did not have the time to read every piece of writing authored by a Christian and scrutinize it for possible hints of heresy.

Aside from debate poetry and pilgrimage, “A Debate between Josaphat’s Body and Soul” also offers several other useful points of comparison. For example, the debate chapter also employs the language of *fin’amors* or courtly love, and as such, could be paired with a reading from the *troubadours* or *trobairitz* in a world literature setting. The Soul picks up this cultural note when it paints itself as the “‘lady’” who is aloof and standoffish; the Soul labels the Body as “‘my servant’” (171). The Soul/Lady chastises the Body by saying: “‘You can be sure that I will never make you my lord, and I will tell you why. If I made you my lord, I would lose our Lord, and so I will not give you power over me’” (171). In response, the Body plays the wounded
lover and cries out: “‘You admonish me too harshly […] Give me at least a little relief, for I cannot bear this. […] You know I speak the truth, for you can see how weak I have become’” (171). However the rhetoric of fin’amors rapidly jolts away in the Body’s next sentence, and we are reminded that the Body is not wasting away from lovesickness but from actual ascetic deprivation. The Body claims: “If I do not find water and salt, I will no longer be able to speak. I will never be able to move from here if you do not have a little mercy on me” (171). While this might echo the request of a lover begging for a love token, when the Soul demands, “‘Mercy for what?’” the outraged Body rejects the play on fin’amors language and exclaims, “‘I am starving!’” (172). This exchange, aside from demonstrating the pervasiveness of the concept of fin’amors language, particularly shows that religious texts do not completely eschew such language. This revelation would work well paired with lyric poetry that applies fin’amors language to the Virgin Mary as part of the cult of the virgin (8).

Aside from its treatments of pilgrimage, allegory, debate poetry, and fin’amors language, there is one last element from this section of Barlaam and Josaphat that should be mentioned: its use of the ubi sunt motif. Again, the usefulness of this section will be for a British literature survey course that focuses on medieval literature. In discussing the ubi sunt motif of Anglo-Saxon poetry such as in the Exeter Elegies, it may be useful to show students further examples of this motif so that they understand its Latinate roots so it doesn’t become fused with a particularly Anglo-Saxon style of composition in their minds, the way a kenning is (rightly) understood. One such example occurs early in the debate between Josaphat’s Body and Soul when the Body is vehemently accusing the Soul of mistreating him:

You have taken away my pleasures and my delights, my comfort, my privileges, my soft bed, my rich table and my good food, and the servants and valets who served me. All these belong to a king, but where are the food, the wine, and my cups of fine gold now? Where are the silver and the gold that used to fill my
This short passage is followed by the Soul’s abrupt correction of the misdirected desires of the Body, but the *ubi sunt* motif here is very much a sign of the pain that the Body experiences as part of its deepening spiritual growth. Like the exiled narrator of “The Wanderer,” Josaphat’s Body is astonished at the loss that it is experiencing as part of leading an ascetic lifestyle, and just as the wandering exile nostalgically recalls all that he has lost (i.e., community, lord, and mead hall), the same lament marks the plaint of Josaphat’s Body. As with the other religious and literary elements encapsulated in this chapter of *Barlaam and Josaphat*, the presentation of the *ubi sunt* motif can deepen students’ understanding that medieval literature has both a variety of content and style, and that it is a faulty division to draw a line between purely secular and religious works because that diversity of style can tie together works that might appear to be on either side of that divide.

In addition to this debate section in *Barlaam and Josaphat*, another feature of the text that presents an important medieval literary concept is its inclusion of multiple exempla, or examples, as well as biblical parables. Over the course of *Barlaam and Josaphat*, these occur primarily at the opening when Josaphat is being instructed in Christian principles. *Barlaam and Josaphat* is particularly good at explaining the relevance and significance of these parables, which makes it a good text to introduce medieval works that do not always make explicit the spiritual relevance of the exempla that they include. For example, the parable of the man who fled the unicorn is told by Barlaam early on; it is also featured as the cover art of the book. The parable tells of a man who runs away from a unicorn so quickly that he almost falls into a pit, but to stop his fall, he grabs onto a tree that has fruit and branches to support him. While holding onto the tree he sees that there are two creatures, one black and one white, gnawing on the tree’s roots, but in the pit
there is also a “hungry dragon” (38). The man is overwhelmed but then is distracted by the fruit:

The man wanted the fruit badly, and he picked it to taste its sweetness. His fear changed to pleasure as he gathered the fruit. [...] The fruit was so sweet that the more he ate, the less he tasted its sweetness [...]. Yet the man was so hungry for the fruit that he lost his fear, and the sweetness of the fruit made him forget the danger. The little animals gnawed at the tree until they chewed through its roots. Then the tree fell and the dragon ate him. (38-39)

Barlaam explains this parable by identifying the unicorn that scared the man as death; the pit “is the world, where we would live in fear if we recognized the danger of the dragon that lay below” and that “represents hell, which takes sinners” (39). Barlaam further shows Josaphat that the tree itself is our life. It is continuously gnawed by the two animals in the pit—one is the day, the other is the night. The fruit hanging from the tree represents the delights of the world, and the sweetness that comes from the fruit represents the devil, who entices men with sweetness and makes them sin. Learn this well: there is nothing in the world as sweet as sin to those who grow accustomed to it. (39)

This parable models what recurs repeatedly during the conversion of Josaphat: there are twelve similar stories presented to educate Josaphat before Barlaam baptizes him, so teachers can select from any number of parables if they are interested in examining this literary form with students.

These parables do not have particular literary merit that would mark them as great literature, but examining them in Barlaam and Josaphat can be useful for two reasons. The first is that these parables are easily understood and many of them, unlike the unicorn story, are biblical, and so students can garner a sense of what quotidian, popular religious exhortation and instruction might look like: parables are a learning tool, and for Josaphat, they come interspersed with summaries of the Gospels’ content. This information gives students a sense of what the most important aspects of medieval Christian faith were and what was emphasized in catechetical instruction. The second reason that these parables are beneficial to examine is that
they can show students how medieval authors could employ narrative and parable for a moral end that has to be decoded—as Barlaam has to decode the meaning of the unicorn for Josaphat.

This decoding can also help prepare students to read longer works such as Farid ud-din Attar’s *Conference of the Birds*, which is a frame-tale narrative about an expedition of birds who are seeking Allah. The text’s frame is about the pilgrimage itself: the birds must travel a great distance to uncover the Simorgh, the representation of Allah in the poem. On the way to the Simorgh, the hoopoe, the guide for the other birds, acting as a sort of prophet, tells stories that offer spiritual education and sometimes reflect the different stages of the spiritual pilgrimage; these parables are not always, or even often, fully explicated by the hoopoe, and so they can be a challenge to students who encounter them without having seen how a parable can be interpreted. By showing students excerpts of *Barlaam and Josaphat*, the concept of the parable and the need for its (correct) interpretation can be made manifest.

Aside from *Conference of the Birds*, excerpts of *Barlaam and Josaphat* could be taught alongside the *Song of Roland*. The most significant portions of *Barlaam and Josaphat* that could be paired with the *Song of Roland* are the chapters titled: “King Avenir Gives Half his Kingdom to Josaphat,” “King Avenir Goes to War against His Son,” “Prince Aracin Plots to Betray Josaphat,” and “King Avenir Converts and Christianity Spreads.” These chapters stage Christian vs. non-Christian military combat and the religious fallout thereafter, which make them comparable to the *Song of Roland*. In the *Song of Roland*, however, the fates of the Twelve Peers and their Saracen counterparts are physically similar but diametrically opposed: both die but the Christians have the moral and spiritual superiority. *Barlaam and Josaphat* offers a slightly different presentation of the differences between the Christian self and the non-Christian Other, though early in the text the pagan King Avenir’s attitude towards Christians is to expel or kill
them, which mirrors the purity of the self/Other dichotomy established in the *Song of Roland*.

Later on, however, in the actual war and its aftermath, this dichotomy folds in on itself due to the conversions that take place.

*Barlaam and Josaphat* presents two catalogs of heroes, parallel to the *Song of Roland*’s Twelve Peers and their Muslim counterparts. Josaphat is a major Christian warrior, as is his archbishop—a notable parallel to the *Song of Roland*’s Turpin (196). Arranged on the pagan side for King Avenir are more named men: Polidonus of Athens, Déinfans of Byzantium, King Protesilaus of Britain, Prince Aracin (an Indian and favorite of Avenir), and Miradeus of Babylon (143-44, 146). The most important of these is Miradeus, who, as his name implies, does not remain pagan. He receives a mortal wound and is reluctantly taken prisoner by the archbishop who promises “‘if you become a Christian, I will heal your wound’” (148). This promised miracle is postponed for the rest of the battle scene which sees the Christian forces repeatedly rallying successfully against the pagan forces. The next day, just before Miradeus is baptized, the Christians kneel and pray for Miradeus to be healed; the church bells miraculously ring and the narrator tells us that “Miradeus was healed: his flesh sealed over the wound. No wise man should have been surprised by it, for Miradeus believed in the Creator!” (151).

Following the miracle, Miradeus is baptized and formally converted; knowledge of this event spreads, and as often occurs in Christian martyrdom stories, there are mass conversions. The conversions devastate the pagan army because the King of Britain and Polidonus of Athens are among them (151). This loss of forces results in Prince Aracin becoming more directly involved in the struggle.

Aracin is the exception in *Barlaam and Josaphat*, and while most of the pagans willingly convert after being reasoned with or experiencing the miraculous power of the Christian God,
Aracin remains stubbornly pagan and converts in name only. He feigns Christianity, gains access to a tower within the capital city, and then, in a pact with King Avenir, tries to betray Josaphat and allow King Avenir to take the city. This entire plot is revealed by a “good man in King Avenir’s army who believe[s] secretly in God” and overhears the plot, and after much Boethian inner dialogue over which allegiance to privilege, the relationship to his lord, or to God, he sends word to Josaphat who is able to foil the plot (154-55). Josaphat, however, allows the plot to be undertaken before he interrupts it and seizes Aracin. *Barlaam and Josaphat* allows for a more liquid self/Other or Christian/non-Christian dichotomy up to a certain point in the conflict, but Aracin is harshly punished for his actions. Josaphat condemns him publicly, and burns him alive, but the condemnation hinges not on his pagan identity, but rather on the falsity of his Christian one: “‘You [Aracin] are condemned by your own judgment, since you pledged yourself to God, and you will die in great shame’” (157). The hagiographical impetus of the text insists upon conversions that are undertaken with honest spiritual intent. The fate for those who would manipulate Christians is as unpleasant as the deaths meted out to non-Christians at the Battle of Roncesvalles. Juxtaposing Gui de Cambrai’s work with texts such as the *Song of Roland* that insist so much on the religious Self-Other dichotomy allows students to experience a broader range of medieval interactions between Christians and non-Christians and to witness the deep ambivalence that characterizes so strongly the medieval Christian reaction to the religious other: destruction or conversion.

Opening up a Middle Ages that is not so hegemonically constructed as a deeply religious, and only Christian, long ago past is an important step in making the Middle Ages a relatable period for the modern, often secular, university student. *Barlaam and Josaphat* also occupies a unique place in its hybridity: as a westernized and Christianized eastern text it is a text that
actively demonstrates cultural appropriation as well as the medieval tendency to recycle and revise material from the past to suit a medieval, Christian audience. As such, *Barlaam and Josaphat* is a valuable teaching text. Furthermore, as a readable, prose translation of the original Old French verse form, it is more readily understood by most undergraduates, and it lends itself to excerption. This makes it invaluable in the contemporary college classroom wherein often medieval topics and authors are given short shrift in ever-lengthening survey courses in British and world literatures. It is also a useful text in the upper division courses with a tighter medieval focus, and could find its place in excerption in classroom discussions on Dante, the *Song of Roland*, or courtly love. Finally, it presents an instructive array of cultural, literary, and religious concepts that appear across medieval texts and that can be understood in a more thorough and complex way by discussing them across texts.
Notes

* A version of this paper was presented at the 2015 Southeastern Medieval Association conference in Little Rock, AR.


18. It is also to be noted that there are examples of homily in *Barlaam and Josaphat* as well. The next to last chapter “The Narrator Laments the Sins of the Present World” can be read as a two-part sermon directed at corrupt church officials and nobility.


Bibliography


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