The Desert as locus Dei in Barlaam and Josaphat?

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Abstract: In the Greek Byzantine « edifying story » of Barlaam and Josaphat (11th cent.) as well as in its Latin translations (11th and 12th cent.), the desert plays a major role, not only as a natural space, but also as the space par excellence where it is possible to be close to God. A re-writing of this desert took place in the European High Middle Ages involving a good number of variations, none of which, however, prevented authors from maintaining the desert-like character of the space, which they define mainly in terms of solitude, the vita contemplativa, asceticism and sexual abstinence. At the same time there seems to be at least in some of the vernacular texts a significant effort to present the court as dystopian in character. This article offers a close reading of selected passages from three vernacular versions of the 13th and 14th centuries.

Resumé : Dans l’» histoire édifiante » grecque byzantine de Barlaam et Josaphat (XIe s.) et dans ses traductions latines (XIe et XIIe s.) le désert joue un rôle central. Non seulement comme espace naturel mais aussi comme lieu où il est possible d’être proche de Dieu. Une ré-écriture de ce désert pendant le Moyen Âge n’a pas empêché les auteurs des Barlaam et Josaphat vernaculaires de maintenir le caractère désertique de cet endroit, c’est-à-dire comme espace solitaire propice à la vita contemplativa, à l’ascétisme et à l’abstinence sexuelle. Il y a aussi des efforts dans quelques textes pour présenter la cour comme dystopie. Cet article offre un « close reading » de passages de trois versions vernaculaires des XIIIe et XIVe siècles.

Introduction

« On a parfois voulu établir des rapports entre le milieu désertique et le phénomène religieux. On s’est demandé s’il y a une religion du désert, si le désert prédisposait plutôt à une telle forme d’expérience religieuse qu’à telle autre et on a pensé en particulier que le désert favorisait le mysticisme. » These are the opening lines of Jacques Le Goff’s famous article on the perception and transformation of the desert in European texts of the High Middle Ages1. His corpus included texts as diverse as the Bible and Béroul’s Tristan.

Whereas the Oriental desert of the Old and New Testaments as well as of those foundational texts which Le Goff calls the « épopée du désert » (i.e. the Vita Antonii of ca. 360 and Jerome’s Vita Pauli of 374-379) was both a geographical-


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historical and a symbolic reality (Jerome wrote his *Vita Pauli* while he himself was in the desert of Calchis), European medieval authors and hermits had recourse only to the geographical realities – island and forest – which were available to them, and then had to turn them into symbols of what the desert had denoted in the literature of the Desert Fathers. If some authors, however, insisted on keeping this strange Oriental space, it was inevitable that they would end up creating a hybrid construct.

In the Greek Byzantine « edifying story » of Barlaam and Josaphat (11th cent.) the desert has a major role to play, not only as a natural space, but as the space where it is possible to be close to God, as was the case in the texts of Athanasius and Jerome. A re-writing of the oriental deserts is to be assumed here, since the « Sitz im Leben » of the Barlaam desert is quite different from that of the lives of the Egyptian fathers. In spite of all the later adjustments introduced by the vernacular medieval writers of the Barlaam story, a desert-like character had to be maintained: the desert where Barlaam and Josaphat meet at the end of the story had to be a lonely place favourable to the *vita contemplativa*, asceticism and sexual abstinence. The contrast to the city in the *Vita Antonii* is replaced here by a contrast to the court, which is presented as a dystopian space designed to contrast with the ideal space of the desert.

This article deals with selected passages from three vernacular versions, i.e. Spanish, French and German texts of the 13th and 14th centuries, which will shed interesting light on the construction of the natural space in which two fictional characters become Saints Barlaam and Josaphat. My aim is to analyse how the authors react to this exotic space, and to assess how important it is within the tradition of the Barlaam and Josaphat story which itself is linked to the literature of the Desert Fathers; finally, I hope to show how the authors set up a contrast between the desert and the populated space of the court-city.

To begin with, the three vernacular versions have basically the same plot: King Avenier, an almost ideal oriental king, rules in India. His one and only flaw is that he happens to be a pagan at a time when Christianity has already entered history and conquered the world. He tolerates only his own religion, which the narrators consider to be either mere idolatry or a vague sort of polytheism, and persecutes and banishes Christians from his kingdom. Although the King remains childless for a long time, his happiness is eventually made complete with the birth of a son, who receives the name of Josaphat. A great feast celebrates this birth, and one of the astrologers invited for the occasion announces that the young prince will not be one of this world, but will become a Christian. This piece of news irritates King Avenier so much that he has a palace built for the young prince so that he can be kept away from the world. We are here reminded of that well known story of the prince in his golden cage. Josaphat grows up surrounded by fair young and healthy men, who are threatened by death should they dare mention anything related to the fragility of the human condition. Nevertheless, Josaphat, a clever young man, thirsty for

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knowledge, wonders at his being locked in this palace, and asks his father for permission to leave. His father grants him an excursion outside the palace, during which he is to experience three decisive encounters (with an old man, a blind man, and a leper). This is the moment when Barlaam the monk enters the narrative: in order to get into the palace, he disguises himself as a merchant and is led to the prince, whom he is going to indoctrinate in the Christian faith. After this central dialogue, which culminates in Josaphat’s baptism, Barlaam returns to his usual dwelling in the desert of Senaar and leaves Josaphat to fulfil his duties as renewer of his father’s kingdom. This happens to be no easy task for Josaphat, since his father is determined to bring him back to the faith of their ancestors. Among various initiatives, the King arranges for a religious disputation (where a double of Barlaam is supposed to let those representing the pagan religion win and publicly declare the inferiority of Christendom); the King then tries to have the prince seduced by young virgins. His last attempt is the division of the kingdom, but all he obtains is the very confirmation of Josaphat’s potential: Josaphat’s new kingdom becomes a model Christian one. Avenier finally repents and asks his son for forgiveness, after which he is baptized. Some time later he dies as a pious Christian. With the conversion of his people and of his own father Josaphat sees the time has come to leave this vain world. He carries out this decision, which provokes the utmost sadness in his people. After two years wandering in the desert, he meets his spiritual father once again. Barlaam dies and is buried in the desert. Josaphat spends the rest of his life praying and fasting. After he dies, he is buried beside his master. Their relics are translated to Josaphat’s first church, where countless miracles are said to take place.

The texts. The Spanish prose text Barlaam et Josafat dates back to the 14th century and is said to be very close to its Latin source, the so-called Vulgate version (12th century). It has usually been regarded as a mere translation, although in fact it contains several subtle changes and adaptations aimed at a Castilian audience. Rudolf von Ems’s Middle High German rendering of Barlaam und Josaphat was written around 1225 and is regarded as a combination of legend and romance, since many passages bear characteristics of courtly literature. The same can be said of the third text, the Old French adaptation of Gui de Cambrai, Balaham et Josaphas, written during the first quarter of the 13th century.

Barlaam and its literary tradition: the Spanish text

De commo demando el infante Josapha a Berlan en commo podria guardarse de pecco e su anima de mal [...] Por ende querria que me mostrases alguna carrera llaña por que podiese andar seguro, e guardase los mandamientos de Dios que me non desviase dellos despes del perdon de los mis muchos peccados, nin moviesse la saña de Dios contra mi. – Mi señor, bien dixiste, mas es cosa que non puede ser esto; tanpoco commo el que anda camino non puede escusar que non coma, nin el que usa con la gente non se puede guardar que non peque; nin tanpoco el que esta cerca del fuego que se non escaliente, ca dize el evangelio: «Non podes servir dos señores, a Dios e al diablo.» [...] E los nuestros padres bien guardaron esto, ca sofrieron muchas tribulaciones e persecuciones, que esta es la carrera. [...] E muchos de los sanctos martires aun resciebieron otro batismo – dellos de sangre, dellos de fuego; [...] E nuestro Señor Jesu Cristo resciebio este por nos; otroyo los sus
discipulos e todos los otros martires e confessores que lidiaron por el nombre de Jesu Cristo contra los malos creydos [...] E muchos de los cabdillos e de los grandes omnes, veyendo estas cosas, se convertian e de buen talante rescebian martirio por amor de Jesu Cristo [...] E crucificaron los sus cuerpos con los vicios e con las ponpas deste mundo [...] e fugieron al desierto, e sofrieron fanbre e frio e desnuedat por los montes e por las cuevas, de los cuales el mundo non era digno. Por eso se arredraron del mundo e de los vicios de la carne, e fueron martires de voluntad ; e otros escogieron tal vida que nunca entraron so cobierto e sofría la calura del estio e el frio del inﬁeriо ; e otros fazian choças cabañas e encerravan ally los cuerpos, faziendo penitençia, comiendo pan duro, e verças campesinas, e vervas, e avellotas, [...] E algunos dellos non comien en toda la semana más de una vegada, e otros comian dos vezes en la semana. [...] E estos forçavan la natura e yvan contra ella, ca en cuerpo de corruption e mortal fazian vida de angeles, en ayunas e en vigilia, e desnuedat, en mucha pasciencia, e algebras del alma, voyan aquellas gentes del çielo e eran puestos fuera de si en revelacion ; [...] E nos trabajemosnos en quanto podieremos de los semejar, cayendo o los coraçones ; que asy comno los obispos tienen personas e semejança de los apostolos, asy los monjes tienen las pisgadas de los padres acabados7.

7 J. E. Keller, R. W. Linker, (eds.), Barlaam e Josafat. Edición crítica. Introd. por O. T. Impey y J. E. Keller. Madrid, Consejo Superior de Investigaciones Cientíﬁcas, 1979 (Clásicos hispánicos, Serie II, Ediciones Críticas 21), p. 105-111. Translation : Of how prince Josapha asked Berlan how he could avoid sin and protect his soul from evil [...] Therefore I would appreciate it if you could show me an easy way that I could safely follow, to be able to keep God's precepts and not part from them after my many sins have been forgiven, nor turn God's wrath against myself. – Well said, my Lord, but this cannot be ; for it is impossible for he who walks not to eat, nor for he who has to do with people not to sin ; neither can he who is near fire not get warm, for the Gospel says : You cannot serve two masters, God and the devil. [...] And our fathers kept this well, for they suffered many tribulations and persecutions, this is the way. [...] And many of the saintly martyrs received yet another baptism – some of blood, some of ﬁre ; [...] And our Lord Jesus Christ received this for us ; besides his disciples and all the rest of martyrs and confessors who battled against the pagans in the name of Jesus Christ [...] And many among the leaders and great men, seeing these things, converted and willingly suffered martyrdom for the love of Jesus Christ. [...] And they crucied their bodies with the vices and pomp of this world [...] and they ﬂed into the desert, and they suffered from hunger, cold and nudity in the mountains and in the caves, those whom the world did not deserve. Therefore they retired from the world and from the vices of the flesh, and they were martyrs of the will ; and some others chose such a life that they never had a roof over their heads and they suffered the heat in the summer and the cold of the winter ; and some others built huts and conﬁned their bodies there, doing penance, eating hard bread, ﬁeld cabbage, herbs, and acorns, [...] And some of them would not eat during a whole week but once only, for in a
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This passage is part of the central dialogue between Barlaam and Josaphat. The latter generally poses a question to which Barlaam gives page-long answers, intermingled with biblical quotations, here as well as in the Latin source. Josaphat’s question in this passage could be paraphrased as follows: « How can I avoid sin? », which is the logical consequence of the previous discussion on sin and penance. Barlaam’s answer has its own paraphrase in the first part of the passage: it is impossible not to sin, for as long as you have anything to do with people. As long as you are in this world, in its populated areas, you are necessarily going to sin. In Barlaam’s quoting of the Gospel – it is not possible to serve two masters – the world, its riches and distractions stand evidently for Satan, the desert and its way of life for the best manner of serving the one true God. He goes on to outline the historical ways of serving the one Lord, briefly alluding to the various kinds of martyrdom, i.e. blood martyrdom and voluntary martyrdom, and finally focussing on the lives of those whom they – Barlaam and his brothers – try to imitate: the Desert Fathers. Their hardships are described in some detail. Some of them chose to live in communities, some chose never to have a roof over their heads. Not only did these monks eat hard bread, but also cabbage and acorns – we see in such details the author’s perception of the desert, as a space where oaks grow and vegetables can be harvested. Referring to Gui de Cambray’s conception of the desert, Carl Appel points out:

Hieraus, und an anderen Stellen, erkennen wir auch, wie sich der Dichter den Desert vorstellt, in welchem die Eremiten leben. Er hat nichts von einer orientalischen Wüste an sich, sondern ist eine felsige mit Eichen und Buchen (vgl. auch v. 4092) bestandene menschenleere Landschaft, etwa wie, einige Jahrhunderte zurück gedacht, der ›Désert‹, in welchem wir heute die Grande Chartreuse finden⁴.

Similarly, Rudolf von Ems states that hermits « in wälden sie vereinden » (v. 4504), but then lets Josaphat pray near the end and look for Barlaam explicitly in the « wüeste » (v. 15036). Hermits’ meals included « krüt, eicheln unde gras » (v. 4511), Barlaam says, Josaphat’s actual diet is based on « wurzel unde krüt », at the same time « diu wüeste was sõ diërre erkant, / daz er dâ wêne wazzers vant. » (v. 15040-2). The eremitical diet as presented in these three vernacular versions happens to be already in the Greek version, perhaps inspired by the literature of the mortal and corruptible body they led angelical lives, in fastings and vigils, in nudity, in much patience, and far away from their relatives and friends, since they were pilgrims. And I could not tell you of the life of one or two among them; for among them there was one whom they called Anton, who founded the monastic life, and he chose to live in the wilderness [...] Afterwards other very brave and strong warriors came who received crowns for their victories and they had grace in this world; contemplating with the very pure eyes of the soul, they saw those heavenly people and they were beside themselves with what was revealed; [...] And we strain ourselves as much as we can to be like them, and if we cannot resemble them through so perfect and saintly works, we do in the hope in our hearts; for just as bishops take their being and appearance from the apostles, so the monks are the followers of the perfect fathers.⁴

Desert Fathers. There is, however, a major difference insofar as the medieval texts here in question do not depict this diet as a supernatural aspect of the desert life.

In the Spanish text, Barlaam then adds that if he were to emphasize the achievements of any of the fathers, he would name one who was one called Anton, i.e. Antony. But that is all, the mere mention of a name. This does not look as if due respect is being paid to Antony, who since Athanasius was considered to be the founder of monastic communities in Egypt. One might agree or disagree with this assumption but even for Jerome, as he writes the *Vita Pauli*, it provides a yardstick by which to praise the achievements of his own protagonist. Antony is here almost one among others. Barlaam even stresses that after Antony some other very brave though nameless warriors followed. It seems that the conventions of the genre required the mention of Antony, but the glorification of a monk or saint above others was against the assumptions underlying the author’s notion of hagiographical writing.

When we leave this particular passage aside and look at the narrative as a whole, we will note that the presentation of actual life in the desert (wherever the Senaar desert where Barlaam comes from might be) is deferred till very late in the story. It is significant too that the teaching takes place in Josaphat’s chamber in the palace. Not Josaphat’s palace, but his father’s is the dystopia against which the desert can be said to constitute a *locus Dei*. Whereas Avenir’s court is only a den of iniquity designed to ensnare and pervert the young prince, the latter’s court turns out to be the cradle of Christendom in India and can therefore also be defined as a divine space. The former is where the action begins and returns to every time the King tries a new stratagem to convert his son back to idolatry. We do not get an idea of what it looks like, it is just the scenario within which unscrupulous plans are designed, which are stumbling-blocks in Josaphat’s road to salvation. In other words, it is a space with highly negative connotations. On the other hand, and in contradiction to what it was meant to be, Josaphat’s palace is only at the very beginning a golden cage. Since Barlaam’s entrance, this palace evolves into a space of Christian teaching and doctrine. To illustrate the proportion involved, one needs only to consider that 17 chapters out of 40 in the Latin Vulgate and accordingly as many pages in the Spanish version, are taken up with the dialogue which is to culminate in Josaphat’s baptism. There are certainly moments when Josaphat’s life is depicted as though he were a prisoner of his own destiny, but on the whole it is within a palace chamber that illumination is granted.

Once the passage quoted is seen not only in the context of the entire text, but also in that of the literary tradition from which it emerges, Barlaam’s teachings might prove to be somewhat inconsistent. Josaphat wants to learn how to avoid sin, he is shown the model of the desert monks, but he is afterwards not allowed to leave for the desert with his master; instead, he has to remain and fulfil his duties at the court, with or rather against his father and his people. The *Vita Antonii*, on the other hand, tells the story of a conqueror of the desert, of a real desert, whose merit lies in the founding of monasticism in the desert and in teaching there as well. Barlaam’s or rather Josaphat’s merits are located among people, not in the solitude of the desert.
Rudolf’s cry

Alsus gie vroelliche
von sinem künichliche
der edele, reine, guote
mit so vroellichem muote..
sō sēre er vreuuen sich began,
rehte als ob ein vremeder man
in herzeclicher swere
in dem ellende waren
und daz ellende wolde lān
und vroelliche wider gān
zu sinen vriunen in sin lant.

noch wart im groezer vreuwe erkant:

ez dūhte sinen herzen muot
in ellende der welte guot;
dem hätte er sich durch das benomen,
daz er zer heimuot möhte komen,
die got alsō gestuetet hāt,
daz si niemer mēr zergāt.

owē, wer volget disem man?
owē, wer gēt mit ime dan?
mit im hein ze lande gān,
ich meine, ūz sinen schulden
zu den gotes hulden?

owē, wie eine er dannen gāt!
wie eine er diz ellende lāt!
wie eine er gert der heimuot!
owē, wie einic er daz tuot!

owē, wie sinen vürsten stānt,
daz sie mit im von dan niht gānt!
Hie meine ich dirre welte kint,
die mit houbetsünden sint

und in den só stille stānt
und niht mit dem rehten gānt
ūz den sünden in daz leben,

dem niemer ende wirt gegeben.

owē, war gāt nū Jōsaphāt,
daz manec sin vriunt só stille stāt,
der ich leider einer bin,
der stille stāt und lāt in hin
in die rehten heimuot gān?

nū wil ich in niht eine lān
und wil im geselleshchaft
mit geselleclicher kraft
leisten mit dem mære. (v. 14905-49)²

This is a very central digression in Rudolf von Ems’s *Barlaam und Josaphat* that has attracted much attention. Together with some other interruptions of the narrative by the narrator, it provides crucial textual material pertaining to questions of genre⁶. For the discussion of the role of the desert it seems especially appropriate, since it is inserted exactly at the moment of Josaphat’s departure from the court, where he grew up and became a Christian, indeed where he turned into a Christian king who changed the faith of his whole people.

The narrator captures this parting moment in what seems, for the first five lines at least, a celebration of Josaphat’s happiness, attested by the condensed use of expressions like « gie vroelîche », « vroelîchem muote » , « vreuen », « vroelîche wider gân », « groezër vreude ». The following six lines compare this happiness to that of someone who is coming back home from abroad – « ellende ». Wordplay based on « ellende » follows, as one term of the comparison, the foreign land, is revealed as the miserable – « ellende » – and vain world which the prince is on the point of leaving. In a fourth part of the digression the narrator chooses a plaintive tone, marked by the anaphorical « owê », to emphasize Josaphat’s loneliness, but as well to reveal the second term of the comparison, the homeland which Josaphat leaves for, as God’s grace.

This homeland, it seems, needs no geographical location, there is no real desert being alluded to here, no monastery, no island, no « walt ». What at first seems an accusation of all those counts surrounding the prince and not going with him – « wie sine vürsten stânt, diz sie mit im von dan niht gânt ! », turns out to be a

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² Transl.: Thus he parted gladly / from the kingdom / the noble, pure, and good man / with bright spirits / he began to rejoice so much / just as if he were a stranger / suffering strongly from an affliction / and being in a foreign land / wishing to leave this misery / and go back in happiness / back home to his friends and relatives. / His happiness became yet the greater: / in his heart it seemed to him / as if worldly goods were an affliction; / from all that he was saved / since he could go back to the homeland, / which God made in such a way, / that it never decays. / Oh ! who follows this man? / Oh ! who goes with this man? / with him home into the land, / I mean, out of his faults / and towards God’s grace? / Oh ! how lonely he departs! / how lonely he leaves this misery / how lonely he desires the homeland / oh ! how lonely he does it! / Oh ! how his counts stand there / and do not go forth with him. / I mean by this the children of this world, / burdened with capital sins / who stay so still / instead of going the right way / out of the sins and into the life, / which never sees an end. / Oh ! where is Josaphat going, / that many of his friends do not move, / I myself being one of them, / who stays still and lets him go / into the true homeland? / Now I won’t leave him on his own / but will keep him company / with friendly strength / with the story.

general accusation of sinners, of those who do not choose the way out of the sinful life into a Christian one. The narrator even includes himself in the accusation, who, aware of his personal shortcomings or rather of the narratological restrictions of his story, can only accompany his protagonist with the story he must now proceed with.

It seems, on the other hand, that the story which Rudolf is telling is in fact his own «stay in the desert», his own poenitentia, for his all too worldly previous behaviour. Whether this is simply one topos among others, it is not our task to find out. The narrator concedes that he does not have the strength which his protagonist possesses, and therefore can only compensate with his narration. This can very easily be interpreted as a way of doing penance, especially if seen as a parallel statement to that of Rudolf's prologus praeter rem.

Josaphat as miles christianus

The context of the third passage is as follows. Avenir’s counsellor Arachin assures him that after the division of the kingdom, i.e. the King’s last attempt to change his son’s mind, Josaphas will give up his contra naturam plans to renounce the world because of royal duties that will fill his mind. Avenir summons his son and explains his desire to divide his kingdom. Josaphas concedes that this is not what he himself would have wished for, but he accepts, as it seems, having already in mind to make use of his royal authority to convert the whole people. Thereupon he is crowned and the festivities last for two months. The King gives his son a city as a present, the former capital of his own kingdom.

Son fil delivre une cité,
Qui ciés estoit de son reigné,
Et les castiaux tot environ.
Devant ses gens li fait le don. (v. 9669-72)

This will be in its turn the starting-point of Josaphas’s mission: the citizens are christened and every symbol of paganism is destroyed. In the middle of this city he has a church built and appoints John Damascene as archbishop. John Damascene, the narrator explains, being the same one who was mentioned some thousands of lines before – «Jehans, uns vesques de Damas, / Le translate molt hautement» (v. 6205-6) – i.e. whom we thank for the composition of the story! With his help Josaphas can carry out his missionary work. The same John Damascene, this time the warrior-to-be John Damascene, speaks the following lines:

Mais ja, sire, se m’en creës
Sans bataille ne li renderës
[...]
On ne doit pas tel terre rendre
A Sarrasins ; [...]
The ensuing war-episode is conserved in only one of the manuscripts of Gui’s *Balaham*. It has often been regarded as an interpolation but it is not the place here to analyse whether this is the case, but to regard the father-son war as part of the manuscript transmission.

Gui’s decision to turn the contrast between father and son – which the Latin Vulgate version had compared with the biblical generational conflict between Saul and David – into an armed conflict is a turning-point in the story. Avenir is disappointed by the enormous success that his son achieves, which includes the conversion of his own liege-men. He seems almost forced to declare war on his son.

When we bear in mind the background provided by the pacifist tone of Barlaam’s teachings, it might be expected at this point that the well-instructed young prince would declare his conscientious objections and retire to the desert. But his city is worth too much to let it be devastated by the pagan army which his father leads. The safety of the city is at stake, and this motivation is enough to make him give up pacifism and fight his main enemy, paganism, which is personified in his father. The reader might well ask what has happened to that character who some thousands lines before desired no other abode than a very different sort of city, the *desertum civitas*, and the life led therein, which his master depicted in the following terms:

XL. ans ai, si com jou cuit.
El desert mainc, et jor et nuit
Illueques faich ma penitenche.
Compaignons ai de ma sentenche.

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9 Transl. : Sir, if you believe me / Without battle you won’t defeat him / [...] / One should not give such a land / to the Saracens. [...] / Sir, you have made such an effort / to convert this land / [...] / But God is the reason / why we must hold the land. / This war is very reasonable / since the good Christian / should always be above the pagans, / [...] / Therefore you don’t have to give it to your father, / You should rather defend it, / For justice is not yours, / But it is God’s and the Holy Church’s / and you as their knight / have to willingly defend it.
Ki el desert vivent et sont
Et par le bos viennent et vont ;
N'ont hebregage ne hostel,
Car il entendent molt à el.10

After Josaphas has defeated the international army of his father – which
includes the great nobles of « Bisante, Atenes, Babiloine et Coine » – and put the
mastermind of the whole conflict, Arachin, to death by burning, he will nevertheless
return to his original plan and end his life in the desert. There does not seem to be
any apparent contradiction between this crusader-like defence of the city and
Josaphas’s eventual life in the desert.

In the name of the desert

A brief comment is required, finally, on the very end of the story: the relics
of Barlaam and Josaphat are taken back to the kingdom, to the church built by
Josaphat. This is the last time that the story points out that the desert is a transitional
space.

The desert as locus Dei is clearly not so central in the Barlaam and Josaphat
tradition as one might automatically assume, since the texts tend rather to destabilize
the meaning of this space as it is transmitted, for example, in Athanasius’ Vita
Antonii or in Jerome’s Vita Pauli. The desert is not the wondrous space of these
foundational texts. The main wonder is probably the fact that the dead bodies of the
saints are found intact when their grave is opened.

Because of its « desert / monastic » character the legend of Barlaam and
Josaphat has often been labelled as an example of contemptus mundi literature. To
what extent does this term apply to the texts referred to above? In another context
Manfred Kern stated that the very idea of a literature which despises the world and
therefore everything within it must despise itself.11 This leads to understanding
contemptus mundi literature as an oxymoron. Is this the case with these Barlaam
texts?

One last aspect related to the depiction of the desert does appear paradoxical,
and that is the very choice of the name of the desert. For the Ancient World Sennaar
was primarily the Greek transliterated form of the Hebrew name of Shin’ar, used in
the Bible to name the Mesopotamian region: the fertile land of Early Antiquity and
a synonym for Babylon as well.12 At least the author of the Greek Byzantine text
could have known this, since he is extremely well acquainted with the Scriptures.
The vernacular authors might have seen in this form an exotic name that could be
linked to a story taking place in India. In any case, it is a happy paradox that this

10 Transl. : I am forty years old, I believe. / In the desert I live, night and day / I do my
penance there. / I have companions in my decision, / who abide and exist in the desert / and
come and go across the woods ; / without shelter or quarters, / because they are intent on other
things.

11 Cf. « Verzeichnis der literaturwissenschaftlichen Habilitationen an österreichischen

12 The name occurs in the following passages : Gen. 10.10, Gen. 11.2, Gen. 14.2,9, Josh. 7,21,
Isa. 11.11, Zc. 5.11 and Dn. 1,2
originally Buddhist legend was to enjoy such a vogue of popularity in the European Middle Ages.

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