

The Buddha Becomes a Prophet: The Arabic *Bilawhar and Būdhasaf*

The story of the Buddha's life traveled out of India, probably following one of the ancient trading routes connecting China, India, Persia, and Syria, known collectively as the Silk Road. Traders and travelers transported silk across deserts and mountains along these routes, along with minerals, spices, metals, saddles, leather goods, glass, and paper. They also carried stories.¹ Literary and religious narratives traveled westward in both oral and written form, and many were translated into Pahlavi, or Middle Persian, when they reached the Sassanian empire in what is present-day Iran. Scholars assume that Buddhist texts followed this path, and although the Pahlavi translation of the Buddha's story has been lost, it is likely to have been the basis for the Arabic *Bilawhar and Būdhasaf*, which preserves several episodes from the life of the Buddha even as it elaborates the prince's relationship to his father and adds a teacher who comes to instruct the prince on the values of the ascetic renunciation of the world.

We know that the Arabic *Kitāb Bilawhar wa Būdhasaf* ("The Book of Bilawhar and Būdhasaf") was composed before the end of the tenth century CE because it is listed in a catalog of Arabic books available in Baghdad bookshops at that time. The catalog also identifies a reworking of the story in verse by an author known to have died in or around 815 CE, so if the reference is accurate, an early version of *Bilawhar and Būdhasaf* would have been composed before the late eighth century CE, during the rule of the Abbasids, the third Islamic caliphate.² Shortly after the Abbasids gained power in a revolt against the Umayyad caliphate in 750 CE, the center of the Islamic empire moved from Damascus, the Umayyad's capital, to Baghdad, a city built by the Abbasids after the Muslim conquest of the Persian Sasanian empire. As an Arab-Persian Abbasid elite succeeded the Arab Umayyad elite, a new openness to ethnic and cultural difference appeared among scholars, manifested in greater inclusion of non-Arab Muslims in the administration of the empire and an interest in non-Arab cultures and philosophy. Translations began to bring texts and traditions from outside the Arab world to Muslim scholars, and this interest in non-Arab cultures and texts may explain the interest of *Bilawhar and Būdhasaf* to Islamic audiences.³

Two versions of *Bilawhar and Būdhasaf* survive. Both draw on an unidentified Buddhist account of the life of the Buddha, translated from Sanskrit or another Indian language into Pahlavi, and both add stories and sermons taken from Arabic literary sources. We know that some of the stories are taken from a Pahlavi collection of maxims and exemplary stories composed in the sixth century. Like other Pahlavi texts, the collection was probably translated into Arabic by Muslims of Persian descent and then incorporated into a story based on the life of the Buddha, supplemented with exemplary stories and parables drawn from other Arabic sources and illustrating, for the most part, the lessons of a teacher who comes to instruct the prince.⁴

Both extant versions of *Bilawhar and Būdhasaf* are associated with sects of Shi'a Islam. During the centuries following the death of the Prophet Muhammad, the Shi'ite Muslims split into different factions, mainly due to disputes over succession to the office of imam. The longer of the two versions of *Bilawhar and Būdhasaf* is associated with the Ismaili branch of Shi'a Islam and is preserved in manuscripts in Yemen and western India, where the sect was strong. It does not reflect specifically Ismaili doctrine, but was probably considered a work on ethics and asceticism that was more generally compatible with Islamic belief.⁵ Abridged versions of the book are found outside the Ismaili collections, further evidence that it circulated as a work that appealed to Muslim readers, although not regarded as a book specifically about Islam.

A second, shorter version of *Bilawhar and Būdhasaf* is cited in a treatise by the influential Twelver Shi'ite author Ibn Babūya (d. 991 CE). It may be based on the longer version, or on a lost earlier redaction of the story. A large part of the middle section of the story is missing in this version, either because of a lacuna in the source or because Ibn Babūya did not wish to include it, and a series of seven stories taken from existing literary sources has been added to fill the gap.⁶ Ibn Babūya explains that he uses the Bilawhar story to draw readers to the rest of his treatise, which promotes the beliefs of his sect. "Whether readers agree or disagree with us, they all enjoy such stories, and if they find some in this book, they will want to read the rest of it," he writes. For Ibn Babūya the story of the prince who renounces the world will attract readers, who will then read the doctrinal discussions included in his book and learn the true path to belief.⁷

Although *Bilawhar and Būdhasaf* found a readership among Muslims, it does not mention the Prophet Muhammad and there is only one brief reference to Islam. Nor does the story clearly identify Buddhism, as we will see below. The narrator calls the ascetic religion adopted by the king's son, Būdhasaf, and persecuted by his father simply "the Religion" (we will capitalize in this usage). We learn, for example, that the king, here named Junaysar, "persecuted followers of the Religion and banned them from his lands in order to surround himself with idolaters."⁸ *Ḍīn*, the Arabic word used for "the Religion," has a wide range of meaning. It originally denoted obedience or discipline and later came to signify obedience to the precepts of Islam. It can also refer to customs or habits, and is even used to indicate debt or financial obligation. With the valorization of *Ḍīn*, the Arabic text does not overtly promote Islam; in fact, the only explicit mention of Islam in the text is in the conclusion, where Būdhasaf, at his death, claims to have "assembled the flock of Islam that had been dispersed." Nor does "the Religion" suggest a veiled form of Buddhism. Although *Bilawhar and Būdhasaf* borrows its frame from the life of the Buddha, the religious doctrine it describes is foreign to Buddhism. In fact, as the editor of the anonymous longer version of *Bilawhar and Būdhasaf* notes, the large place given to the persecution of the "people of the Religion" by idolaters, the exaltation of martyrs, and the monotheism of Būdhasaf's teacher Bilawhar are closer to a Syrian Christian tradition than to Indian Buddhism.⁹

Both Arabic versions begin with the birth of Būdhasaf, and their description of the prince's early life and later death are similar to the Buddhist accounts. Apart from that resemblance, there are no other examples of early Arabic narratives about the life of the Buddha. In fact, early Muslim historians appear to have had little knowledge about Buddhism. Al-Bīrūnī's early eleventh-century encyclopedia on India, *Verifying All That the Indians Recount, the Reasonable and the Unreasonable*, gives many details about Hinduism, but relatively few descriptions of Buddhism.¹⁰

However, the lack of accurate information about Buddhist practices and beliefs does not mean that early Muslim writers had no knowledge of Buddhism's founder.¹¹ The Buddha's name was preserved in two forms in Arabic texts: *al-Budd*, derived from *Buddha*, and *Būdhasaf*, derived from *bodhisattva*. The two forms almost always appear separately; the first is used as a common noun to name an idol or as a proper name to represent a divinity or a prophet.¹² Only rarely is *al-Budd* associated with the Buddha, as in this exceptional account of Buddhist belief by the Muslim writer al-Shīhrastānī in the early twelfth century:

The Buddha [*al-Budd*], in their opinion, means a person who is not born, who never marries nor eats food nor drinks nor grows old nor dies. The first Buddha appearing in the world was named *Shākamin*, which means 'the noble master'. Five thousand years have elapsed from the time of his appearance and the time of the *hijra* [622 CE]. They assert that below the rank of the Buddha is the rank of the *Budisai'ya* [Bodhisattva], the latter term meaning, "the one who seeks the way of the truth." Indeed, one arrives at this rank only by: patience and alms-giving; seeking after that which ought to be sought; abstinence and withdrawal from the world, and aloofness from its desires and pleasures; abstinence from what is forbidden; compassion for all created beings; avoidance of the ten offenses.¹³

This description demonstrates knowledge of the Buddha's relation to a bodhisattva and uses *al-Budd* as the name of the Buddha, but again, this is an exceptional account and the connection of *al-Budd* to the historical Buddha remains rare in Muslim accounts.

In the passage above, as in Buddhism, the Sanskrit word *bodhisattva*, from which *Būdhasaf* is derived, is the term for someone who aspires to become a Buddha. It is also the term that the Buddha used when describing himself in the time before his enlightenment, including his past lives, as we noted in Chapter One. However, early Muslim texts do not clearly distinguish between a bodhisattva and a Buddha, nor do they demonstrate a clear understanding of who the Buddha was. Many Muslim historians take Būdhasaf to be a semi-mythical character from early human times; some claim that he existed before Adam. In the Persian poet Firdawsī's *Book of the Kings*, written at the end of the tenth century, he is a false prophet who appeared in India at the time of Tamūrhat, the third king of the world. This Būdhasaf taught the so-called Sabaeen religion, which some historians take to be the Chaldean belief in the divinity of the elements. The tenth-century Arabic historian al-Mas'ūdī says this about Būdhasaf's teaching:

A star's departure from its sphere, its course through space, the converging or separation of stars at a single point determine, according to

Būdhāsaf, the shape of exterior forms, the appearance or absorption of water into the earth. In sum, he located the supreme engine of the universe in the planets and their spheres.¹⁴

In this passage, Būdhāsaf is said to teach that the stars move the universe and shape everything that happens in it; he is a teacher or a sage. According to other Muslim historians, Būdhāsaf was a false prophet; others saw him as the founder of an idolatrous religion in India. It appears that Būdhāsaf was also remembered for preaching asceticism and generosity, but the more famous teachings of the Buddha, including the four noble truths, do not appear in Muslim texts, nor do these texts recount the Buddha's life.¹⁵ Only *Bilawhar and Būdhāsaf* includes a version of the Buddha's life story.

Historian Daniel Gimaret has suggested that in the Islamic tradition, it is as though Buddhism was shattered into fragments that no one knew how to reassemble.¹⁶ Such fragmentary knowledge is not surprising. As Islam began to spread in the seventh century CE, Buddhism was disappearing in India, especially in its northwestern area (modern Afghanistan and Pakistan) where the earliest Muslim contact had occurred. The famous Chinese pilgrim Xuanzang, traveling through the region in the first half of the seventh century, reported that many Buddhist monasteries were in ruins. Moreover, whereas early Muslim scholars assimilated many scientific texts from India, translations of Indian philosophical texts were much less common. *Bilawhar and Būdhāsaf* is the rare text that reproduces the story of the Buddha's life, though here it serves as a frame for a series of exemplary stories and parables that promote ascetic values. Its Muslim audiences most likely saw the narrative as a text by a non-Muslim writer which nonetheless illustrated values compatible with Islam.

A Prince Is Born

Bilawhar and Būdhāsaf opens with the story of a king who desires a son, and all subsequent translations and rewritings of the story preserve this narrative frame.¹⁷ In the Arabic version, this king is Junaysar of India, and he rules Sulabā, a place name that may be a deformation of Kapilavastu (or in Pali, Kapilavatthu), the birthplace of the Buddha. Junaysar is an idolater king, much attached to the pleasures and glories of his position, and he persecutes the "people of the Religion"; as we said earlier, "the Religion" names an ascetic renunciation of worldly values. But one of the king's courtiers adopts these ascetic beliefs. King Junaysar learns of it and confronts him, demanding that he explain his conversion. The courtier delivers a long sermon on the vanities of the world, the fleeting nature of its pleasures, and the need to prepare for a future life, thus offering the king and the story's readers an initial primer on ascetic beliefs. The king reviles his courtier's path, exiles him, and continues to persecute all those who turn away from the worship of idols.

In King Junaysar we have a very different ruler from Prince Siddhartha's father. King Śuddhodana is a just and respected king. He is not a zealot and he does not persecute his subjects. In one sense, he may be termed an idolater because he makes offerings to various gods, but this religion of ancient India is not a practice that his son, even after he becomes the Buddha, specifically condemns.

In the Arabic story, King Junaysar longs for a son to continue his lineage, and his wife has a dream that foretells the birth of a son called Būdhāsaf. In its inclusion of the mother's prophetic dream, *Bilawhar and Būdhāsaf* preserves an element of the Buddhist narrative absent from Ibn Babūya's Arabic version and from later Christian versions of the story. All versions of the story agree, however, that the king summons astrologers to foretell his son's future. They similarly foretell that the king's son will attain honors and privileges, but one astrologer who reveals that the prince will be a leader of the ascetics and that his glory will come in the next world. Again, the king builds a palace for the prince, isolates him from all the ills of the world, and surrounds him with beauty and pleasure. However, King Junaysar, unlike King Śuddhodana, fears the prophecy and intensifies his persecution of the people of the Religion.

The Arabic story moves away from the Indian work at this point. In the Arabic version, the king has a favored minister who is devoted to his sovereign and serves him faithfully. The minister has great power in the court and the king's other courtiers are jealous of his friend. One day the minister is out hunting and comes upon a man who has been gravely wounded by a wild animal. The man asks for his help and promises a great reward to the minister in exchange for his succor. The minister asks what reward he would receive and the wounded man replies that he mends words with words; when he finds a tear, he repairs it, restitching it so that no ill results. The minister pays little attention to the man's claim, but takes him home and cares for him.

Meanwhile, the king's courtiers conspire to destroy the favored minister. They tell Junaysar that he plans to claim the throne after the king's death. They counsel the king to test his minister's loyalty by summoning him and telling the man that he has decided to abandon his rule and join the ascetics. The minister's reaction will allow the king to judge his intentions, they claim.

The jealous courtiers have discerned the minister's sympathy for the ascetics. When the king tests him, the minister rejoices and commends Junaysar's decision. The king does not reproach him, but the minister sees immediately that the king is displeased and he despairs. Then he remembers the man who claimed to mend words. He sends for him and explains his plight. The word-mender offers good counsel: the king thinks that the minister wishes to take his place, he explains. That is the tear that must be mended with the appropriate words. The minister should set aside his rich clothes and jewels, and put on the humble clothes of the ascetics, shave his head, and go to the king. He should tell Junaysar that he is ready to follow his friend and sovereign into the wilderness. The minister immediately follows the advice of the word-mender. When the king sees the sincerity of his minister's devotion to him, his suspicions are calmed and his trust in and favor for him increase. However, his anger toward the ascetics grows more intense. He exiles them from his country and kills all those who will not leave.

The story of the word-mender expands the description of the king's enmity toward the ascetic people of the Religion and, like the parables that will appear later in the narrative, it is probably based on an Arabic tale, though its source has not been clearly identified. It is an enduring addition to the story, perhaps because it introduces so well one of the themes that underlies the story: the conflict between loyalty to an earthly king and obedience to a spiritual lord.

The Prince Leaves His Palace

The king's son Būdhāsaf grows into a young man. He longs to go out into the world and he wonders why his father has isolated him from it. He persuades Junaysar to allow him to venture into the city, but the king takes the precaution of ordering that any sign of misfortune or unhappiness must be hidden from the prince's view. However, one day as he rides through the city, Būdhāsaf encounters two beggars. One is diseased and the other is blind, and the prince sees illness and infirmity for the first time. Another day he sees an old man and learns that all living things must die. He then understands that the present world cannot offer salvation, and he turns to the ascetic life. King Junaysar attempts to engage his son in the pleasures of the world and the practice of his religion, but fails. The king's persecution of ascetics intensifies.

Although the Buddha's story is a clear source for the story of the king's son in the Arabic texts, the resemblance ends once the prince renounces his father's religion. The Arabic text then turns to a series of didactic exchanges about religion, first between the prince and his ascetic teacher, Bilawhar, then between the prince and his father. Apart from two short passages that may recall the Buddha's experience of sexual renunciation, one in each Arabic version of the story, the Buddha's story returns only at the end of the narrative in the account of Būdhāsaf's death.

The addition of Bilawhar, Būdhāsaf's teacher, may be the most significant change that the story undergoes as it is adopted into a Muslim context. One of the unique qualities of the Buddha in the Indian text is that he discovered the path to nirvana on his own, without relying on a teacher. After the Buddha leaves his palace, he studies with two teachers but soon discovers that they do not know the path to liberation. The monotheistic redactor of the Arabic text may have misunderstood the Buddha's relationship with the two masters whose doctrines he rejects, or he may have invented a teacher for Būdhāsaf in order to reconcile the edifying story of the Buddha with the belief that true knowledge is transmitted through a series of prophets (Moses, Jesus, Muhammad).¹⁸ Whatever the origins of the prince's teacher, his importance in the story represents a significant modification and changes it into a succession of didactic lessons delivered in the form of parables.

A Teacher Arrives

News of Prince Būdhāsaf's beauty, intelligence, and asceticism travels widely. The ascetic Bilawhar hears about the prince's renunciation of the world and vows to go "bring this living man out from among the dead." Bilawhar travels from Sarandīb (Ceylon) to teach him. He arrives disguised as a merchant and tells one of Būdhāsaf's servants that he has an exceedingly valuable jewel to offer the king's son: it will give sight to the blind, heal the sick, make the deaf hear and the weak strong; it protects against madness and vanquishes enemies. The servant marvels at the description of such a powerful object and asks to see the jewel before speaking about it to the prince. Bilawhar declines to reveal his merchandise. The servant's vision is weak, Bilawhar claims, and the jewel could blind him, but the prince has good sight and will be able to look upon it for as long as he likes. The courtier recounts Bilawhar's claims to Būdhāsaf, who immediately understands that Bilawhar has come to give him the wisdom he desires. The prince receives the ascetic, and Bilawhar begins to instruct Būdhāsaf in the Religion, teaching him to disdain the present world and look to the next and to heed the prophets who preach

true wisdom.

Bilawhar's lessons are illustrated by parables and reinforced by maxims. He first teaches the prince the difference between worldly and spiritual values. He tells him about a pious king who worshipped the True God. One day, accompanied by his courtiers, the king met two poor men, barefoot and dressed in rags. The king dismounted, bowed before the wretched men, and embraced them. His courtiers denounced him for his lack of dignity and called on the king's brother to reproach him for forgetting his royal office by humbling himself before unworthy men. The brother went to the king and spoke the words he had prepared, but the king did not reply. A few days later the king sent a herald of death to sound his drum in front of his brother's door, a signal that he would be put to death. The following morning, the king's brother dressed himself in a shroud and went to the king's house, crying and lamenting. He threw himself before the king to beg for mercy. When the king asked him to explain his behavior, the brother cited the king's signal of his pending execution. The king corrected him: his brother was distraught because he had heard an order sounded by a herald. The king's brother should know that he had committed no crime for which the king would condemn him and yet he was still fearful. Moreover, the condemnation sounded by the herald came from a mortal man, not from his Creator. And yet, the king continued, his brother would blame him for bowing before the heralds of his own death, which he saw foreshadowed in the poor men he encountered on the road.

The king knew that his courtiers had led his brother astray, and he decided to teach them a lesson. He had four wooden caskets prepared. Two were filled with gold, silver, and gemstones but covered with black pitch on the outside. Another two caskets were covered with gold, but filled with filth. The king summoned his ministers, showed them the four caskets, and asked which they thought were the most valuable. The courtiers responded quickly, identifying the two caskets covered in gold as priceless; their importance and beauty should be obvious, they claimed. The insignificance and mediocrity of the two caskets covered in pitch was equally obvious to the king's courtiers, who judged them to have no value at all. The king lifted the covers of the caskets his courtiers had judged worthless and showed them the riches they contained. These caskets are like the poor men they judged to be beneath them, he explained. The courtiers judged the men by their appearance, but beneath their poor exterior, they were filled with learning and wisdom more valuable than the gold and gemstones in the caskets. The king had the covers of the golden caskets lifted and showed his ministers the filth inside. He explained that these caskets were like the people who adorn themselves with rich clothing and jewels but are filled with ignorance, resentment, envy, pride, and infamy. The king's ministers understood their error and recognized the worth of the men they had disdained. So, too, Bilawhar says, Būdhāsaf has seen past his poor exterior to the wisdom Bilawhar has brought him.

This parable and many more survive virtually unchanged in the later *Barlaam and Josaphat* texts and in other works as well; Shakespeare adapts the tale of the caskets in *The Merchant of Venice*. *Bilawhar and Būdhāsaf* includes many more parables than the later Christian versions of the story, and exchanges among the characters are full of didactic examples. Both Bilawhar and Būdhāsaf use parables in their conversations, the king uses stories in debates with his son, and Būdhāsaf later uses parables to teach others. In later versions of the story, the didactic stories are increasingly reserved for the prince's teacher. All but two of the parables are found in the lessons of the teacher, Bilawhar, in the Georgian version, and in subsequent versions, all but one parable is spoken by Barlaam. But in all versions of the story, the dialogue between the ascetic teacher and his disciple is structured in the form of questions and answers, and the teacher's answers often take the form of parables. They also include lengthy expositions of doctrine.

Bilawhar teaches Būdhāsaf that the Religion comes from God. Some will respond to His call, others will not, he explains; divine wisdom is available to some men but not to all. It is like the sun, Bilawhar says: some see its light, some are blind to it, and others see it imperfectly. This is why the Religion should only be preached to those capable of hearing and receiving it. Bilawhar recounts a parable about a king's courtier who heard and followed the words of divine wisdom. He shared everything with his king and told him all his thoughts, but he hesitated to declare his beliefs to his lord. The courtier consulted his friends about whether he should instruct the king, and they cautioned him to speak only if the king was worthy and would hear the truth. They warned that if he would not receive the truth, he could turn against the Religion and its practitioners. One evening the king and his courtier rode through the city and came upon a dung hill. Inside they saw an old, poor, and very ugly man dressed in rags, and they pitied him. Then they heard music, and they saw that the man was playing a guitar. His equally ugly wife, also dressed in rags, poured wine for him and danced as he played. The spouses praised each other's beauty, generosity, and nobility, demonstrating a contentment and gaiety that the king and his minister could not comprehend. In Bilawhar's parable, when the king expressed his surprise at the couple's pleasure in their poverty, his companion told him that from the perspective of the Eternal Kingdom, the king himself was a man rejoicing in poverty. The couple's joy is analogous to the pleasure of those who enjoy wealth and privilege in this world—they are all impoverished but do not see it; they enjoy their lives in this world and do not think of the next. The king reproached his minister for not telling him earlier about divine wisdom and commanded him to instruct him. The minister complied, and both men took "the path of salvation and deliverance."

All of Bilawhar's conversations with Būdhāsaf offer similar lessons: to heed the teaching of prophets, to disdain the pleasures of the present world, and to follow the ascetic life. The parables and sermons do not follow an obvious order, however. Indeed, the lack of a strong compositional logic in the ascetic's lessons persists in later versions of the story and may have contributed to the elimination or rearrangement of some of the parables as the story passed through further translations and rewritings.¹⁹

Bilawhar continues to teach the prince for four months, until one of Būdhāsaf's servants begins to worry about the wise man's frequent visits and goes to Būdhāsaf to express his concern that the king may not approve. Būdhāsaf persuades his servant to hide in his room and listen to the teaching of Bilawhar when he next comes to teach him. The servant hears Bilawhar's lessons and recognizes the wisdom of his words, but he fears the king's anger should he discover Bilawhar's presence and asks Būdhāsaf what he should do. The prince counsels his servant to keep his secret, but the servant fears betraying the king's trust. He pretends to be ill and does not return to Būdhāsaf's palace. At this time, Bilawhar decides to leave Būdhāsaf to return to his hermitage. Būdhāsaf wishes to accompany him, but Bilawhar forbids it: the prince's departure would bring the king's wrath upon the ascetics. He would do better to remain at his father's court and convince him to abandon his persecution of the people of the Religion. Bilawhar takes his leave of Būdhāsaf, and the king's son worships God in secret, spending his nights in prayer.

The King Tries to Keep His Son

The departure of Bilawhar marks the end of the first part of the story. In the longer version of *Bilawhar and Būdhāsaf*, our focus here, the second part of the story recounts a series of exchanges between Būdhāsaf and his father and other defenders of idolatry (the shorter version of the story omits these debates). As the story continues, King Junaysar learns that one of the courtiers he placed in Būdhāsaf's household has fallen ill and sends his own physician to heal him. The doctor cannot discover any illness and reports to Junaysar that the courtier must suffer from some anxiety, for he is in good health. The king fears that his man has angered Būdhāsaf somehow, and the prince's displeasure causes him to suffer. He sends word that he will visit the courtier the next day, but before the king can leave his palace, the man rises, dresses, and goes to meet the king. He explains that his illness comes from his heart, but he still does not dare to tell the king about Būdhāsaf's secret conversion, so he attributes his debilitating concern to a dream. The courtier recounts that while he slept he saw a crowd descend on a grove of trees and destroy them all. In their place grew a single great tree that then left the grove and came to Būdhāsaf. As the king's son sat at the foot of the tree and listened to it, the tree shook its branches and its leaves fell into Būdhāsaf's ears and passed into his belly, and his belly grew. Then the tree left, and Būdhāsaf himself became a tree, taller and more beautiful than the first tree. In the dream, Junaysar arrived with a great crowd of people and approached the tree. The tree shook its branches and the leaves fell on the king and those who accompanied him, but after the leaves fell to the ground they flew back up onto the branches from which they had fallen. After the king and his people left, others assembled around the tree, and its leaves fell into their ears. Each of them became a tree in turn, and the grove was filled with trees, more beautiful than it had been before.

The king does not respond to the courtier's recital of his dream, but ponders its meaning. He sends for an interpreter of dreams named Rakis, who reveals to the king that what his courtier recounted was not a dream but a vision. Junaysar confronts the courtier, and the man explains that the invented dream represented both what he had seen and what he had divined about the future. He then tells the king about Bilawhar's visits to his son.

King Junaysar is overcome by anger and devises a plan with the astrologer Rakis. They will capture Bilawhar and make him renounce his beliefs. When the prince sees that Bilawhar cannot defend his Religion, he will turn away from asceticism and return to his father's idolatrous religion. If they cannot find Bilawhar, Rakis will use his magic charms to take on the ascetic's appearance. He will pretend to be Būdhāsaf's teacher and enter into a formal disputation with the king's wise men, who will defend the idolaters' religion. Rakis, disguised as Bilawhar, will allow himself to be defeated and he will renounce his beliefs. Rakis promises the king that Būdhāsaf will follow his teacher's example.

Junaysar sends his men out to search for Bilawhar. They do not find him, but come upon a group of ascetics, led by a man carrying human bones tied to a cord. The ascetics refuse to tell the king's men where they can find Bilawhar; they will not reveal his whereabouts even when threatened with death. In fact, the ascetics ask their captors why they should fear death. Life in this world holds no attraction or pleasure for them. The king's men take their captives back to court, where the king claims that the ascetics will become bones like those they carry if they do not reveal Bilawhar's location. The man who carries them replies that they keep the bones out of veneration for those who have suffered and died because of the king's persecutions, and as a

reminder that death waits for all men. They do not lament for the dead, but they happily add their bones to those they carry. Next, the ascetics reproach the king for his persecutions of ascetics, and he condemns them to be tortured and killed.

Rakis then disguises himself as Bilawhar and the king pretends to capture and imprison him. Before resorting to the staged debate, the king tries to bring Būdhasaf back to his faith by reminding his son of the loyalty he owes to his father and to his lineage. Būdhasaf responds to each of his father's claims for the superiority of his own faith and to each of his criticisms of his son's faith. Just as the king, like Bilawhar before him, uses parables to illustrate his claims, so too Būdhasaf uses parables to refute his father's claims. One of these is a story about *al-Budd*.

The Prophet al-Budd

Al-Budd appears only in the debates between Būdhasaf and his father. When the king reproaches and threatens Būdhasaf because he will not worship idols, the prince explains that al-Budd brought the word of God to the Indians and later died as he journeyed through that land. The 'Anqā, a mythical bird, found his corpse and carried it away to feed its young. Because of the virtuous life lived by al-Budd, when the young birds consumed his body they were filled with piety, goodness, sincerity, knowledge, and wisdom. The young bird that ate al-Budd's eyes saw the vanity of the world; the one that ate his ears heard the cries of the poor and the lessons of the sages; the one that ate his nose rejected the odors of the world; the one that ate his tongue could not bear the bitter taste of a lie; and the one that ate his heart felt what all the others felt, for what was divided among them was held in the heart. The bird that ate the heart gained knowledge of the future life and became a guide for his siblings, telling them about al-Budd and his lessons. Together the young birds agreed to reject their present life in order to seek a future one. When their parent returned, bringing them prey, they divided it among themselves, then took the nourishment into the desert and threw it away. When they became thin and the 'Anqā asked why, the young bird that ate al-Budd's tongue explained that once they had been nourished from al-Budd's body, they had no need of further sustenance. They refused this life in anticipation of the next. When the 'Anqā threatened to beat the young birds, they were not afraid and welcomed the chance to pass more quickly into the next life. The 'Anqā then killed its young, which is why it disappeared from the world and can no longer be seen. Būdhasaf tells his father that he is like the 'Anqā's young. Like them, he welcomes his father's punishment, for he no longer cares for this world and longs only for the next. King Junaysar understands that his reproaches will have no effect on his son. He leaves Būdhasaf and returns to his own palace, full of sorrow and regret.

Al-Budd appears only in the long version of *Bilawhar and Būdhasaf*; in the shorter version the entire debate between the king and his son is absent. The introduction of al-Budd may be a later addition to the original form of the story, but if it is an interpolation, it appears to have been a very early one. Both Būdhasaf and King Junaysar cite al-Budd as an authority for their beliefs, and both father and son claim to be disciples of al-Budd as they dispute the nature of the good and the truth of their respective religions. Both claim to follow the true teachings of al-Budd: For King Junaysar, the prophet taught charity and goodness but did not require the renunciation of the world. For Būdhasaf, al-Budd preached the renunciation of the earthly world, the very renunciation practiced by the ascetics whom his father persecutes.

After his father leaves him, Būdhasaf goes to visit the ascetics taken prisoner during the search for Bilawhar. They have been tortured and most of them have died; only the bone carrier and two others survive. Būdhasaf strips off his clothes, has his men tie his hands behind his back, and walks among the ascetics lamenting their fate. The man who carries the bones of the dead speaks to Būdhasaf and tells him that those he laments have suffered at the hands of powerful men, but their souls do not feel bodily pain. They have gone to join their Master and receive the rewards he will bestow. Būdhasaf tells the suffering ascetics that he is the king's son and he confesses his fear that his own conversion has provoked the king's violence. He asks them to confirm his path in the ascetic religion by releasing his bound hands. The three suffering men rejoice that although King Junaysar has destroyed their bodies, they can still use their tongues. They praise God and claim that the king's violence has only increased their compassion toward the prince's father. They bless Būdhasaf and exhort him to use his freedom and his office to promote and strengthen the Religion of God. They pray that God will pardon his sins and release his hands, and Būdhasaf's bound hands are miraculously freed. The ascetics encourage the prince in his resolve to leave the world and its pleasures. Būdhasaf embraces the bone carrier and stays with the dying men until their souls leave their bodies. Then he buries them.

The figure of the ascetic bone carrier appears in the later Christian versions of the story, in which the bones he carries are easily identified as saints' relics. But Būdhasaf's confession to the dying ascetics, his plea for their forgiveness, and their confirmation of the path he has chosen are elements of the Arabic story that drop out of the later versions, perhaps because of the expanded role of the prince's teacher, Barlaam, in leading the prince toward a formal conversion and baptism, and in exhorting him to his faith.

The King Reminds His Son of His Lineage

King Junaysar learns of his son's departure from the palace and sets out to find him, bringing forty leaders of the idolaters to dispute Būdhasaf's beliefs, forty witches to cast him out of his madness, and forty noble princes to remind him of his office and noble heritage. The king finds his son praying in front of the cave where he has buried the tortured ascetics. Junaysar reasons with Būdhasaf and tries to convince him that his nature should incline him toward the idolatrous religion of his father and forefathers. Būdhasaf's ancestor Baysam was the first disciple of al-Budd, King Junaysar reminds his son, and he claims that the teachings of al-Budd do not require him to renounce the ties of lineage. Būdhasaf rejects his father's claim that he can serve al-Budd while enjoying the privileges of his office, and he rejects the notion that loyalty to his lineage is more important than loyalty to his beliefs. To prove his point, he tells a parable recounted by al-Budd.

A man approached al-Budd as he rested under a tree. He explained that his brother had chosen to leave the world, abandoning his aged parents and young siblings, while he himself chose to stay with his family and support them until the parents died and his siblings grew up. He asked al-Budd which brother was closer to the truth. Al-Budd replied with a parable.

The young sons of a king became separated from their father in the middle of a desert. The two boys took refuge in a cave where a group of monkeys lived. The monkeys treated the children with kindness, and the boys decided to stay with them because, they reasoned, there are none among all the wild animals that resemble humans so closely or that are more gentle, useful, and well disposed toward them. The boys stayed with the monkeys until they reached puberty, and the animals treated them as members of their species. The female monkeys seduced the boys, and the boys slept with them and fathered children. Over the years the king continued to search for his lost sons, and when he finally learned where to find them, he sent messengers bearing presents and leading horses that would carry them back to their father. One brother was eager to return to his father's kingdom, but the other boy's attachment to the place, his children, and his animal spouses, as well as his fear of the long journey across the desert, caused him to stay with the monkeys.

Al-Budd then asked his interlocutor which brother was closer to the truth. The man asked in bewilderment how al-Budd could compare his relationship with his family to the relationship between the boys and the monkeys. Al-Budd replied that the bodies of men are more like the bodies of monkeys than they are like those of our spiritual relations. Spiritual kinship is the only true lineage, and it can be attained only through the rejection of the body, he explained. Būdhasaf uses the story to illustrate that spiritual attachment should take priority over blood relations, and he claims to have learned this lesson from al-Budd.

Būdhasaf argues that his father's words honor al-Budd, but his actions contradict the prophet's teachings. He recounts other parables to show his father that to follow al-Budd means renouncing the world of privilege, wealth, and position and looking to the next world for rewards. King Junaysar is almost persuaded by his son's preaching, but then he remembers the comforts of his life and the pleasures he enjoys, and he resists the truths that Būdhasaf would teach him. He remembers the ruse planned by Rakis and proposes to his son that they test their faiths in a disputation. He will proclaim amnesty for the ascetics so that they may attend, and he will assemble his priests and wise men to debate with Bilawhar. The king's son agrees.

The King Neglects His Idols

On the chosen day, people assemble from throughout the kingdom. High priests gather to dispute their religion with Bilawhar, represented by the disguised Rakis. None of the ascetics attend the disputation, and only one believer in the Religion is present to take Bilawhar's side. The king and his son each agree that if his faith is proven wrong, he will convert to the other's religion. King Junaysar then addresses the idolatrous priests. If they are defeated, he vows, he will destroy all his idols and give up his crown. Moreover, he will kill all his priests, enslave their wives, and crucify their children. Būdhasaf likewise addresses Rakis, who has used magic charms to take the form of Bilawhar. He vows that if the disguised Rakis is bested by the priests of idolatry, he will rip out his heart and his tongue and feed them to dogs. Rakis sees that his ruse has turned against him and that he will die if he does not successfully defend the Religion. He begins eloquently to deny the power of idols and to defend the ascetics and their faith. The king is enraged to see Rakis defend the Religion so well, but he cannot speak to him without revealing the deception they planned together.

At the end of the day, Rakis has defeated the king's philosophers in debate, and Būdhasaf takes him back to his palace. The prince reveals that he knows that Rakis is not Bilawhar. The prince exhorts Rakis to believe his own arguments and convinces him of the truth of the words he himself used to

only two more years and encourages the prince to live with him in filial piety until he dies. Rakis converts to the Religion and leaves Būdhāsaf to go into the wilderness and live as an ascetic. Junaysar recognizes that his plan to deceive his son has failed, and the king loses faith in his idols. Although he does not convert to the Religion, he abandons his efforts to persuade his son to return to idolatry.

Meanwhile, the priests are concerned by the king's neglect of his idols. A great feast day approaches and King Junaysar has made none of his usual preparations for the celebration. The priests seek to revive the king's support for their religion and they turn to a *bahwan*, an idolater who lives in the wilderness like the ascetics but does not share their beliefs.²⁰ First the *bahwan* persuades the king to celebrate the feast day for his idols. Then to reward Junaysar's demonstration of his faith, he tells him how he can win his son back to his religion: the king must call on demons to help him, for they will be powerful allies against his son. When the king asks how demons can be enlisted in his cause, the *bahwan* uses a parable to explain.

The *bahwan's* parable sounds very much like Būdhāsaf's own story. A much desired son was born to a king and when the king assembled his astrologers to foretell the prince's future, the wise men announced that the prince would die if he saw the sun before his tenth birthday. The king had a great pit excavated and furnished with everything his son could need, and he closed his son inside along with his nurses, servants, and teachers. The child stayed in the pit for ten years, and he was then released. His father had him taken through the city and commanded that all things be brought out and displayed for the child so that he could see them and learn their names. All kinds of animals, trees, and goods were shown to the boy, and as he saw them he asked their names. He passed by women and asked what they were called. Those accompanying him replied that these beings were demons who seduced men and led them astray. The prince was filled with love and admiration for them, and when he returned to the king and his father asked him what had most pleased him, the boy replied that of all he saw, the demons pleased him most. And so, the *bahwan* concludes, women are the demons that can help King Junaysar win his son.

Junaysar immediately has all the male servants removed from Būdhāsaf's palace and replaces them with four thousand of the most beautiful women in the country. He charges the women to care for Būdhāsaf, to love and entice him, and the women comply. They wear seductive clothing or no clothes at all; they speak sweetly to the prince; they sing and play music; they accompany him on outings; they even debate with him about the truth of his religion. Among the women is a princess more beautiful and learned than all the others. Būdhāsaf is drawn to her and speaks with her frequently, trying to convince her to abandon idolatry and devote herself to the Religion. She bargains with the king's son: if he will become her lover for a year, at the end of the year she will adopt his religion and live chastely with him for the rest of their lives. Būdhāsaf will not agree. The lady then proposes that he spend a month with her, or just a single night. Būdhāsaf is no more immune to the seductions of women than any other man, the narrator tells us, and he is tempted. Satan enters his body and convinces him to surrender to his desire; the prince spends a single night with the lady and she conceives a son. Afterward, Būdhāsaf regrets his actions.

When the king learns of the princess's pregnancy, he is delighted because he thinks that his lineage is now assured, since his grandson will inherit his throne if his son will not take it. King Junaysar no longer depends on the women to convince Būdhāsaf to return to idolatry, but he keeps them in his son's palace. Satan continues to torment Būdhāsaf with the women's beauty, and the prince seeks refuge in prayer. One night while he lies prostrate in devotion to God, his soul is taken from his body. He sees Bilawhar and the bone carrier coming toward him. They take him to Paradise, where he sees a brilliant splendor unlike any he has seen on earth. He compares the lowliest things of Paradise to the most beautiful women from his palace, and the women appear repugnant to him. Bilawhar and the bone carrier show him the place that awaits him in Paradise, and they then return his soul to his body. Būdhāsaf awakes and sees the women gathered around him; they saw his still and unbreathing body and feared he had died. Būdhāsaf gazes on the women and is filled with disgust for them.

The king's effort to use the seductions of women to bring his son back to his religion draws on an episode from the life of the Buddha and is also found in all subsequent versions of the story, but sexual attraction is only one of the attachments to the world that the prince rejects. Unlike the hero of the later Christian versions of the story, Būdhāsaf does not remain a virgin, and virginity and chastity do not assume the central place that they hold in *Barlaam and Josaphat*. In this regard, the Arabic text more closely resembles the story of the Buddha, who also produces an heir before he renounces the world.

Būdhāsaf Preaches the Religion

King Junaysar learns of the change in his son and goes to visit him. Būdhāsaf tells his father about his vision of Paradise and calls on him to serve God and His Religion. He reminds him of the prophecy that foretold his death: the king has but a short time left to live and he has no hope of joining his ancestors in a future life if he does not put his faith in God's Religion. Būdhāsaf assures his father that even though he has been imperfect in this life, his conversion would assure his comfort and contentment in the future life. The king is moved and wishes to turn to God. He embraces the Religion and abandons his idols. Junaysar sends the women out of Būdhāsaf's palace and dwells there with his son.

After the king renounces idolatry, his subjects also neglect the idols. The *bahwan* comes to Būdhāsaf to reproach him for abandoning his ancestral gods and preventing his people from worshipping their true gods. Būdhāsaf reasons with the *bahwan*, teaching him about the difference between appearance and reality, and argues that the *bahwan's* gods offer only the appearance of truth and power, whereas al-Budd reveals the true word of God. Būdhāsaf convinces the *bahwan* to renounce idolatry and embrace asceticism. The *bahwan's* conversion is a final blow to the idolaters. Their priests are scattered, and the people openly distrust them.

Būdhāsaf's son is born, and after the child's birth, his mother keeps her promise to live chastely until her death. The king keeps his grandson close to him, but he regrets that he has such a short time to live and fears that without his protection, the young boy will not inherit his kingdom. The king questions wise men about his grandson's future. Unlike the astrologers who predicted his son's renunciation of his kingdom, they confirm that the king's lineage will prosper; his grandson will have a long life and many descendants. The king is content and happy that he heeded Būdhāsaf's urgings to follow the Religion.

Būdhāsaf and Bilawhar ends with an account of Būdhāsaf's death that clearly draws on the life of the Buddha. An angel from God goes to Būdhāsaf and tells him that it is time to leave this world to seek the kingdom that will never end. Būdhāsaf should prepare himself, for the angel will come to summon him shortly. Būdhāsaf does not speak of the angel's visit, nor does he announce his departure, but he is prepared when the angel arrives in the night. He goes to the palace gate and asks for his horse. A young man runs after him and reproaches him for leaving. His people have long anticipated his reign, the man claims, and they have desired to live under his rule. Būdhāsaf sends the young man home and tells him that if he will help the prince leave his kingdom, he will have a share in all that he accomplishes after his departure. Būdhāsaf mounts his horse and prepares to leave, but then changes his mind and dismounts to go on foot, telling his squire to take the horse back to his parents. His squire asks how he will tell Būdhāsaf's parents of his departure. He regrets the prince's decision and the hard life of solitude he has chosen. Būdhāsaf's horse also regrets his decision. It bows before the prince and kisses his feet. God gives the horse speech and it begs Būdhāsaf not to leave it behind, but the prince is resolved to depart alone. He gives his rich clothing, his jewels, and his horse to his servant, then travels north on foot until he reaches a great plain. Near a spring he sees a tree full of birds and takes it as a symbol of his mission. Four angels take him to heaven and reveal everything there to him, and then Būdhāsaf returns to his native land. His father learns of his arrival and comes to meet him with honor. Būdhāsaf preaches the Religion to the people and the land is full of wisdom. The day of King Junaysar's death arrives, and Būdhāsaf stays with him.

These episodes share much in common with the story of the Buddha. On the night that Prince Siddhartha renounces the world, he leaves the palace on his royal steed Kāñhaka accompanied by his groom Chandaka. Once outside the city he exchanges his royal dress for the common clothes of Chandaka and sends him back to inform his father of his departure. He also bids farewell to his horse, which dies of a broken heart. After six years of ascetic practice, he finds the Bodhi Tree and sits down under it, meditating all night and achieving enlightenment at dawn. Now the Buddha, he gathers a group of disciples, eventually returning to the capital, where he teaches the *dharma* to his father. His teaching is not represented as an effort to convert, but simply as a sharing of the truth that the Buddha has come to understand. Unlike the Arabic tale, the Buddha's father does not die at that time and the Buddha's young son does not become heir to the throne; instead, he becomes a monk. Later, hearing that his father is dying, the Buddha flies through the sky to be with him, and then preaches to him so that his father can attain enlightenment and enter nirvana.

In *Bilawhar and Būdhāsaf*, the prince buries Junaysar according to the custom of the ascetics. Then he assembles all his relatives and the princes of the realm and calls them to the Religion of God, and they embrace it. He destroys the idols and transforms their temples into places for the worship of God. He converts all the people of the land, and thirty thousand of them become ascetics who renounce the world to live in the wilderness. The prince chooses his uncle Samṭa as his successor, and then he leaves his land to wander through the cities of India calling people to the Religion of God.

When he arrives finally at Kashmir, it is time for him to die. He gives his last counsel to his disciple, Ababid, and the people of Kashmir. He says, "I have taught, protected, and raised up the Church, I have put there the lamps of those who came before me, I have reassembled the dispersed flock of Islam to which I was sent. Now the moment comes when I will be raised out of this world and my spirit will be freed from its body. Observe your commandments, do not stray from the truth, adopt the ascetic life! Let Ababid be your leader!" We hear in this speech echoes of the final instructions of