

LITERATURE REVIEW

The Path of Human Spiritual Development in Georgian *Balavariani*

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ABSTRACT

One of the most critical issues in hagiography is the presentation of the path of human spiritual development. The writer conducts the narrative while maintaining the compositional integrity of the works, presenting an idealized image of the hagiographic hero through the main plot line and its tributary episodes. An analysis of the plot and compositional structure of the Georgian “Balavariani” shows that the main character, Iodasaf, undergoes a visible spiritual transformation from prince to saint, becoming an ideal hero against the backdrop of other characters in the work. Moreover, the prince, educated by Balavari, is the initiator of the spread of the Christian faith in his kingdom. King Abenes tried to educate the prince with pagan religious teachings, but God guided his future through a different spiritual life, a Christian worldview, and self-awareness. Jodasaph, despite the prohibitions, accepted Christianity and reached the highest level of self-awareness; he was able to convert others to the Christian faith. Of particular significance is the conversion of King Abenes himself. The purpose of the works is the deification of the hagiographic hero who has embarked on the path of sainthood and his transformation into a god-clothed one. The author uses the artistic method of establishing Jodasaph as a saint as a key issue; he himself creates Jodasaph as a saint, employing a hypodigmatic-paradigmatic structure and symbolic-enigmatic facial expressions. The saint of the hagiography, Bal-ahvari in “Balavariani,” and his disciple Jodasaph gradually become clothed with a heavenly image, which is completed by deification and communion with God as a result of their worthy life-work in this world; they achieve citizenship in heaven. The article aims to present the spiritual image and the process of becoming saints of the characters in the Georgian “Wisdom of Balahvari”.

Keywords: The Wisdom of Balahvar, iodasaph, abenes, the path of spiritual development, inheritance of the Celestial Kingdom

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INTRODUCTION

One of the central aspects in determining the literary value of hagiographic works is the depiction of the path of human spiritual development. In this process, the hagiographer constructs the narrative to present the ideal image of the main character – the hagiographic figure – through the primary plotline and ancillary episodes, including the presentation of the hypodigmatic aspects of biblical characters and the paradigmatic interpretation of the episodes, all while maintaining the compositional coherence of the work. Ivane Javakhishvili laid the foundation for studying the phenomenon of the human being in the context of Georgian literature, history, and society in his article *Man in Ancient Georgian Literature and Life*.¹ (Javakhishvili, 1956, pp. 130-155). In this article, he focused primarily on the doctrine of man in historical and literary texts. He presented his socio-ethical ideals, aiming to explore man's purpose as a member of society and as a creator. In defining the nature and essence of hagiography, Korneli Kekelidze noted that it is a product of the ancient literary era, which simultaneously contains theoretical ideas about fiction grounded in the fundamentals of artistic thinking characteristic of the period during which hagiography emerged and flourished. In hagiography, artistic representation assumes a regularized form (Kekelidze, 1960, pp. 500–503). This observation can be extended not only to Georgian literature but also to the entire genre of Christian literature in general, including hagiography, as it is not a phenomenon unique to Georgian tradition. A hagiographer creates an idealized character from an evaluative perspective and presents him as possessing the qualities of a saint. According to Revaz Siradze, hagiography, as an anthropological category, is a form of writing that describes the ideal human of its time. When hagiography created and shaped a new ideal of a human being, it faced two tasks: to overshadow earlier (mythological) figures and to incorporate the characteristics of prominent personalities from antiquity (Siradze, 1975, p. 102). The saint in hagiography develops gradually, undergoing spiritual growth; in this way, he is portrayed dynamically, which distinguishes him not only as a divine figure but also as an aesthetic one.

An analysis of the plot development and compositional structure of the Georgian version of *The Wisdom of Balahvard* demonstrates that the central figure, Iodasaph, undergoes a spiritual transformation that is manifest to the reader, from prince to saint, and ultimately emerges as the ideal character in contrast to the other figures within the narrative – moreover, the prince, educated by Balahvar, initiates the dissemination of Christianity in his kingdom. *The Wisdom of Balahvar* also demonstrates its affinity with works of a distinct compositional genre through its depiction of a childless king's story; in this regard, it invites comparison with Sulkhan-Saba Orbeliani's *A Book of Wisdom and Lies*, which shares both similarities and divergences, though this topic warrants separate discussion. It should be noted that *The Wisdom of Balahvar* has not yet been the subject of a dedicated scholarly

1 Ivane Javakhishvili made a significant contribution to the study of the phenomenon of man, being the first to discuss man in ancient Georgian literature and life, based on historical and hagiographic works in his article *Man in Ancient Georgian Literature and Life*. When classifying issues, he identified three main problems: 1. The doctrine of man; 2. The socio-ethical ideals of man; 3. Man as a creator. In each of the works discussed, man is presented through different fields of anthropology.

study from an artistic and figurative perspective. However, some scholars have offered isolated commentaries on specific episodes or characters.

One of the main characters of *The Wisdom of Balahvar*, King Abenes – who, after prolonged prayers and supplications, was granted a son by God, thereby emerging as a hypodigmatic figure in Sulkhan-Saba Orbeliani's *A Book of Wisdom and Lies* – attempted to raise the prince according to ancient religious beliefs and teachings. However, divine providence ordained otherwise, guiding the prince's future along a completely different spiritual path shaped by a Christian worldview, self-awareness, and self-knowledge. Despite his father's opposition, Iodasaph embraced Christianity, achieving the highest degree of spiritual self-awareness and converting others to the Christian faith. Of particular significance was his conversion of his father, King Abenes himself – an achievement made possible through Iodasaph's tremendous effort, relentless struggle, faith, hope, and profound devotion to God. This event also carries symbolic weight, as the work reflects different generational perspectives, and the triumph of the new generation is perceived as the victory of the new religion.

Georgian and Byzantine hagiographies exhibit differences and similarities in their specific hagiographic features (Kekelidze, 1960, pp. 501–505; Siradze, 1987, pp. 5–21). In particular, Byzantine hagiography lacks a national phenomenon, due to a lack of a sense of nationality – a defining characteristic of the multi-ethnic imperial state. In Byzantium, national ideas and the state ideology failed to align; instead, they remained distinct. The Byzantine Empire's state status and collective consciousness shaped the perspectives of its ruling elites and citizens, resulting in the absence of national themes in its hagiography. By contrast, Georgian hagiography was deeply influenced by national literary traditions that must have been strong in the pre-Christian era, playing a major role. This contributed to the development of original Georgian hagiographic literature that was essentially new and distinct from its Byzantine counterpart. In scholarly literature, it has frequently been noted that fiction occupies a substantial place in Byzantine hagiography, characterized by rich figurative language and a diversity of artistic-expressive methods – a feature also present in Georgian hagiography. This abundance of fictional elements in Georgian hagiography contributes to its resemblance to Byzantine hagiography. Georgian hagiographic literature is rightfully regarded as a rich corpus of exemplary works within the Georgian literary tradition, reflecting pivotal events central to Christianity. This attests to the spiritual and intellectual maturity, cultural sophistication, and capabilities of the Georgian nation. Against this backdrop, *The Wisdom of Balahvar* exhibits tendencies distinct from Georgian hagiography, instead following the trajectory established in Byzantine hagiographic writing. It does not engage with national themes, a feature determined by the work's origin: it is considered a Christianized adaptation of the Buddha's life. In this context, the author's national stance is neither observed nor anticipated; rather, the focus lies on the author's concept of the ascetic Christian life. The primary concern is the protagonist's spiritual transformation – emulating the Savior, walking in His footsteps as a saint, witnessing the journey of Christ's Passion, restoring the original image of Adam (fallen through sin), and striving to elevate the fallen Adam – an endeavor achievable only through divine will.

The work's ultimate purpose is the deification of the hagiographic protagonist, who embarks on the path of sainthood and is transfigured into a God-bearing figure. This journey toward this goal is arduous, requiring traversing with physical suffering while embracing Christian joy. Through this process, the saint – adorned with the typical artistic traits of a hagiographic character and drawing near to the Savior – transforms worldly attributes into reflections of the divine. The author focuses on the artistic method of shaping Iodasaph as a saint, making it clear that he is the architect of Iodasaph's sainthood. To achieve this, he employs various literary techniques and expressive means, with the hypodigmatic-paradigmatic structure and the symbolic-enigmatic expression playing central roles. Paul's First Epistle to the Corinthians defines the relationship between the symbolic images of Adam and the Savior, stating that "the first man," Adam, made of dust, bears a physical, earthly image after the Fall. In contrast, the Savior, "the second man," embodies the heavenly image. Every human is clothed in the essence of this world, and must also be clothed with the image of the heavenly: "*The first man was of the earth, made of dust; the second Man is the Lord from heaven... And as we have borne the image of the man of dust, we shall also bear the image of the heavenly Man*" (1 Cor. 15:47). In the hagiographic narrative, Balahvar from *Balavariani* and his disciple Iodasaph gradually take on the semblance of the sacred – a transformation culminating in deification and communion with God, following their virtuous lives and deeds in this world. They are depicted as heirs to the Celestial Kingdom.

METHODS

This article employs multidisciplinary research methods – primarily historical-comparative, analytical, hermeneutic, and those grounded in source studies – to present the process by which the hagiographic figure is transformed into a God-bearing figure on the path to sainthood. The study applies the fundamental characteristics of scientific thought, each assigned particular significance – on the one hand, to examine the general artistic image of the hagiographic character, and on the other, to position the hagiographic figure as the central character within the context of Georgian scientific and literary-artistic thought, as well as world literature.

RESULTS

The study elucidates the arduous path of human spiritual development depicted in the work, wherein the hagiographer constructs the narrative through a central plotline and supplementary episodes – including the retelling of biblical passages – while preserving the compositional integrity of the text. The aim is to present the idealized image of the central figure – the hagiographic protagonist. An analysis of the plot development and compositional structure of the Georgian version of the text reveals that the main character, Iodasaph, undergoes a spiritual transformation before the reader's eyes, evolving from a prince into a saint, and emerges as an ideal figure in contrast to the other characters in the work. Furthermore, the prince, under Balahvar's guidance, emerges as a pivotal figure in

the propagation of Christianity within his kingdom.

The study has also revealed that *The Wisdom of Balahvar* exhibits parallels with works of a compositionally distinct genre through its depiction of the narrative of a childless king. King Abenes endeavored to raise his son in accordance with ancient religious beliefs and teachings; however, divine providence intervened, redirecting the prince's future toward a distinct spiritual path grounded in the Christian worldview and self-awareness. Despite prohibitions, Iodasaph embraced Christianity, attaining the highest degree of spiritual self-awareness, and succeeded in converting others to the Christian faith. Of particular significance was his conversion of his father, King Abenes himself – an achievement made possible through Iodasaph's tireless effort and relentless struggle.

Unlike Georgian hagiography, Byzantine hagiography lacks a national dimension, which can be attributed to an absence of national identity characteristic of Byzantium as a multi-ethnic state, where national identity and state ideology failed to coincide. Byzantine hagiography is characterized by a significant presence of fictional elements and is rich in figurative language and artistic-expressive techniques – a feature also present in Georgian hagiography. It is important to emphasize that Georgian hagiography strongly emphasizes national identity. Against this backdrop, *The Wisdom of Balahvar* demonstrates tendencies that diverge from those typical of Georgian hagiographic tradition, aligning instead with the conventions of Byzantine hagiography. It fails to address the national motif – an aspect determined by the work's origin, as it is a Christianized version of the Buddha's life. The author's concept of Christian asceticism occupies a central position in the text, with primary emphasis on the spiritual transformation of the protagonist, emulating the Savior, the saint's following in Christ's footsteps, the testimony of Christ's passion, the restoration of Adam's primordial state lost through sin, and striving to elevate the fallen Adam. Accordingly, Balahvar from *Balavariani* and his disciple Iodasaph gradually took on the semblance of the sacred, culminating in deification and communion with God. Following their dignified lives and deeds in this world, they are portrayed as having attained heirship to the Celestial Kingdom.

PURPOSE

The article aims to explore the spiritual imagery of the characters in the Georgian *Balavariani* (*The Wisdom of Balahvar*) and to trace the process of their formation as saints. The aim of the work itself is to depict the deification of the hagiographic protagonist through the transformative journey of sainthood and his emergence as a God-bearing figure. This journey is arduous, involving physical suffering embraced with Christian joy, through which the saint, adorned with the typical artistic traits of the hagiographic character and drawing near to the Savior, transforms worldly qualities into ones that reflect the divine.

DISCUSSION

The central theme of *The Wisdom of Balahvar* is the upbringing of the character's spiritual successor – made evident by the title of the work itself – and the character's spiritual growth through the teaching and transmission of divine wisdom, ultimately revealing a figure elevated above all worldly concerns. Typically, hagiographic works center on individuals endowed with the highest spiritual qualities – figures marked by divine perfection and completeness – who approach or attain the inner nature of a moral person, the ideal of humaneness¹. What constitutes the ideal human or humaneness? This fundamental question necessitates an anthropological inquiry, theoretically grounded in biblical, particularly psalmic, and evangelical-apostolic teachings. It is noteworthy that “Martyrdom” and “Life” genres offer differing portrayals of the ideal human being/humaneness, the image of a moral person: “Martyrdoms” depict singular episodes of suffering culminating in death, whereas “Lives” portray the merits accomplished by a saint in this world, i.e., a saint’s earthly virtues and accomplishments. Yet, neither the lives portrayed in “Martyrdoms” culminating in death, nor the virtuous lives depicted in “Lives” can be regarded as perfect or complete, since true fulfillment lies in the inheritance of the Celestial Kingdom.

Recent studies suggest that the work possesses a missionary character. Elguja Khintibidze, in particular, argues that “The fact that *Barlaam-Roman* is a work created for missionary purposes is confirmed not only by the narrative part of the work (i.e., the compelling story of a young king converting his country to Christianity), the denunciation of paganism, and the defense of Christianity, but also by the author’s reworking of the original text (i.e., the Georgian *Balavariani*). This reworking follows the metaphrastic principle, i.e., the enrichment of the hagiographic text with additional passages” (Khintibidze, 2024, p. 15; see also Khintibidze, 1982, pp. 155–163).

The Wisdom of Balahvar begins with the depiction of an old-generation king, which, in my view, simultaneously reflects the image of the country itself. Taken together, these elements provide the basis for examining the text from a multidisciplinary perspective. Taken together, these features open the way for the text to be approached from a multidisciplinary perspective. The extended and short versions of the text portray King Abenes differently. The extended version states that in India, in Sholoti, a pagan and idolatrous king, Abenes, reigned, terrifying and dangerous to all. He is presented as the enemy of Christ’s servants and ruled over a vast kingdom inhabited by countless people. Abenes, a conqueror of enemies, is described as relaxed and arrogant, and as pleasing in appearance. In contrast, the short version presents Abenes as calm, humble, and deeply merciful toward the poor², introducing him through his positive qualities. Notably, later, even in the extend-

1 On the spiritual image of a saint, see: G. Parulava, *On the Nature of Artistic Imagery in Ancient Georgian Prose*, Tbilisi, 1982; L. Grigolashvili, The Theme of the Saint in Georgian Clerical Poetry// Problems of Ancient Georgian Literature (dedicated to the 75th anniversary of the birth of Professor Levan Menabde), Tbilisi; N. Sulava, *On the Nature of a Spiritual Image in Hagiography and Hymnography// The Time of Sacrifice in the Georgian Language*, Tbilisi, 2018, pp. 65–78.

2 The divergent portrayals of Abenes in the extended and short versions of *The Wisdom of Balahvar* warrant a separate study, which could offer further insight into the origins of the respective editions.

ed version, Abenes is depicted as merciful – though initially only toward pagans. The work presents the spiritual transformation of Abenes, ultimately culminating in his conversion to Christianity. This transformation acquires special significance as an illustration of personal spiritual growth, depicting a man who embarks on a path of truth-seeking late in life. In fact, he initially stands in stark contrast to the figure of the Good Shepherd. Eventually, he gains spiritual insight and repents his foolish behavior – living in pleasure and caring only for worldly glory. Before his death, he laments not having had sufficient time to repent and perform good deeds. His sorrow over entering the path of the truth so late is expressed through the metaphor of the parable of the Prodigal Son: “I was lost, and You sought me; I was bound, and You freed me; for I was an enemy, and You gave me shelter” ([The Wisdom of Balahvar, 1957b, p. 154](#)). Shortly before his death, the king – having achieved profound Christian awareness – instructs his son so that the allure of temporal royal glory would not cause him to forget his love for Christianity and his pursuit of eternity ([The Wisdom of Balahvar, 1957, p. 154](#)). Iodasaph compares Abenes, who converted to Christianity late in life, to the “eleventh-hour worker,” whom the Lord honors equally alongside the others, thereby affirming the evangelical teaching that repentance and entering the path of God are never too late. The king also asks Iodasaph to distribute his wealth to the poor and needy, hoping that his soul might be saved through good deeds. In this way, the work presents the spiritual growth and artistic transformation of the once-wrathful Abenes as a merciful Christian who earned the crown of eternal inheritance in the next world.

In *The Wisdom of Balahvar*, the concept of human spiritual growth occupies a central place. The narrative features characters with diverse traits – King Abenes, Prince Iodasaph, Tutor Balahvar, Zandan the Trainer, among others – but places particular emphasis on three key figures, with Prince Iodasaph standing out prominently. Regarding him, the text states: “He [King Abenes] had a son, and there had never been born a son as remarkably handsome as him in those times” ([The Wisdom of Balahvar, 1957a, p. 9](#)). According to the work’s conceptual vision, King Abenes was granted a son by God. He credited the idols with this mercy and expressed his gratitude to them. Notably, Iodasaph entered the narrative as a “promised son,” and accordingly, his future as the chosen one was determined by divine providence. The pagan king summoned astrologers and prophets to foresee the fate of his only son. They revealed the son’s future to Abenes, but the prophecy was far from pleasing; in fact, it became a source of profound sorrow for the king. The king was informed that the prince would attain royal glory unmatched by anyone in the land. At first glance, such a prophecy should have seemed favorable; however, the wisest and most trustworthy man foretold that this royal glory would be unearthly – signifying true leadership along the Christian path. This deeply disturbed the king and led him to make a drastic, misguided decision: to prevent communion with the Christian faith, he expelled all Christians from his country. He confined the prince in a separate city so that the prophecy would not be fulfilled. In fact, he defied divine providence, ordering the construction of a separate city for the prince, where his son would be raised in complete isolation, cut off from the outside world. It was necessary to find a tutor responsible for the prince’s comprehensive upbringing. Balahvar was chosen for this role because he stood out at the royal court for his exceptional wisdom and was capable of providing the prince with the necessary instruction. However, according to

the shorter version of the text, the king, unable to persuade the Christian advisor to accept idolatry, expelled him from the kingdom. Balahvar abandoned everything – he refused to renounce his Christian faith for material gain. Here, the theme of the struggle for faith – specifically Christianity – emerges. It can be argued that Balahvar's symbolic renunciation of worldly glory is expressed through a powerful gesture: removing a golden belt adorned with precious stones in the presence of the king ([The Wisdom of Balahvar, 1957b, p. 16](#)). His words further affirm the strength of his conviction – his resolve remains unshaken, not even the offer of the royal crown from Abenes.

In the extended version, following this episode, Balahvar – who has escaped death – is no longer present at the royal court. Through this act, the nature of King Abenes as a human being is revealed: he appears incapable of recognizing the truth or demonstrating foresight. He lives within the temporal and spatial confines of idolatry, and his spiritual future hinges entirely on the Christianization of his son. To be fair, Abenes is also portrayed by the author from the perspective of a loving father – a man who seeks to protect his son from temptation, pain, and illness, and to raise him as a strong, free, and independent individual; a future king capable of governance, care for his people, and discernment between good and evil in the earthly life. It is here that Abenes errs: the king's son was to be raised in a specially constructed city, far removed from the royal court. According to his father's instructions, he would remain ignorant of the truth. Specifically, he would not know what death, illness, old age, youth, eternity, sin, poverty, or, more generally, the hardships and adversities of life were. Abenes removed Iodasaph from all worldly trials, believing he was acting in the prince's best interest – that the prince should live in joy and comfort, without developing a desire to inquire into the nature of earthly life or, later, to take an interest in the Christian faith. This is a flawed decision from the outset, as the truth would inevitably come to light. The king places himself in opposition to God, divine providence, and the Christian community. He attempts to assert his will over life and defy destiny – an ultimately futile endeavor. This is precisely how the narrative unfolds in *The Wisdom of Balahvar*. None of the king's courtiers, fearing his anticipated wrath, dares to advise or warn him that shielding the prince from the realities of earthly life would serve no purpose in preparing him to rule as a future king. Balahvar, however, understood this. That is why, at the appropriate moment, he appeared before the prince as a tutor to guide him toward spiritual awakening. What ultimately proved decisive in challenging the king's decision was the inquisitive spirit of the king's son himself. Despite the king's efforts, the prince comes to understand the inevitability and necessity of death, as well as the burden of hardship and illness. This experience profoundly transforms his previously acquired understanding of God, the universe, earthly life, and the human being, awakening in him a desire to comprehend the essence and meaning of worldly life. In time, the king reflects and acknowledges his error: he had failed to expose his son – the heir to the throne – to both the joys and sufferings of life. As he later concedes: "Had I allowed you to face trials and to taste the bitter alongside the sweet, you would not be ignorant of the bitterness of suffering and the sweetness of life. But now, you are unaware of the sweetness of this life, for you have never known the bitterness

of the life you now seek.” ([The Wisdom of Balahvar, 1957a, p. 103](#))¹.

In *The Wisdom of Balahvar*, it is stated that the king ostensibly ensured his son received all the knowledge necessary for kingship. However, it appears that Iodasaph did not receive a complete education from his tutor, Zandan/Zadan. The instruction he received was limited in scope, failing to address the transience and complexity of earthly life. Only by facing both the appealing and the challenging aspects of earthly life did the prince begin to critically examine worldly concerns, question his core values, and subsequently pose exploratory questions to his tutor, ultimately compelling the latter to reveal the truth. The knowledge acquired within a confined and isolated environment proved insufficient to satisfy the prince’s curiosity and spiritual needs. Iodasaph proved to be an intelligent and spiritually inclined figure whose expanding consciousness and yearning for spirituality collided with the realities of earthly life. This tension transformed his spiritual outlook and enabled him to perceive reality, the earthly life, and its underlying principles in an entirely new light. It also set the stage for deeper comprehension. Troubled and distressed, Iodasaph came to recognize the necessity of acquiring soul-nourishing wisdom – knowledge beneficial to the soul – which had been inaccessible to him in isolation but attainable with the help of Balahvar, who had secretly reached the prince. According to versions of *The Wisdom of Balahvar*, Balahvar – having learned of the prince’s desire for spiritual knowledge – began secretly visiting Iodasaph in the guise of a merchant to instruct him. In this way, despite the king’s efforts to prevent it, the prophecy was fulfilled. The Christian-minded educator, Balahvar, is portrayed as a wise man who gained experience through travelling. His biography is neither included in the text nor necessary, as the narrative centers on the prince’s transition to Christian consciousness, his spiritual ascension, and his aspiration to inherit the Celestial Kingdom. By the time Iodasaph met the teacher from a foreign land, he had already reached adulthood. This detail signals his entry into a new phase of life, wherein he is prepared to deepen his understanding and explore the essence of God and the universe.

Balahvar tested Iodasaph’s intelligence before beginning to teach him divine wisdom. He conveyed to the prince various perspectives regarding the Christian God and the nature and essence of earthly life. As a result, the prince came to comprehend the world in both its positive and negative aspects. Through Balahvar, he acquired divine wisdom, along with Christian beliefs and knowledge. According to the text, Balahvar’s pedagogical method was rooted in theoretical parables and admonitions, which are reflected in the work in accordance with the understanding of biblical rhetoric and exegetical literature. In contrast, the transmission of biblical knowledge to the king’s son through biblical texts opens up perspectives for the hermeneutical study of the composition. Moreover, the transmission of biblical knowledge to the king’s son through biblical texts themselves establishes avenues for the hermeneutical study of the work. He explained the nature of earthly life and worldly

1 In general, the symbolic interpretation of the binary opposition between *sweet* and *bitter* is interpreted in line with philosophical and theological teachings. It also permeates fictional literature and acts as a conceptual artistic-expressive device, and an ideological-worldview construct. Accordingly, the symbolism of *sweet* and *bitter* is found not only in theological literature – particularly in hagiographic literature – but also in secular works; as an example, we can cite the following aphorism from *The Knight in the Panther’s Skin*: “He finds the sweet turns bitter: better what is hard-won”.

temptations, helped Iodasaph understand how earthly life entices human beings, and identified those who express affection for it. Balahvar instructed Iodasaph to avoid temptation and guided him toward an understanding of divine wisdom. Iodasaph is portrayed as highly intelligent, inquisitive, and deeply appreciative of wisdom. Despite his profound respect for his father, he did not comply with the king's intention to raise him in isolation and shield him from awareness of the world's good and evil. He came to understand the rationale behind his isolation. Ultimately, Iodasaph proved to be wiser than his father, for unlike the king, he received from Balahvar the wisdom that the king had sought to suppress. This wisdom, grounded in Christian doctrine and belief, guided the human mind and spirit toward the knowledge of the truth. Iodasaph demonstrated the knowledge he had acquired from Balahvar at the royal court, where the king tested his son's newly gained understanding through a series of questions and answers. In his debate with the king and Rakhis, Iodasaph defended his position by drawing on the knowledge imparted by Balahvar; he upheld the Christian faith, which entailed renouncing the pleasures of earthly life. It is noteworthy that within the narrative, the characters are mindful of the "time to speak." More broadly, the understanding of the appropriate "time to speak" is essential to human life, as it ensures the accurate and constructive reception of what is communicated. Significantly, in *The Wisdom of Balahvar*, the king accepted the truth spoken at the appropriate moment and came to recognize the falsehood of his own prior beliefs ([The Wisdom of Balahvar, 1957, p. 49](#)).

The Wisdom of Balahvar explores the theme of spiritual testing, a motif rooted in ancient mythologies, classical literary traditions, and philosophical teachings, which also resonates in later literary works. In the narrative, Abenes subjects his advisor to a test of loyalty. Similarly, Balahvar tests Iodasaph's intelligence to determine his readiness to receive divine wisdom. Later, the prince – already educated in Christian doctrine – is himself subjected to testing by the king and his advisor, Rakhis. In one of Balahvar's parables on wisdom, a bird tests a man's adherence to three previously imparted commandments. Particularly noteworthy in *Balavariani* is the court of justice convened by the king and Iodasaph, wherein two faiths are debated in an attempt to reveal the truth¹. For Iodasaph, this event constitutes a test of his religious conviction. Abenes is ultimately left disappointed, as no compelling arguments are presented in defense of idolatry and fire worship, leading him to question their essence and truth. The prince also tests Zandan the Trainer by deliberately exposing him to Balahvar's teachings on the vanity of earthly life, while feigning disagreement, to assess Zandan's attitude and understanding of Balahvar's wisdom. Zandan, however, fully perceives the situation and recognizes that "the time has come" for him to embark on his spiritual journey, revealing his previously acquired knowledge of Christianity. Iodasaph's resolve is further tested when the king, following the advice of the idolater Thedma, appoints beautiful women as his servants in an attempt to seduce him and draw him toward worldly pleasures. Iodasaph, however, resists temptation and expels from the palace all who seek to seduce or distract him ([cf. Kekelidze, 1945, pp. 13–22](#)).

1 In Georgian hagiography, among various religions, the spiritual quest of St. Eustathius of Mtskheta and St. Abo is complemented by the inquisitive spirit of St. Iodasaph.

The narrative depicts Iodasaph's gradual spiritual growth. One illustrative episode is his discussion with the king, in which he advises his father to consider what is "the best" for his soul. The prince, having already discovered "the best" through the wisdom imparted by Balahvar, seeks to guide his father toward the truth. Abenes, however, struggles to comprehend why one cannot "serve two masters." The entire narrative of *The Wisdom of Balahvar* is imbued with the assertion of the futility of earthly life and the necessity of striving toward eternal life, which the author presents as humanity's sole path to salvation. This is why Western scholarly literature refers to *The Wisdom of Balahvar* and its Greek version, *Barlaam and Ioasaph*, as "a story beneficial to the soul" (Kekelidze, 1960, p. 188; Kaukhchishvili, 1973, pp. 224–236)¹. The prince declares that earthly happiness and existence are meaningless to those who know eternal glory (Balavariani, 1957, p. 51).

A question arises: what must a king know to govern a country – a state – more effectively? What distinguishes a good king from a bad one? A king cannot be raised solely in luxury and abundance, detached from the everyday realities of his subjects – the people. A king must experience and comprehend both the positive and negative aspects of earthly life – knowing and feeling good and evil, sweetness and bitterness. This was what Iodasaph lacked during his period of seclusion. Merely living in comfort and acquiring wisdom was insufficient. Abenes believed he had taught the prince what was most necessary for kingship; however, he failed to impart the essential wisdom without which the king cannot become a just and virtuous ruler of his state and his people.

What does Balahvar teach Iodasaph in this regard? According to the text, Balahvar instructs the prince in divine wisdom: (Balavariani, 1957a, p. 64). He teaches: "Likewise, a wise man should examine himself in all his deeds and desires, and then judge for himself with his mind what is just, what is good to choose, and what is fitting in its season." A wise man must "drive away evil with knowledge"; he "loves wisdom and humility, for through wisdom man attains the good commandments of God, whereas through folly many souls perish. For the foundation of all strength is the fear of the Lord and the keeping of His ways" (Balavariani 1957a, p. 64). This teaching reflects biblical wisdom which can be attained only by a person specially prepared – one filled with spirituality and educated in divine wisdom. According to the work, Balahvar guides the prince in several directions, emphasizing that the fear of God is the beginning of wisdom – an idea rooted in biblical tradition: "Likewise, a wise man must teach himself, just as a good shepherd teaches his flock. And the fear of God must always and forever be in his thoughts, for the Psalmist says: The fear of God is the beginning of wisdom, and a good understanding have all they that practise it" (Balavariani b, 1957, p. 64). Balahvar acknowledges that divine wisdom and knowledge cannot be imparted to everyone; most people are not prepared to receive it. They are incapable of comprehending God's commandments and are instead inclined to transgress them, substituting divine truths with human inventions. As an example, Balahvar refers to the persecution of Christians and the dominance of idolatry in the kingdom

1 Simon Kaukhchishvili has attested to the lemmas used in the Greek translation of the work, in which *Barlaam and Ioasaph* is referred to as "a story beneficial to the soul" (Kaukhchishvili, 1973, pp. 224–236).

of Abenes. This is vividly illustrated in the parable he shares with Iodasaph – “*The Bird and the Man*” – a story rich in symbolic meaning. In exchange for its freedom, the bird promises to teach the man three applicable commandments, the observance of which would bring him benefit in life: “*Do not seek the unattainable, do not regret the past, and do not believe in what is not*” (Balavariani 1957a, p. 58). The fact that a bird delivers this wisdom is itself significant, as birds are traditionally viewed as symbols of freedom, spiritual life, and independent decision-making. A person must be inwardly prepared to receive divine wisdom and to cultivate it further. One may teach a person many things, but if he is not receptive, the effort will be in vain. In this context, Prince Iodasaph is depicted as a fruit that will inevitably multiply spiritually (cf. Luke 6:43–44).

“Full of the Holy Spirit and all wisdom,” Balahvar also cherished earthly life. However, following the Christian worldview, he came to understand that no one remains in this world forever – “Neither great nor small, neither strong nor weak, neither wise nor foolish” (Balavariani 1957b, p. 62). Like many before him, he would one day depart from this life. All earthly wealth is fleeting; only the fear of God can deliver a person from eternal punishment. Consequently, Balahvar chose to restrict his own will and desires, cultivating within himself the fear of God in order to avoid falling into worldly anxiety – a struggle in which divine guidance sustained him.

Balahvar is entrusted with introducing new wisdom to the royal court. Disguised as a merchant, he risked his own life as he gained access to Iodasaph to train him and teach him divine wisdom. In the short version of the text, the knowledge he conveys is described as “tuali patiosani” (“the precious stone”)¹, while in the extended version, it is referred to as “the vessel of great value”. Symbolically, both terms – “tuali patiosani” and “the vessel” – represent concealed Christian teaching accessible only to a select few. According to Balahvar, only a person with a discerning eye and purity of body can perceive this wisdom. Only the chosen are capable of “seeing” or comprehending the wisdom imparted by Balahvar, as exemplified by Iodasaph: “I have heard that the son of the king has become the chosen one and has lived a holy life, free from all evil” (Balavariani 1957, p. 29). Therefore, Balahvar hoped that Iodasaph would be able to “see the vessel” (Balavariani 1957, p. 29).

The wisdom sought and received by man is likened to a “pearl of great value” (Balavariani A 1957, p. 46). According to Balahvar, wisdom is manifested in various forms, as he distinguishes between apparent and concealed knowledge², both of which he imparts to

1 A parallel of “tuali patiosani” of *The Wisdom of Balahvar* is found in Bivril/Bivrit from *The Conversion of Kartli*, who survives the destruction of the Armaz idol and symbolically acquires the meaning of Christian wisdom.

2 It has long been observed in scholarly literature that the work is familiar with the views of St. John of Damascus, including those regarding wisdom articulated in *An Exact Exposition of the Orthodox Faith* (John of Damascus, 1977, 52:6). Among more recent studies, one may mention the work of Irma Makaradze, who cites R. Folke’s position regarding the Greek translation of the text: namely, that passages from the writings of John of Damascus are quoted both accurately and extensively, though with certain minimal theological modifications, as well as occasional minor additions or omissions from the cited material. It should also be noted that in the Greek text, the quotations from St. John of Damascus are particularly emphasized (Makaradze, 2024, p. 34).

Iodasaph. Iodasaph is portrayed as God's chosen one, who never reproached his strict educator and was able to "see" and grasp the wisdom conveyed to him – a privilege not granted to all. For instance, Zandan, despite understanding the essence of divine wisdom, feared the king more than he revered the true God. Balahvar asserts that "a wise man must teach himself, just like a good leader teaches his people, guiding their actions with humility, alleviating their burdens, and thereafter honoring those who obey." (Balavarani 1957a, p. 64). *The Wisdom of Balahvar* is meant for an ideal individual – not for the "weak-minded person," but for one who is "full of mind" (Balavarani 1957a, p. 30). To cultivate spiritual growth and acquire wisdom, a person must be prepared, for not everyone has the strength to do so. Balahvar tells Iodasaph the Gospel parable of the sower (Matthew 13:44), illustrating the teaching of wisdom and the transmission of the true word. The purpose was to teach that only the seed that falls on fertile soil can bear fruit and multiply, meaning that true wisdom can be attained by an individual who, through the unity of eye, heart, and mind, has conquered desire, purified themselves of passions, and brought forth good fruit.¹.

The enthroned Iodasaph became the embodiment of the paradigm of a good shepherd and king. He became a ruler loved by all. The nation admired him for his wisdom, justice, kindness, mercy, and humaneness. Many people left the kingdom of Abenes to reside in the prince's domain. Observing this, the fearful king granted his son control over his part of the country. The people refused to allow Iodasaph to relinquish the throne. When he departed from the kingdom, the nation followed him, like sheep without a shepherd. They mourned deeply until nightfall, much like children grieving for a father (Balavarani 1957a, p. 165)². In turn, Iodasaph, from the perspective of a good shepherd, imparted wise instructions to Barakhya, who was preparing to ascend the throne. He taught him how to govern the kingdom with dignity, encouraging him to emulate the qualities of a good shepherd. Eventually, Iodasaph relinquished the royal throne to pursue a monastic life. Balahvar tested Iodasaph, and the latter realized that the "tuali" mentioned by his tutor was not material, but rather a "word" that would bring him spiritual benefit. Balahvar conveyed knowledge "beneficial to the soul" to the prince through parables, explaining the content and symbolic meaning at the end of each one. Like Balahvar, Iodasaph imparted advice "beneficial to the soul" to Barakhya, the future king of India.

Iodasaph proved to be the prince who could renounce worldly luxury and glory, finding contentment even in little things, driven by a desire for spiritual nourishment. Therefore, from the outset, he wished to follow Balahvar and live among the monks; however, the sage did not consider him ready for this. In his view, a person raised in luxury and never exposed to poverty may easily go astray. Nonetheless, Iodasaph's resolve remained steadfast. His path of spiritual development proved challenging, as he first had to rule the kingdom – his father granted him half of it to govern. Abenes, though unwilling, was compelled to cede

1 The Gospel parable of the sower is interpreted in the exegetical work of St. John Chrysostom, *Translation of the Gospel of Matthew* (John Chrysostom, 1998, pp. 16–18).

2 A parallel to this episode appears in the account of Queen Shushanik's confinement in Iakob Khut-sesi's *Martyrdom of the Holy Queen Shushanik*, when the martyred queen is accompanied by people weeping and lamenting – a hypodigmatic image of the Gospel account of Jesus Christ's journey to Golgotha, where He was likewise accompanied by those who shared His faith.

half the kingdom to his son to prevent him from retreating to the desert to become a monk. The heir to the Indian throne agreed to rule only temporarily, for his father's sake. The prince determined the kingdom's future, along with the well-being of its people and land. Accordingly, the heir seeking divine wisdom became a harbinger of spiritual progress. From Iodasaph's words in *The Wisdom of Balahvar*, it is evident that he comprehended the true duty of a king: "None should be so zealous as a king to walk in righteousness, for it is his duty to shepherd his people in safety and mercy" (Balavariani 1957b, p. 136). Iodasaph began his reign by distributing alms from his wealth to the poor. His primary goal was to perform good deeds and to deliver his people from both spiritual and physical suffering. His spiritual care manifested itself in the dissemination of Christianity; he ensured that his principalities and territories ruled by eristaviselected a worthy bishop, the latter being entrusted to shepherd the flock with righteousness, dignity, and "judgment of righteousness."

The Wisdom of Balahvar aims to instill a morality rooted in Christianity, illustrating the Christianization of a pagan nation through the figures of Balahvar and Iodasaph. Iodasaph first encountered teachings on the nature of earthly and eternal life from Zandan the Trainer and later from Balahvar, who was enlightened by Christian wisdom. Balahvar conveyed biblical teachings to his disciple through parables, elucidating symbols that profoundly transformed the prince's worldview and steering him away from the idolatrous path of his father. Ultimately, Iodasaph converted the entire Indian country to Christianity. From this foundation emerged Iodasaph, characterized by wisdom and intellect, who altered the spiritual future of the whole nation. The parable narrated by Balahvar about the king and his loyal companion imparts an unjderstandin of Christianity and its adherents, who "tested this earthly life and discovered that all its splendor was transient" (Balavariani 1957a, p. 51).

The Wisdom of Balahvar emphasizes the futility of earthly life and the necessity of turning towards eternal life, which, according to the author, is the sole salvation for humanity. Iodasaph embraced this worldview and ultimately withdrew to the desert as a monk. The desert holds symbolic significance as a place of spiritual testing and transformation.¹, fostering the individual's spiritual formation and preparing them for the attainment of the higher realm – the Celestial Kingdom.

CONCLUSION

Based on the analysis of the Georgian redaction of *The Wisdom of Balahvar*, it can be concluded that the work demonstrates compositional affinities with texts of other literary genres through the inclusion of the motif of a childless king, embodied in the figure of King Abenes. The central message of *The Wisdom of Balahvar* is the spiritual development of the human being, a path that involves immense difficulty. The main character, Ioasaph, undergoes a profound spiritual transformation before the reader's eyes, evolving from a prince

¹ There exists a substantial body of scholarly literature on the activities of clergy in the desert. Noteworthy among these are Grigol Peradze's *The Beginning of Monasticism in Georgia* (Peradze, 2006, pp. 51–56), Revaz Siradze's *Georgian Hagiography— The Image of Giorgi Merchule* (Siradze, 1987), and others.

into a saint and ultimately forming the image of an ideal hero. King Abenes attempted to raise the prince according to ancient religious doctrines and teachings, but God ordained otherwise. Despite all prohibitions, Ioasaph came into contact with the Christian faith and attained the highest level of self-awareness: he succeeded in converting others to Christianity, most notably his own father. Moreover, it can be said that the prince, instructed by Balahvar, emerged as the initiator of the spread of Christian doctrine within his kingdom.

Significantly, *The Wisdom of Balahvar* reveals tendencies that differ from those of Georgian hagiography, instead following the path shaped by Byzantine hagiographic literature, in which national identity is not emphasized. This contrasts sharply with Georgian hagiography, where the national element plays a crucial role. This difference is primarily determined by the work's origin, which explains why the author's concept of the Christian ascetic life occupies a central place. The essential focus lies in the spiritual transformation of the character, which the author achieves by depicting the protagonists as citizens of the heavenly realm.

Ethics Approval and Conflict of Interest

This study was conducted in accordance with relevant ethical standards. The authors declare that there are no financial, personal, professional, or institutional conflicts of interest that could have influenced the design, conduct, interpretation, or publication of this work.

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