The story of Ahikar from the Aramaic, Syriac, Arabic, Armenian, Ethiopian, Old Turkish, Greek and Slavonic versions

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THE STORY OF AHİKAR
THE STORY OF ĀḤIḴAR

FROM THE
ARAMAIC, SYRIAC, ARABIC, ARMENIAN,
ETHIOPIAN, OLD TURKISH, GREEK
AND SLAVONIC VERSIONS

BY

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AND

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SECOND EDITION
ENLARGED AND CORRECTED

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PREFACE

THE story which is here rescued from the Arabian Nights and, with some diffidence, restored to the Biblical Apocrypha, occurs in such various forms and in so many languages that there are few scholars who could edit it single-handed, and I suspect that not many critics will see their way at once through the diverse transmission of the legend to its primitive verity.

In the present edition I have had the assistance of my friends Mrs Lewis and Mr Conybeare in dealing with the linguistic problems; and I am also much indebted to my friend Mr Kennett for his kindness in reading and revising the Syriac sheets. Without their aid, the attempt to edit Aḥīkār would have been inadequate. As it is, I hope we have been able to clear up some of the difficulties in the text, and to pave the way for its further criticism. The part taken by each of the contributors is indicated by the initials of their names.

J. RENDEL HARRIS

PREFACE TO SECOND EDITION

THE first edition was nearly exhausted, when the story of Aḥīkār was again brought into prominence by the discovery of a series of papyrus fragments from the island of Elephantiné, dating from the fifth century before Christ. A new edition of the tale was therefore required. We had further material in the discovery of an old Turkish or Tartar version, with which Mr Conybeare has enriched the present edition. We hope it will be found in every way more correct as well as more complete than the first.

J. RENDEL HARRIS
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THE STORY OF AḤIKAR AND HIS NEPHEW NANDAN

INTRODUCTION
(By J. RENDEL HARRIS)

CHAPTER I
ANTiquITY OF THE LEGEND

The story of Aḥikar has been long known to readers of the Arabian Nights, in the supplement to which it finds a place; but, in common with many other tales which are so liberally heaped up by Scheherezadé, or which have been attached to her collection, it has escaped up to the present time from the close inspection of criticism, into the focus of which it has been slowly drifting; but, as we shall see when we consider the literature that has been quietly accumulating around it during the last few years, there has been an increasing perception that we had in this pretty romance something more and something earlier than a conventional Arab tale of the way in which Ingratitude meets its due, and that the nucleus of the tale, at all events, was Biblical or semi-Biblical in character, however wide the gulf might at first seem between the Hebrew and the Arabic literatures. And it is this perception of the imperfectly recognised debt which one branch of Semitic literature owes to another, and the rectification of ideas involved in the payment of the debt, that furnishes the main motive of the present tract.
But, before plunging into readings and recensions, into the
criticism of texts and the discrimination of sources, let us briefly
sketch the main features of the story itself.

Aḥīkār, or, as he is called in Arabic, Hayḵar, was the vizier of
Sennacherib the king of Assyria, and was famous amongst men
for his wisdom in all that concerned morality and politics. But
he had a standing grief, in that the wealth and power which he
had acquired, and the wisdom which he had attained, could not be
perpetuated in a son born of his own body; nor did his prayers to
the gods in this regard, nor the successive marriages which he
made with sixty wives, result in any male child whom he might
bring up as his successor, and to whom he might teach those
precepts of virtue which every Sage, from his time onward to the
days of Polonius, the Grand Vizier of Denmark, has wished to
erenew to gravure thereof upon the youthful mind. At the last
his reiterated appeals brought him the reply of the Supreme
Power that he should take his sister’s son and bring him up as his
own offspring.¹

¹ [The folk-lore details of the bringing up of Nandan can be found in the
literature of Tibet. Take for instance the detail of the eight nurses.
This seems to be a favourite feature of Basteru story-telling.
The following illustrations from Tibetan Tales (von Schiefner and Ralston).
Story of Sūdhana Avadana: p. 52.
‘The boy Sudhana was handed over to eight nurses, two to carry him, two to
suckle him, two to cleanse him, and two to play with him. As these eight nurses
fed him and brought him up on milk, both sweet and curdled, on butter, both fresh
and clarified, on butter-foam (Butter-Schaum) and on the best of other things, he
shot up rapidly like a lotus in a tank.
By the time he was grown up he was acquainted with reading and writing &c.’
p. 257. Story of Visvāntara.
‘To the boy Visvāntara were given eight nurses, two for carrying, two for
suckling, two for cleansing and two for playing, who fed him on milk, curdled milk,
butter, melted butter, butter-foam, and divers other excellent kinds of nutriment,
so that he grew rapidly like a lotus in a pool. When he had grown up and learnt
writing, counting, and hand-reckoning &c.’
‘Let him be named Sūryanemi. When he had received that name, he was
entrusted to eight nurses, two for carrying, two for suckling, two for cleansing, and
two for playing. These eight nurses nourished him with milk, curdled milk, butter,
melted butter, butter-foam, and other excellent kinds of food, and he grew apace
INTRODUCTION

The babe who is thus brought on the scene grows into man's estate, becomes tall as a cedar (though a mere bramble in heart), and is in due course introduced to king Sennacherib as the successor-designate of the now aged Aḥiḳar. He is a 'goodly apple, rotten at the core.' The precepts of his uncle have scarcely penetrated the outworks of his mind, and he seems to have grown up without any taste for the proverbial philosophy which Aḥiḳar had so liberally showered upon him.

He commenced to take more than a son's place in the home, and more than a successor's right in the palace. At home he squandered, and at court he intrigued. Finally a suggestion on the part of Aḥiḳar to replace his wilfulness and wantonness by the superior fidelity of a younger brother brought the intrigue to a head. Nadan wrote in Aḥiḳar's name treasonable letters to neighbouring sovereigns, sealed them with Aḥiḳar's seal of office and then betrayed his uncle to the king. When the unfortunate victim of this intrigue is brought before the king, he is unable, through fear and surprise, to utter a word in his own defence, and as he who does not excuse himself, accuses himself more effectively than his slanderers, he is promptly ordered to be done to death.

It happens, however, that Aḥiḳar had on a previous occasion saved from the wrath of his majesty King Sennacherib, the very person who is now directed to cut off the head of Aḥiḳar and throw it a hundred ells from the body. An appeal to his gratitude results in a scheme by which a substitute is found in the condemned cells at Nineveh to undergo the extreme penalty, while Aḥiḳar is safely ensconced in a dark underground excavation beneath his own house, where he is secretly supplied with food, and has occasional visits of consolation from his friend the like a lotus in a pool. When he had grown up he learnt writing, reckoning, drawing and hand reckoning and the arts and accomplishments.¹

p. 279. Story of the two brothers.

¹ Let him be called Kasemankars. This name was given to him and he was entrusted to eight nurses, two to carry him, two to suckle him, two to cleanse him and two to play with him. These nurses brought him up on various milk products and other excellent forms of nourishment, so that he shot up like a lotus in a pool.]
Executioner. Here he has the maddening experience of hearing the overhead revels of Nadan and his boon companions and the shrieks of his beaten men and maids, and occupies his loneliness by fervent petitions to the Lord for a rectification of his lot, which prayers were, if we may judge by subsequent events, more closely allied to the vindictive Psalms than to the Sermon on the Mount.

The liberation of the imprisoned Vizier comes at length through political dangers in which his wise head and steady hand were needed and not found. The king of Egypt, presuming on the reports of Aḥikar's death, sends a series of absurd demands to Sennacherib of a type which Eastern story-tellers affect, demanding answers to fantastic questions and the performance of impossible requirements. Inter alia, he will have a castle built in the air and ropes twisted out of sand. All the while he conceals beneath these regal amenities the desire to damage the Assyrian kingdom. Aḥikar is now in demand; Assyria has need of him; and the prudent Executioner plays the friend's part by confiding to the king that the Sage is still living. The re-instatement of the buried outcast affords material for the story-teller to dilate upon, as he records how the wasted and withered old man, with nails

1 [For a parallel, take Wiedemann, Popular Literature in Ancient Egypt p. 43: 'The papyrus evidently described an encounter between the rival potentates, Apei, the Hyksos of Avaris, and the leader of the national party Râ-sakenen (Soknunri) whose dwelling-place was in Upper Egypt. Each propounded to the other riddles and difficult problems, on the solution of which the fate of his adversary was to depend.]

2 [On the demand to make ropes out of sand, we may compare:
Tales from Tibet (v. Schiefer and Ralston) p. 138.
Story of Mahansadha and Visakha.
'King Janaka sent a messenger to Pûrṇa, the head man of the hill-village Pûrṇakatsakshhâ with an order to send a rope made of sand one hundred ells long. When the messenger had arrived and communicated the order, Pûrṇa was greatly alarmed. From his birth upwards he had never seen nor heard of such a thing, and he would therefore have to expect a reprimand...Mahansadhâ asked him to send for the messenger, saying that he would reply to the king. Thereupon he said to the messenger, "Make known to the people this my request, without forgetting it. As the people of our country are slow-witted, unintelligent and stupid, may it please the king to send an ell of that kind of rope as a pattern, like unto which we will twine a hundred, nay, a thousand ells, and will send them to him"...The king was astonished.']