The Story of Ahikar, Syriac version A (translated by F. C. Conybeare, J. Rendel Harris and A. S. Lewis)

Story of Ahikar (5th century BC (earliest text); versions of the 1st-10th centuries AD)

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Chapter 1.

1. AGAIN, by the divine power, I write the proverbs, to wit, the story of A ikar, sage and secretary of Sennacherib the king of Assyria and Nineveh. In the twentieth year of Sennacherib, son of Sar adum, king of Assyria and Nineveh, I, A ikar, was the king's secretary. 2. And it had been said to me when I was a boy, that no son will be born to thee: and the wealth that I had acquired was too vast to tell. Sixty wives had I wedded: and sixty castles did I build them: and I had no son. 3. Thereupon I, A ikar, built me a great altar, all of wood; and kindled fire upon it, and laid good meat thereon, and thus I spake: 4. 'O Lord, my God; when I shall die and leave no son, what will men say of me? they will say that this, then, is A ikar the just and good and God-serving: he is dead, and has left no son to bury him, no! nor a daughter: and his possessions, as if he were accursed, no man inherits.

5. But I ask of Thee, O God, that I may have a male child; so that when I shall die, he may cast dust on my eyes:' 6. and this voice was heard by me, 'O A ikar, wise scribe, all that thou hast asked of me I have given thee; but as to my having left thee childless, let it suffice thee: perplex not thyself: but behold! Nadan thy sister's son: he shall be a son unto thee: so that with the growth of his stature thou shalt be able to teach him everything.' 7. And when I heard these things, I was grieved again, and said, 'O Lord God! is it that Thou wilt give me as a son Nadan my sister's son, so that when I die, he may throw dust on my eyes?' And no further answer was returned to me. 8. – 10. And I obeyed the command and took to me for a son Nadan, my sister's son: and because he was yet young, I furnished him with eight wet-nurses: and I brought up my son on honey, and made him lie on choice carpets, and clothed him in fine linen and purple; and my son grew and shot up like a cedar, and when my son was grown big, I taught him book-lore 10 and wisdom; and when the king came from the place to which he had gone, he called me and said to me, 'O Ahikar, the wise scribe and master of my thoughts, when thou shalt wax old and die, who is there to come after thee and to serve me like thyself?'

11. And I answered and said to him, 'O my lord the king, live for ever! I have a son, wise like myself, and book-learned like myself, and educated.' 12. And the king said to me, 'Bring him and let me see him. If he is able to stand before me, I will release thee in peace, and thou shalt spend thy old age in honour, until thou shalt end thy days.' 13. Then I took my son Nadan and set him before the king, and when my lord the king saw him, he said, 'This day

shall be a blessed day before God, so that like as Ahikar walked before my father Sarhadum, and before me also, he shall be rewarded and I will set his son in my gate in his lifetime, and he shall depart his life [in peace].' 14. Thereupon I, Ahikar, bowed down before the king and said, 'My lord the king, live for ever! And like as I walked before thy father and before thyself even until now, so do thou also extend thy forbearance to the youthfulness of this my son, that thy grace which was toward me may be found multiplied towards him.'

15. Then when the king heard this, he gave me his right hand, and I, Ahikar, bowed down before the king. Nor did I cease from the instruction of my son, until I had filled him with instruction as with bread and water. And on this wise was I discoursing to him:

Chapter 2.

1. ‘Hear, O my son Nadan, and come to the understanding of me, and be mindful of my words, as the words of God : 2. My son Nadan, if thou hast heard a word, let it die in thy heart, and reveal it to no man; lest it become a hot coal in thy mouth and burn thee, and thou lay a blemish on thy soul, and be angered against God. 3. My son, do not tell all that thou hearest, and do not disclose all that thou seest. 4. My son, do not loose a knot that is sealed, and do not seal one that is loosed. 5. My son, lift not up thy eyes and look upon a woman that is bedizened and painted; and do not lust after her in thy heart; for if thou shouldst give her all that is in thy hands, thou findest no advantage in her; and thou wilt be guilty of sin against God.

6. My son, commit not adultery with the wife of thy neighbour; lest others should commit adultery with thy wife. 7. My son, be not in a hurry, like the almond-tree whose blossom is the first to appear, but whose fruit is the last to be eaten; but be equal and sensible, like the mulberry-tree whose blossom is the last to appear, but whose fruit is the first to be eaten. 8. My son, cast down thine eyes, and lower thy voice, and look from beneath thine eyelids: for if a house could be built by a high voice, the ass would build two houses in one day: and if by sheer force the plough was guided, its share would never be loosed from the shoulder of the camel. 9. My son, it is better to remove stones with a wise man than to drink wine with a fool. 10. My son, pour out thy wine on the graves of the righteous, rather than drink it with evil men.

11. My son, with a wise man thou wilt not be depraved, and with a depraved man thou wilt not become wise. 12. My son, associate with the wise man, and thou wilt become wise like him; and associate not with a garrulous and talkative man, lest thou be numbered with him. 13. My son, while thou hast shoes on thy feet, tread down the thorns and make a path for thy sons and for thy sons’ sons. 14. My son, the rich man eats a snake, and they say, “He ate it for medicine.” And the poor man eats it, and they say, “For his hunger he ate it.” 15. My son, eat thy portion, and despise not thy neighbours. 16. My son, it is not becoming even to eat with a shameless man. 17. My son, envy not the prosperity of thy enemy; and rejoice not at his adversity.

18. My son, draw not near to a woman that is a whisperer, nor to one whose voice is high. 19. My son, go not after the beauty of a woman, and lust not after her in thy heart because

the beauty of a woman is her good sense, and her adornment is the word of her mouth. 20. My son, if thine enemy meet thee with evil, meet thou him with wisdom. 21. My son, the wicked falleth and riseth not; but the just man is not moved, for God is with him. 22. My son, withhold not thy son from stripes; for the beating of a boy is like manure to the garden, and like rope to an ass [or any other beast], and like tether on the foot of an ass. 23. My son, subdue thy son while he is yet a boy, before he wax stronger than thee and rebel against thee, and thou be shamed in all his corrupt doing.

24. My son, get thee an ox that [is fat and] lies down, and an ass that has good hoofs, but do not get thee a slave that is runaway nor a maid that is thievish; lest they destroy all that thou hast gotten. 25. My son, the words of a liar are like fat sparrows; and he that is void of understanding eateth them. 26. My son, bring not upon thee the curses of thy father and of thy mother, lest thou rejoice not in the blessings of thy children. 27. My son, walk not in the way unarmed; because thou knowest not when thy enemy shall come upon thee. 28. My son, even as a tree is fair in its branches and fruit, and a bosky mountain in its trees, so is a man fair in his wife and weans; and he that hath not brethren, nor wife nor weans, is despised and contemptible before his enemies; and he is like unto a tree by the roadside, from which every passer-by plucketh, and every beast of the weald teareth down its leafage.

29. My son, say not, “My lord is a fool, and I am wise”; but take hold of him in his faults and thou shalt obtain mercy. 30. My son, count not thyself to be wise, when others count thee not to be wise. 31. My son, lie not in thy speech before thy lord, lest thou be convicted, and he shall say to thee, “Away from my sight!” 32. My son, let thy words be true, in order that thy lord may say to thee, “Draw near me,” and thou shalt live. 33. My son, in the day of thy calamity revile not God; lest when He hear thee, He should be angered against thee. 34. My son, treat not thy slave better than his fellow; for thou knowest not which of them thou wilt have need of at the last. 35. My son, smite with stones the dog that has left his own master and followed after thee.

36. My son, the flock that makes many tracks becomes the portion of the wolves. 37. My son, judge upright judgement in thy youth, in order that in thy age thou mayst have honour. 38. My son, sweeten thy tongue and make savoury the opening of thy mouth; for the tail of a dog gives him bread, and his mouth gets him blows. 39. My son, suffer not thy neighbour to tread on thy foot, lest he tread on thy neck. 40. My son, smite the [wise] man with wise word, that it may be in his heart like a fever in summer; [but know] that if thou smite the fool with many blows, he will not understand. 41. My son, send a wise man and give him no orders; but if thou wilt send a fool, go rather thyself and send him not. 42. My son, test thy son with bread and water, and then thou canst leave in his hands thy possessions and thy wealth.

43. My son, withdraw at the first cup, and tarry not for lickerish draughts: lest there be to thee wounds in thy head. 44. My son, he whose hand is full is called wise and honourable; and he whose hand is scant is called foolish and abject. 45. My son, I have carried salt and removed lead; and I have not seen anything heavier than that a man should pay back a debt

when he did not borrow. 46. My son, I have carried iron and removed stones; and they were not heavier on me than a man who settles in the house of his father-in-law. 47. My son, teach hunger and thirst to thy son, that according as his eye sees he may govern his house. 48. My son, better is he that is blind of eye than he that is blind of heart; for the blind of eye straightway learneth the road and walketh in it: but the blind of heart leaveth the right way and goeth into the desert.

49. My son, better is a friend that is at hand than a brother who is far away: and better is a good name than much beauty: because a good name standeth for aye, but beauty wanes and wastes away. 50. My son, death is better than life to a man that hath no rest: and better is the voice of wailing in the ears of a fool than music and joy. 51. My son, better is a drumstick in thy hand than a wing [?] in the pot of other people; and better is a sheep that is at hand than a heifer that is far off: and better is poverty that gathers than wealth that scatters; and better one sparrow in thy hand than a thousand on the wing: and better is a woollen coat on thy back than fine linen and silks on the backs of others.

52. My son, restrain a word in thy heart, and it shall be well with thee; because when thou hast exchanged thy word, thou hast lost thy friend. 53. My son, let not a word go forth from thy mouth, until thou hast taken counsel within thy heart: because it is better for a man to stumble in his heart than to stumble with his tongue. 54. My son, if thou hear an evil matter, put it seven fathoms deep underground. 55. My son, tarry not where there is contention: for from strife arises murder. 56. My son, every one who does not judge right judgement angers God. 57. My son, remove not from thy father's friend, lest perchance thy friend come not near to thee. 58. My son, go not down into princes' gardens, and draw not near to princes' daughters. 59. My son, aid thy friend before the ruler, that thou mayst find out how thou mayst help him from the lion.

60. My son, rejoice not over thy enemy when he dieth. 61. My son, when thou seest a man who is stronger than thyself, rise up before him. 62. My son, if the waters should stand up without earth, and the sparrow fly without wings, and the raven become white as snow, and the bitter become sweet as honey, then may the fool become wise. 63. My son, if thou art a priest of God, be thou ware of Him and enter His presence in purity, and from His presence remove not. 64. My son, him that God prospers do thou also honour. 65. My son, strive not with a man in his day, and stand not against a river in its flood. 66. My son, the eye of man is like a fountain of water, and it is not satisfied with riches until filled with dust. 67. My son, if thy will is to be wise, refrain thy tongue from lying, and thy hand from theft, and thou shalt become wise.

68. My son, have no part in the espousal of a woman; for if it shall go ill with her, she will curse thee; and if it shall go well with her, she will not remember thee. 69. My son, he that is elegant in his dress is elegant also in his speech, and he that is contemptible in his dress is contemptible also in his speech. My son, if thou shalt find a find before an idol, offer the idol its share of it. My son, the hand that was satisfied and is now hungry will not give, nor the hand that was hungry and is now satisfied. My son, let not thine eyes look upon

a woman that is beautiful; and be not inquisitive into beauty that does not belong to thee: because many have perished through the beauty of woman, and her love has been as a fire that burneth. My son, let the wise man strike thee with many blows, and let not the fool salve thee with sweet salve. My son, let not thy foot run after thy friend, lest he be surfeited with thee and hate thee. My son, put not a gold ring on thy finger, when thou hast not [wealth]3, lest fools make mock of thee. This is the teaching which Ahikar taught to Nadan his sister's son.

Chapter 3.

1. But I, Ahikar, supposed that everything which I had been teaching Nadan he took hold of in his heart, and that he stood in my stead in the king's gate; and I knew not that Nadan listened not to my words, but scattered them, as it were to the wind, and returned and said that 'my father Ahikar is grown old, and stands at the door of his grave; and his intelligence has withdrawn and his understanding is diminished'; 2. and my son Nadan began [to ill-treat] my servants by beating them and slaughtering them and destroying them; and he showed no mercy on my servants and my handmaidens though they were industrious and well-beloved and excellent; and my horses he slew and my good mules he hamstrung. 3. So when I beheld me that my son Nadan was doing detestable things, I answered and said to him, 'My son Nadan, touch not my property; my son, it is said in the proverb, "What the hand did not acquire, the eye did not spare."'

4. Moreover I showed to Sennacherib my lord all these matters; and my lord spake on this wise: 'As long as Ahikar lives, no man shall have power over his wealth.' 5. Then when my son Nadan saw his brother Nebuzardan standing in my house, he was very irate and he spake on this wise: 'My father Ahikar is grown old and his wits have waned; [and as for his wise words, he despised them]; hath he given his possessions to Nebuzardan my brother, and hath he removed me from his house?' 6. When I, Ahikar, heard these things, I said, 'Alas for thee, my wisdom, that my son Nadan has made insipid; and as for my wise sayings, he has contemned them.' 7. Now when my son Nadan heard thereof, he was angry and went to the gate of the king, and devised evil in his heart; and sat down and wrote two letters to two kings who were enemies of Sennacherib my lord; one to Akhi, the son of Hamselim, king of Persia and Elam, as follows:

8. 'From Ahikar the Secretary and Great Seal of Sennacherib king of Assyria and Nineveh, greeting. When this letter reaches thee, arise and come to Assyria to meet me; and I will bring thee into Assyria, and thou shalt seize the kingdom without war.' 9. 10. And he wrote another letter, as follows: 'To Pharaoh, king of Egypt, from Ahikar, Secretary and Great Seal of the king of Assyria and Nineveh, greeting. When this letter shall reach thee, arise and come to meet me at Eagles' dale, which lieth to the south, on the twenty-fifth day of the month of Ab. And I will bring thee into Nineveh without war and thou shalt seize the kingdom.' And he made these writings of his like to my own handwriting; and he sealed

them in the king's palace, and went his way. And he wrote further another letter to me, as if from my lord the king Sennacherib; and on this wise he wrote it:

11. 'From Sennacherib the King, to Ahikar, my Secretary and Great Seal, greeting. When this letter reaches thee, gather all thy forces together, to the rock that is called Sis: and come forth from thence and come to meet me at Eagles' dale, which lieth to the south, on the twenty-fifth day of the month Ab. 12. And when thou seest me approaching to thee, array thy forces against me, like a man that is ready for battle: for ambassadors of Pharaoh the king of Egypt are come to me, that they may see what forces I have.' 13. And my son Nadan sent this letter to me by the hands of two of the king's servants. And thereupon my son Nadan took the letters that he had written, as if he had actually found them; and he read them before the king; and when my lord the king heard them, he lamented and said, 'O God, wherein have I sinned against Ahikar, that he should do unto me on this fashion?'

14. And my son Nadan answered and said to the king, 'My lord, do not fret nor rage. Arise and let us go to Eagles' dale on the day that is written by him in the letter. And if it be true, then all that thou commandest shall be done.' 15. So my son Nadan took the king my lord, and they came to me at Eagles' dale: and they found me having with me great forces that were gathered there. And when I saw the king, I put my forces in array against him, as it was written in the letter. And when the king saw it, he was much afraid. 16. Then my son Nadan answered and said to him: 'Let it not disturb thee, my lord the king. Return and come into thy chamber in peace: and I will bring Ahikar before thee.' Then my lord the king returned to his house.

17. And my son Nadan came to me and said to me, 'All that thou hast done, thou hast done finely: and much hath the king praised thee; and he commands thee to dismiss thy forces that they may go every man to his own place and his own district. And do thou come to me thyself alone.'

Chapter 4.

1. Thereupon I came before the king, and when he saw me, he said unto me, 'Art thou come, Ahikar, my Secretary and the foster-child of Assyria and Nineveh, thou whom I caused to come into honour? but thou hast turned back and taken the part of my enemies.' 2. And he gave me those letters that were written in my name and were sealed with the seal of my own ring. And when I read them, my tongue stammered and my limbs became faint: and I sought for a single word from the words of wisdom and I found me none. 3. And my son Nadan answered and said to me, 'Away with thee from the king's sight, thou foolish old man: and give thy hands to bonds and thy feet to iron fetters.' Then Sennacherib the king turned away his face from me, and he talked with Nabusemakh . . . and said to him, 'Arise, go slay A ikar, and separate his head a hundred ells from his body.'

4. Then I fell on my face on the ground and worshipped the king, and I said, 'My lord the king, live for ever. Seeing, my lord, that it hath pleased thee to kill me, thy will be done. I know, however, that I have not sinned against thee. But command them, my lord the king, that they kill me at the door of my house: 5. and let them give my body to burial.'

6. – 10. And the king said to Nabusemakh . . ., 'Go, kill A ikar at the door of his house, and give his body to burial. Thereupon I, Ahikar, sent to Eshfagni my wife that she should bring forth from the daughters of my tribe maids a thousand and one: 'and let them put on raiment of mourning, and let them wail and lament and weep over me. And let them come to meet me, and let them make a funeral feast over me before I die. And prepare thou bread and a table and a banquet for Nabusemakh . . . and his Parthians that are with him, and come to meet them, and receive them and bring them into my house. And I too will come into the house as a guest. And Eshfagni my wife, for that she was exceeding wise, understood all my message, and did whatsoever I had sent to her to do; and she came forth to meet them, and she brought them into my house: and they did eat bread, and with her own hand she served them, until they fell asleep from drunkenness, every man in his place. Thereat I, Ahikar, entered and said to Nabusemakh, 'Look towards God, and remember the love that there was between us brother: and grieve not over my death:

and remember that thee also did Sarhadum the father of Sennacherib deliver to me that I should slay thee, yet I slew thee not, because I was aware that there was in thee no ground of offence; and I kept thee alive until the king desired thee, and when I brought thee before

him, he gave me great gifts, and many presents did I carry off from him. And do thou too, now, preserve me alive and recompense me this kindness: and in order that the word come not abroad that I was not killed and that the king may not quarrel with thee, behold, I have in my prison-house a slave, Marzifan hight, and he is due to die: clothe this slave in my raiment and rouse up the Parthians against him and they will slay him: and I shall not die, because I have done no wrong.

11. And when I spake thus, moreover Nabusemakh . . . also was sore grieved over me, and he took my raiments and clad in them the slave that was in the prison-house. And he roused up the Parthians, and they arose in the fumes of their wine, and they slew him and removed his head a hundred ells from his corse, and they gave over his body for burial. 12. 13. Then went forth the report in Assyria and Nineveh, that Ahikar the Secretary is killed. And Nabusemakh . . . rose up, and Eshfagni my wife, and they made for me a hiding-place underground; its breadth was three cubits and its height five cubits, under the threshold of the door of my house. And they put bread and water with me, and went and showed to Sennacherib the king that Ahikar, the Secretary, was dead: and when the men heard it, they wept; and the women disfigured their faces and said: 'Alas for thee, Ahikar the wise Secretary, thou fence of the breaches of our country: for like thee there will never be any one to us.'

14. Then Sennacherib the king called my son Nadan, and said to him, 'Go make a funeral feast for thy father Ahikar, and then return to me.' 15. And when Nadan my son came, no funeral feast did he make for me, nor any remembrance at all; but gathered him the vain and lewd folk, and set them down at my table, with singing and with great joy; and my beloved servants and handmaidens he stripped and flogged without mercy. 16. Nor had he any reverence for my wife Eshfagni, but sought to do with her the way of man with woman. 17. And I, Ahikar, was cast into darkness in the pit beneath. And I was hearing the voice of my bakers, cooks, and butlers as they wept and sobbed within my house. 18. And after a few days came Nabusemakh . . . and opened [my prison] over me and comforted me; and set before me bread and water; and I said to him, 'When thou goest forth from me, remember me before God, and say, O God, just and righteous, and that showest grace upon the earth, hear the voice of Thy servant Ahikar, and remember that he sacrificed to Thee fatted oxen like sucking lambs. And now he is cast into the darksome pit where he seeth no light. And dost Thou not save him that crieth unto Thee? O Lord, hear the voice of my colleague, [I pray Thee.]

Chapter 5.

1. Now when Pharaoh, king of Egypt, heard that I, Ahikar, had been slain, he was greatly rejoiced, and he wrote a letter to Sennacherib on this wise: 2. 3. 'Pharaoh, king of Egypt, to Sennacherib, king of Assyria and Nineveh, greeting. I am planning to build a castle between heaven and earth, wherefore seek out and send me from thy kingdom a man who is a skilled architect, that he may give me reply concerning all that I shall ask him. And when thou shalt send me such a man, I will collect and send thee the revenue of Egypt for three years: and if thou send me not a man who shall give me reply concerning all that I ask him, then do thou collect and send me the tribute of Assyria and Nineveh for three years, by the hands of these ambassadors that come to thee.' 4. And when this letter was read before the king, he cried out to all the nobles and franklins of his kingdom, and said unto them: 'Which of you will go to Egypt to give reply to the king concerning all that he shall ask him? And he shall build him the castle that he planneth, and bring back the three years' tribute of Egypt and come hither.'

5. And when the nobles heard this, they answered and said unto the king: 'My lord the king, thou knowest that not only in the years of thy reign, but also in the years of thy father Sarhadum, Ahikar the Secretary was in the habit of resolving questions like these. 6. And now, also, behold his son Nadan, he is instructed in his father's book-lore and wisdom.' And when my son Nadan heard these things, he cried out before the king and said: 'The gods themselves cannot do things like these; let alone men' 7. 8. And when the king heard these words, he was much perturbed, and he descended from his throne and sat on the ground, and spake thus: 'Alas for thee, Ahikar the wise, that I destroyed thee for the words of a boy! Who will give thee to me for such a time as this? I would give him thy weight in gold.' For Ahikar, whom thou didst command me to slay, is yet alive.'

9. And when the king heard these words, he answered and said, 'Speak on, speak on, Nabusemakh; speak on, thou good and clever man, unskilled in evil. If it is indeed as thou sayest, and thou show me Ahikar alive, then I will give thee presents of silver, a hundred talents in weight, and of purple, fifty talents in value.' 10. And Nabusemakh answered and said, 'Swear to me, my lord the king, that, if there be not found before thee other sins of mine, this sin shall not be remembered against me.' And the king gave him his right hand on this matter. 11. And forthwith the king mounted his chariot, and came unto me in haste,

and opened [my prison] over me, and I ascended and came and fell before the king; the hair of my head had grown down on my shoulders, and my beard reached my breast; and my body was foul with the dust, and my nails were grown long like eagles'.

12. And when the king saw me, he wept and was ashamed to talk with me, and in great grief he said to me, 'It was not I that sinned against thee, Ahikar; but thy son whom thou broughtest up, he it was that sinned against thee.' 13. Thereupon I answered and said to him, 'Because I have seen thy face, my lord, no evil is in my mind.' And the king said to me, 'Go to thy house, Ahikar, and shave off thy hair, and wash thy body, and recover thy strength forty days; and after that come to me.'

Chapter 6.

1. Therefore I went to my house, and I was in my house about thirty days, and when I was recovered, I came to the king, and the king answered and said to me: 'Hast thou seen, Ahikar, what a letter Pharaoh, king of Egypt, has written me?' 2. – 5. And I answered and said, 'My lord the king, let there be no trouble to thee over this affair. I will go to Egypt and build the king a castle: and I will make him answer concerning all that he may ask me: and I will bring back with me the three years' tribute of Egypt.' And when the king heard these things he rejoiced with a great joy: and he gave me gifts: and as for Nabusemakh . . . he set him at the head of all. And after this I wrote a letter to Eshfagni my wife, as follows: 'When this letter reaches thee, command my huntsmen that they catch me two young eagles: and command the workers in flax, that they make me hempen ropes; the length of each one of them shall be a thousand ells, and their thickness that of one's little finger. And bid the carpenters to make me cages for the young eagles: and deliver over Ubael and Tabshelim, the two boys, who do not yet know how to talk, and let them teach them to say on this wise: "Give the builders mud, mortar, tiles, bricks, for they are idle."'

6. And Eshfagni my wife did all that I commissioned her: then I said to the king: 'Command, my lord, and send me that I go to Egypt.' And when the king commanded me to go, I took me a force of soldiers and went. 7. And when we came to the first halting-place, I let out the young eagles and bound the ropes to their feet and made the boys ride on them; and they took them and went up to a height, and the boys cried out as they had been taught, 'Mud, mortar, tiles, bricks supply to the builders who are idle.' Then I pulled them in again. 8. And when we came to Egypt, I went to the king's gate: and his nobles told the king, 'There is come the man whom the king of Assyria has sent.' And the king commanded and gave me a place to reside in; and on the following day I came in before him and worshipped him and inquired after his health.

9. And the king answered and said unto me, 'What is thy name?' And I said to him, 'My name is Abikam: one of the contemptible ants of the kingdom.' And the king answered and said to me, 'Am I thus despised of thy lord, that he has sent me a despised ant of his kingdom? Go, Abikam, to thy lodging, and come to me early in the morning.' 10. Then the king commanded his nobles, 'On the morrow clothe yourselves in red,' and the king dressed himself in fine linen, and sat on his throne. And he commanded and I came into his

presence: and he said to me, 'To what am I like, Abikam, and to what are my nobles like?' And I answered and said to him, 'My lord the king, thou art like unto Bel, and thy nobles are like unto his priests.' And again he said to me, 'Go to thy lodging, and come to me on the morrow.'

11. And the king commanded his nobles, 'On the morrow clothe yourselves in robes of white linen,' and the king himself put on white and sat on his throne. And he commanded and I came into his presence: and he said to me, 'To what am I like, Abikam, and to what are my nobles like?' And I said to him, 'My lord the king, thou art like to the sun, and thy nobles to his rays.' And again he said to me, 'Get thee to thy lodging, and come to me to-morrow.' 12. And again the king commanded his nobles, 'On the morrow clothe yourselves in black,' and the king put on crimson. And he commanded, and I came into his presence: and he said to me, 'To what am I like, Abikam; and to what are my nobles like?' And I said to him, 'My lord the king, thou art like to the moon, and thy nobles to the stars.' And again he said to me, 'Go to thy house: and come to me to-morrow.'

13. And the king commanded his nobles, 'On the morrow dress in diverse and varied colours, and let the doors of the palace be covered with red hangings.' And the king himself was robed in fine needlework. And he commanded and I came into his presence: and he said to me, 'To what am I like, Abikam? and my nobles, to what are they like?' And I said to him, 'My lord the king, thou art like to the month Nisan, and thy nobles to its flowers.' Then the king said to me, 'The first time thou didst compare me to Bel, and my nobles to his priests. 14. The second time thou hast compared me to the sun, and my nobles to its rays. The third time thou hast compared me to the moon, and my nobles to the stars. And the fourth time thou hast likened me to Nisan, and my nobles to the flowers thereof. And now tell me, Abikam, to what is thy lord like?'

15. And I answered and said to him, 'Be it far from me, my lord the king, that I should make mention of my lord Sennacherib, whilst thou art seated. 16. My lord Sennacherib is like [the God of Heaven] and his nobles to the lightnings that are in the clouds: for when he wills, he fashions the rain and the dew [and] the hail; and if he thunders, he restrains the sun from rising, and its rays from being seen; and he will restrain Bel from coming in and from going forth in the street, and his nobles from being seen; and he will hinder the moon from rising and the stars from appearing.' 17. And when the king heard these things he was exceeding wroth, and said to me, 'By the life of thy lord, I adjure thee tell me what is thy name?' 18. And I answered and said to him, 'I am Ahikar the Secretary and Great Seal of Sennacherib king of Assyria and Nineveh.'

19. And the king said to me, 'Did I not certainly hear that thy lord had killed thee?' And I said to him, 'I am yet alive, my lord the king: and God saved me from something which my hands did not.' 20. And the king said to me, 'Go, Ahikar, to thy house, and come to me to-morrow, and tell me a word which I never heard nor any one of my nobles, and which was never heard in the city of my kingdom.'

Chapter 7.

1. Then I sat down and meditated in my heart and wrote a letter as follows: ‘From Pharaoh, king of Egypt, to Sennacherib, king of Assyria and Nineveh, greeting. 2. ‘Kings have need of kings and brethren of brethren: and at this time my gifts are become scant, because silver is scarce in my treasury: command, therefore, to send me from thy treasury 900 talents of silver, and in a little while I will return them to their place.’ 3. This letter, then, I folded and held it in my hands: and the king commanded and I came into his presence, and I said to him, ‘Perhaps in this letter there is a word that was never heard by thee.’ And when I read it before the king and before his nobles, they cried out, as they were ordered by the king to do, and said, ‘This has been heard by all of us, and it is so.’

4. Whereupon I said to them, ‘Behold, [in that case] there is a debt of 900 talents from Egypt to Assyria.’ And when the king heard this, he marvelled. 5. Then he said to me, ‘I am planning to build a castle between earth and heaven. Its height from the earth shall be one thousand fathoms.’ 6. Then I brought out the young eagles and bound the ropes to their feet, and set the boys on their backs; and they were saying, ‘Provide mud, mortar; [foreman, mix] tiles and bricks for the builders, because they are idle.’ And when the king saw it, he was confounded. 7. Then I, A ikar, took a switch and beat the king’s nobles, till they all took to flight. Then the king was indignant with me, and said to me, ‘Thou art gone clean mad, A ikar: who is able to carry up anything to these boys?’

8. And I said to him, ‘Concerning the affairs of Sennacherib my lord, say ye nothing; for if he had been at hand, he would have built a couple of castles in one day.’ And the king said to me, ‘Have done with the castle, A ikar, and go to thy lodging; and in the morning come to me.’ 9. And when it was morning, I came into his presence, and he said to me, ‘Explain to me, A ikar, the following matter. The horse of thy lord neighs in Assyria, and our mares hear his voice here, and their foals miscarry.’ 10. Then I went forth from the king’s presence, and commanded my servants to catch me a cat, and I whipped it in the streets of the city; and when the Egyptians saw it, they went and told the king that ‘A ikar has acted contemptuously of our people and makes mock of us. For he has caught a cat and whips it in the streets of our city.’

11. And the king sent for me and called me; and I came into his presence. 12. 13. And he said to me, ‘In what way art thou insulting us?’ and I answered and said to him, ‘This cat

has seriously damaged me in no slight matter; for a cock had been entrusted to me by my lord, whose voice was extremely beautiful, and by the time that he crowed I understood that my lord wished for me, and I went to the gate of my lord. And in this past night this cat went to Assyria and tore off the head of this cock of mine and returned.' And the king answered and said to me, 'As far as I can see, A ikar, since thou art grown old thou art become stark mad. For it is 360 parasangs from here to Assyria; and how canst thou say that in a single night this cat went and cut off the head of the cock and came back?'

14. Then I said to him, 'And if it is 360 parasangs from Egypt to Assyria, how do thy mares in this place hear the voice of the horse of my lord, and their foals miscarry?' 15. And when the king heard this, he was sore vexed, and he said to me, 'A ikar, expound to me this riddle: A pillar has on its head twelve cedars; in every cedar there are thirty wheels, and in every wheel two cables, one white and one black.' 16. And I answered and said to him, 'My lord the king, the ox-herds in our country understand this riddle that thou tellest. The pillar of which thou hast spoken to me is the year; the twelve cedars are the twelve months of the year; the thirty wheels are the thirty days of the month; the two cables, one white and one black, are the day and the night.'

17. Again he said to me, 'Twine me five cables from the sand of the river.' And I said to him, 'My lord the king, bid them bring me from thy treasury one rope of sand, and I will make one to match it.' Then he said to me, 'Unless thou do this, I will not give thee the Egyptian tribute.' 18. Thereupon I sat down and calculated in my heart how I should do it. And I went out from the king's palace and bored five holes in the eastern wall of the palace. 19. And when the sun entered the holes I scattered sand in them, and the sun's path began to appear as if [the sand] were twined in the holes. Then I said to the king; 'My lord, bid them take up these, and I will weave you others in their stead.' And when the king and his nobles saw it, they were amazed.

20. And again the king commanded to bring me an upper millstone that was broken: and he said to me, 'A ikar, sew up for us this broken millstone.' Then I went and brought a nether millstone, and cast it down before the king and said to him, 'My lord the king, since I am a stranger here, and have not the tools of my craft with me, bid the cobblers cut me strips (?) from this lower millstone which is the fellow of the upper millstone; and forthwith I will sew it together.' 21. And when the king heard it, he laughed and said, 'The day in which Ahikar was born shall be blessed before the God of Egypt; and since I have seen thee alive, I will make it a great and appropriate day.' 22. Then he gave me the revenue of Egypt for three years, and straightway I returned and came to my lord the king Sennacherib: and he came forth to meet me and received me.

23. And he made it a great day and set me at the head of his household: and he said to me, 'Ask what thou wilt, Ahikar'; and I worshipped the king and said, 'Whatever thou willest to give me, bestow it upon Nabusemakh . . .'; because he gave me my life; and for myself, my lord, bid them give me my son Nadan, that I may teach him a further lesson. For he has forgotten my former teaching.' 24. 25. And the king commanded and gave me my son

Nadan; and the king said to me, 'Go thy way, Ahikar, and work thy will on thy son Nadan; for no man shall rescue his body from thy hands.' Thereupon I took Nadan my son, and brought him to my house; and I bound him with iron chains whose weight was twenty talents, and I fastened the chains in rings, and I fastened collars on his neck; and I struck him one thousand blows on the shoulders and a thousand and one on his loins; and I put him in the porch of the door of my palace, and gave him bread by weight and water by measure.

26. And I delivered him to my boy Nabuel to guard, and told my boy, 'Write down in a tablet whatever I say to my son Nadan, when I go in or come out.' And I answered and said to my son Nadan as follows:

Chapter 8.

2. as for me, my righteousness has saved me. 3. Thou hast been to me, my son, like a scorpion, which strikes at a rock. And the rock said to it, "Thou hast struck at an unconcerned heart." And it struck at a needle, and they say to it, "Thou hast struck at a sting worse than thy own." 4. My son, thou hast been to me like a gazelle that was standing over a sumach-tree and eating it. And the sumach-tree said to it, "Why eatest thou me, seeing that they tan thy skin with me?" And the gazelle said, "I eat thee in my life, and when I am dead they will pluck thee up by thy roots." 5. My son, thou hast been to me like the man that threw a stone at the heaven, and it did not reach the heaven; but he incurred sin against God.

6. My son, thou hast been like the man who saw his companion shivering from cold, and took a pitcher of water and threw it over him. In the primitive sense of 'almsgiving'? Apparently the point of the story is missed, which is that the sumach-tree has its revenge on the gazelle: 'thy skin shall be dyed with my roots presently.' 7. My son, not when thou hadst killed me, wouldst thou have been able to stand in my place; for be well aware, my son, that even if the tail of the swine should grow to seven ells, he would never take the place of the horse: and even if his hair should become soft and woolly, he would never ride on the back of a free man. 8. My son, I said that thou shouldst be in my place; and thou shouldst acquire my house and my wealth, and inherit them. But God was not pleased therewith and has not heard thy voice.

9. My son, thou hast been to me as the lion that came upon an ass in the morning of the day and said to him, "Welcome, my lord Kyrios." But the ass said to him, "May the same welcome that thou givest me be the portion of him that tied me up last night, and did not make my halter fast, so that I had not seen thy face." 10. My son, a snare was set upon a dunghill, and there came a sparrow and looked at it and said, "What doest thou here?" And the snare said, "I am praying to God." The sparrow said, "And what is that in thy mouth?" The snare said, "Bread for guests." Then the sparrow drew near and took it, and the snare caught him by the neck. And the sparrow said, as he was being shaken, "If this is thy bread for guests, may the God to whom thou prayest never listen to thy voice."

11. My son, thou hast been to me as an ox that was bound with a lion; and the lion turned and crushed him. 12. My son, thou hast been to me like the weevil that is in the corn, which destroys kings' granaries, and is itself of no account. 13. My son, thou hast been to

me like the pot, to which they made golden handles, but its bottom was not cleansed from blackness. 14. My son, thou hast been to me like a husbandman that sowed a field with twenty measures of barley; and when he reaped it, it made him twenty measures. And he said to it: "What I scattered, I have gathered, but thou art shamed with thine evil name, in that thou hast made a bushel into a bushel: and I, [how] am I to live?" 15. My son, thou hast been to me like the . . . bird that could not save himself from death, and by his voice slaughtered his companions.

16. My son, thou hast been to me like the buck that led his companions into the slaughter-house; and yet he did not save his own life. 17. – 20. My son, thou hast been to me like the dog that came to the potters' oven to warm himself, and after he was warm rose up to bark at them. My son, thou hast been to me like the swine that had been to the baths, and when it saw a muddy ditch, went down and washed in it, and cried to its companions, "Come and wash." My son, my finger is upon thy mouth, and thy finger is upon my eyes. Why have I brought thee up, thou jackal, that thy eyes look thus upon apples? My son, the dog that eats of his hunting will become the portion of wolves: and the hand that is not industrious shall be cut off from its shoulder: and the eye in which there is no vision the raven shall pluck it out.

21. What good hast thou done me, my son, that I remembered thee and that my soul had comfort in thee? My son, if the gods steal, by whom shall they make them to swear? 22. And a lion that steals a piece of land, how will he sit down and eat it? 23. My son, I caused thee to behold the face of the king, and brought thee to great honour: and thou hast chosen to do me evil. 24. My son, thou hast been to me like the tree that said to its woodcutters, "If there had not been somewhat from me in your hands, ye had not fallen upon me." 25. My son, thou hast been to me like the young swallows which fell out of their nest; and a cat caught them and said to them, "If it had not been for me, great evil would have befallen you." They answered and said to her, "Is that why thou hast put us in thy mouth?"

26. My son, thou hast been to me like the cat, to which they say, "Leave off thy thievish ways, and thou shalt go out from and come in to the king's palace, according to thy heart's wish." And she answered and said, "If I should have eyes of silver and ears of gold, I will not leave off my thieving." 27. My son, thou hast been to me like a serpent that was mounted on a thorn-bush and thrown into a river; and a wolf saw them and said to them: "Bad rides on bad, and worse than either carries them off." The serpent said to him, "If thou hadst been here, thou shouldst have paid the reckoning for the she-goats and their young ones." 28. My son, I have seen a shegoat brought into the slaughter-house, and because its time was not yet come, it returned to its place and saw its children and its children's children. My son, I have seen colts that have become slayers of their mothers.

29. My son, I fed thee with every pleasant meat: and thou, my son, hast fed me with bread of ashes, and I was not satisfied therewith. 30. My son, I salved thee with sweet salves, and thou, my son, hast fouled my body with dust. 31. My son, I trained up thy stature like a cedar, but thou hast humbled me in my life, and hast made me drunken with thy

wickedness. 32. My son, I raised thee like a tower and said, "If the enemy should come upon me, I will go up and dwell in thee": and thou, when thou sawest my enemy, didst bow before him. 33. My son, thou hast been to me like the mole that came up out of the earth that he might get possession of the sun, because he had no eyes; and an eagle saw him and struck him and carried him off.'

34. My son Nadan answered and said to me, 'My father Ahikar, such things be far from thee: do to me according to thy mercy: for God also forgives the fault of men: and thou also, forgive me this my folly: and I will tend thy horses and feed thy pigs which are in thy house, and I shall be called evil: but thou, devise not evil against me.' 35. I answered and said to him, 'My son, thou hast been to me like that palm-tree that stood by a river, and cast all its fruit into the river, and when its lord came to cut it down, it said to him, "Let me alone this year, and I will bring thee forth carobs." And its lord said unto it, "Thou hast not been industrious in what is thine own, and how wilt thou be industrious in what is not thine own?"

36. My son, they say to the wolf, "Why dost thou follow after the sheep?" He said to them, "Their dust is exceeding good for my eyes." Again they brought him into the school-house: the master said to him, "Aleph, Beth"; the wolf said, "Kid, Lamb." 37. My son, I taught thee that there is a God: and thou risest up against good servants, and beatest those that have not sinned; and like as God has kept me alive on account of my righteousness so hath He destroyed thee for thy works. 38. My son, they set the head of the ass over a dish at the table, and he rolled off and fell in the dust. And they say, "He spites himself; he does not receive honour." 39. My son, thou hast verified the proverb, which is current: "Call him whom thou hast begotten, thy son, and him whom thou hast purchased, thy slave."

40. My son, the proverb is true that is current: "Take thy sister's son under thy arm and dash him against a stone." But God is He that hath kept me alive, and He will judge between us.' 41. Thereat Nadan swelled up like a bag and died. And to him that doeth good, what is good shall be recompensed: and to him that doeth evil, what is evil shall be rewarded. And he that diggeth a pit for his neighbour, filleth it with his own stature. And to God be glory, and His mercy be upon us. Amen. The proverbs of Ahikar the sage and secretary of Sennacherib king of Assyria and Nineveh are ended.

Source. English translation by J. Rendel Harris, A. S. Lewis and F. C. Conybeare, from ***The Apocrypha and Pseudepigrapha of the Old Testament in English***, edited by R. H. Charles, volume 2 (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1913); public domain. The text was read by machine (Mistral OCR) from a scan of the 1913 edition at the Internet Archive and has not been proofread against the printed book. SermonIndex has removed running heads and page numbers, joined words split across lines, and divided the text into chapters and short sections; the wording is the translator's own. Footnotes and the editor's introduction are left out. Charles's introduction to the book, the headings and summaries he added, his notes

and the record of the manuscript readings at the foot of the page, and the Greek, Hebrew and Latin words quoted in them are also left out. The second Syriac text (version B), which is fragmentary and is printed under the first, the Armenian version, which is printed in a third column and has no numbering of its own, and the Ethiopic, Greek and Slavonic pieces that follow are also left out; the Arabic version is given separately. The passage that begins chapter 8 is missing from the scan, and verse 1 of that chapter is therefore lacking. No original-language text is shown beside it, and no modern English version has been made.

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