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The *Story of Ahiqar* and the Contest of Kings: Puzzle Games and Wisdom Literature in the Ancient Near East

A História de Ahiqar *e o concurso de reis: jogos de quebra-cabeça e literatura sapiencial no antigo Oriente Próximo*

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Abstract: The tale-type of the "wisdom contest of kings" is internationally attested in two variant forms. The simpler and older one involves only two rulers in intellectual competition with each other. In the other, more expanded form, one of the rulers has a counsellor, who undertakes the most important role in the action, solving the problems and securing the victory for his king. The introduction of the counsellor's figure and the development of the expanded variant are related to a key narrative composition of the ancient world, the *Story of Ahiqar*, which exercised a vast influence on subsequent novelistic and wisdom texts. In the *Story of Ahiqar*, the sagacious counsellor is not only the main figure of the wisdom contest but also the protagonist of a broader biographical narration, into which the contest has been inserted as an individual episode. The reason for the extraordinary promotion of the counsellor's character lies in the composite narrative construction of *Ahiqar*, in which two different story patterns (the "wisdom contest of kings" and the "disgrace and rehabilitation of the wise adviser") are joined. The counsellor serves as the link between the two patterns; the intellectual competition, to which the king is challenged, is interposed between the counsellor's fall and his restoration and provides the cause for the latter. Thus, the kings' contest is refashioned in such a way as to revolve around the counsellor's central role in the entire narrative. By artfully combining two distinct popular tale-types of the Near-Eastern imaginarium, the creator of *Ahiqar* shaped a new, groundbreaking narrative construct.

Keywords: wisdom contest; wise counsellor; riddle; ancient narrative; Ahiqar.

Resumo: O tipo de conto do "concurso de sabedoria dos reis" é atestado internacionalmente em duas formas de variantes. A mais simples e mais antiga envolve apenas dois governantes em competição intelectual entre si. Na outra forma, mais ampliada, um dos governantes conta com um conselheiro, que assume o papel

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mais importante na ação, resolvendo os problemas e garantindo a vitória do seu rei. A introdução da figura do conselheiro e o desenvolvimento da variante expandida estão relacionados com uma composição narrativa chave do mundo antigo, a *História de Ahiqar*, que exerceu uma vasta influência em textos romanescos e sapienciais subsequentes. Na *História de Ahiqar*, o conselheiro sagaz não é apenas a figura principal do concurso de sabedoria, mas também o protagonista de uma narração biográfica mais ampla, na qual o concurso foi inserido como um episódio individual. A razão para a extraordinária promoção do personagem do conselheiro reside na construção narrativa composta de *Ahiqar*, na qual se juntam dois padrões de histórias diferentes (a "disputa de sabedoria dos reis" e a "desgraça e reabilitação do sábio conselheiro"). O conselheiro serve como elo entre os dois padrões; a competição intelectual, para a qual o rei é desafiado, interpõe-se entre a queda do conselheiro e a sua restauração e fornece a causa desta última. Assim, a disputa dos reis é remodelada de modo a girar em torno do papel central do conselheiro em toda a narrativa. Ao combinar artisticamente dois tipos distintos de contos populares do imaginário do Oriente Próximo, o criador de *Ahiqar* moldou uma construção narrativa nova e inovadora.

Palavras-chave: concurso de sabedoria; conselheiro sábio; enigma; narrativa antiga; Ahiqar.

The Contest of Kings: A Very Ancient Tale-Type

Once upon a time, there were two rival kings who discovered a way of dispensing with the violence of war. Instead of dispatching their armies to fight battles on the open field, they practiced a more spiritual manner of competition. They used to send to each other difficult riddles or intellectual problems for solution. The monarch who found the answer to his opponent's questions, or managed to set puzzles which could not be cracked by the other king, won the contest and gained the prize; the loser paid him tribute or ceded him parts of the territorial dominions of his kingdom. This brief outline summarises the tale-type which may be called "the wisdom contest of kings", one of the most ancient story patterns in the collective imaginary of mankind.[1] It was current since the

[1] On this story pattern and its international diffusion, see most notably Benfey (1892, p. 163-168, 173-196, 199-205); Cosquin (1899, p. 62-68); Chastel (1939b, p. 34-37); Grottanelli (1982a, p. 560, 568-569); Konstantakos (2004a); Konstantakos (2004b);

third millennium BCE and became exceedingly diffused in the ancient world, especially in the Near East.

The basic model of the story is more or less standard in all traditions, although individual motifs may vary from one specimen to another. The contest may be limited to a single riddle or it may comprise a series of problems of the same or of different kinds. The second king may simply answer the first one's questions, or he may respond further by setting additional problems of his own to his rival, thus prolonging the competition into a second phase. As a rule, the king that starts the intellectual conflict and first challenges the other is the one who loses in the end; by contrast, the challenged ruler solves the problems posed to him and emerges as the final winner. The prize of the contest represents a form of authority and domination of the winner over the loser; the concession of presents, tribute, or territories is a de facto acknowledgement of the defeated king's submission. The contest of wisdom is ultimately the substitute of a political confrontation for power.

Morphologically, the tale-type of the wisdom contest is attested in two variants, the simpler and the extended. In the simpler form, the two rulers are the only protagonists; they pose and answer their problems by themselves, each one on his own, without the assistance of any counsellor or helper. In the more developed version, on the other hand, the kings have advisers who give them ideas and find the solutions on their behalf. As a rule, the character with the most important role in the action is the counsellor of the challenged king. The provoked ruler is unable to crack his opponent's questions and therefore has recourse to a wise man (for example, a learned courtier or a clever foreigner) for intellectual aid and clarification. The extended form of the story is much more widely diffused, especially in the later traditions, from the first millennium BCE onwards; it is the commonest variant in the repertoire of folktales and legends worldwide. The simpler version, however, is clearly more ancient, attested already in the oldest specimens of the tale-type, from the late third and early second millennium BCE.

Grottanelli (2005, p. 49-51, 75-79); Goldberg (1993, p. 25-41, 157-172); Konstantakos (2008-2013, v. 1, p. 65-142).

The counsellor's role was apparently a secondary addition to the original core of the spiritual duel between two royal opponents. The development of the more expanded form of the pattern out of the simpler one was probably related to a key narrative composition of ancient Near-Eastern literature, the *Story of Ahiqar*, which contains the first attestation of the adviser motif and exercised a vast influence on subsequent novelistic and wisdom texts throughout the classical and oriental world.

Sumer to Sasanians: The History of the Tale-Type in the East

The earliest known narrative of a contest of wit between enemy rulers is included in a Sumerian short epic, transmitted by Old Babylonian tablets but presumably created at the time of the Third Dynasty of Ur (ca. 2100-2000 BCE), like all the classic epic compositions of Sumerian literature. The work belongs to a cycle of poems that dramatise the expeditions of the kings of Uruk against Aratta, a wealthy city on the plateaus of Iran. Enmerkar, the ruler of Uruk, wants to subjugate Aratta and exploit its rich resources of precious metals and stones. He threatens to attack the city and enslave its population, but the lord of Aratta refuses to yield and proposes an intellectual contest instead. Thus, the Arattan lord sets three problems to Enmerkar, three impossible tasks (*adynata*, as this type of puzzle is known in folkloristic scholarship) which transcend the laws of nature and cannot be achieved by ordinary human means. Enmerkar must accomplish these unattainable labours, if he wishes to prevail over Aratta, and manages indeed to carry out the impossibilities by means of clever technical inventions.[2]

Firstly, the lord of Aratta asks of Enmerkar to carry grain in fishing nets. Enmerkar sprinkles water on the grains of corn, which germinate and turn into malt as a result; the malt consolidates in small lumps, which may then be carried in nets with narrow meshes. The second impossible thing demanded by the ruler of Aratta is a sceptre made of no known

[2] For text and translation of this Sumerian epic, see Cohen (1973, p. 62-143); Jacobsen (1987, p. 280-319); Vanstiphout (2003, p. 56-93). Cf. Berlin (1983); Alster (1995); Vanstiphout (1995); Konstantakos (2008-2013, v. 1, p. 51-52, 68-78).

kind of wood, metal, or stone. Enmerkar fabricates a sceptre out of reed, a substance which does not belong to any of the forbidden categories of materials. On the third instance, the lord of Aratta requires a dog of no known colour. Enmerkar covers his dog with a piece of fabric which has not been dyed in any one of the existent tints but preserves its original, neutral hue, which has no name. Enmerkar thus solves all the puzzles, but the lord of Aratta still refuses to capitulate. The latter part of the text of the epic is severely damaged on the cuneiform tablets, and hence the outcome of the story is uncertain. The conflict appears to escalate into some kind of battle or martial duel, and the champion of Uruk arrives at Aratta to fight. In the end, a commercial agreement between Uruk and Aratta is achieved, and the precious materials are finally heaped up in the courtyard of Inanna's temple.

In this age-old Sumerian contest, the two rulers are the sole protagonists. Enmerkar does pray to the gods for illumination, in order to solve the puzzles; the goddess Nisaba inspires him with the idea of turning the grain into malt, and Enki suggests to him the use of a reed for the sceptre;[3] but otherwise Enmerkar has no recourse to a wise courtier or counsellor. As is usual in most specimens of this story pattern, the two rival kings do not confront each other directly but communicate through a messenger, who goes to and fro between the two cities.[4] The impossible tasks demanded by the lord of Aratta display the same structure as the paradoxes set to the cunning hero or heroine in many medieval and modern folktales of Europe and Asia: in these stories, the hero is required to come neither on foot nor on horseback, neither dressed nor naked, neither alone nor in the company of other people etc. Like Enmerkar, the folktale hero bypasses the paradoxical contradictions through clever practical tricks: he walks with one foot on the ground and the other foot placed on the back of a goat; he covers himself with a net

[3] See Cohen (1973, p. 128, 132-133); Jacobsen (1987, p. 300-301, 307); Vanstiphout (2003, p. 74-75, 80-81).

[4] On the wisdom contest in this epic, see in general Alster (1973, p. 105-106); Cohen (1973, p. 34-40); Berlin (1983, p. 20); Vanstiphout (1983, p. 38-41); Alster (1995, p. 2316, 2320-2321, 2324-2325); Vanstiphout (1995, p. 7-8, 11-14, 17-18); Vanstiphout (2003, p. 2-3, 10, 49-50, 52-54).

instead of clothes; and he is accompanied by an animal in place of human companions.[5] Furthermore, the contest of wisdom is the substitute or the spiritual equivalent of a military conflict. Enmerkar threatens to make an expedition and sack Aratta, if the city does not submit to his authority; the lord of Aratta proposes the riddle contest as an alternative to war.[6] In other epics of the same Sumerian cycle, the confrontation between Uruk and Aratta takes indeed the form of a military clash. Enmerkar and his officer Lugalbanda lead an army against Aratta, put the city under siege, and finally subdue it by force.[7]

From Mesopotamia, the story pattern of the wisdom contest of kings spread widely and became popular all over the Levant. Another example of the plainest and most archaic form of the tale is the famous encounter between Solomon and the Queen of Sheba, as recounted in the Hebrew Bible (1 *Kings* 10.1-13). According to the laconic and spare Biblical narration, the queen heard of Solomon's fame and came to test his wisdom with hard questions. She arrived at Jerusalem accompanied by a large retinue and camels laden with gold and precious gems. She posed her questions to the Hebrew monarch, and Solomon expertly answered all of them. The queen admired his wisdom and offered him her lavish gifts.[8]

In this case, again, the two monarchs are the sole participants in the contest of wit. The legend presupposes that both Solomon and the Queen of Sheba were figures celebrated for their wisdom; neither of them would have deigned to resort to the advice of a third party. The structure of the tale is kept as simple and unadorned as possible, to an even greater degree than what happened in the Sumerian epic. Even

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[5] On these folk paradoxes, see the tale-types ATU 875 and 920 in Uther (2004, p. 494-495, 540-541); motifs H1051-H1064, H1066-H1073, J1161.8 in Thompson (1955-1958); and further Benfey (1892, p. 213-219); Bolte; Polívka (1913-1932, v. 2, p. 349-356, 362-367, v. 3, p. 214, 225-226, v. 4, p. 140); De Vries (1928, p. 176-220).

[6] On this point, cf. Jestin (1957, p. 146-147); Limet (1972, p. 11).

[7] On the Sumerian epic cycle regarding the war and conquest of Aratta, see Berlin (1983); Vanstiphout (1995); Alster (1995); Black (1998, p. 58-184); Larson (2005).

[8] On this famous legend, see the collection of essays in Pritchard (1974, p. 7-16, 65-149); see also Chastel (1939a); Chastel (1939b); Schearing (1997); Kitchen (1997); de Pury (2003); Konstantakos (2004b).

the messenger is dispensed with. The queen comes in person to meet Solomon at Jerusalem – a notable deviation from the standard pattern of the tale-type, which has the two opponents communicate through envoys and intermediaries. Possibly this unique detail was specially and purposefully fashioned in the context of the Hebrew legend, in order to emphasise Solomon's grandeur. The Hebrew monarch is so famous for his wit that the queen feels the need to come in person and ascertain his intelligence at first hand. In other words, Solomon's superiority is such that it makes his opponent break the standard rules and the established conventions of the traditional tale-type. As Solomon is peerless in his wisdom, so is the story of his spiritual contest unique among all the specimens of this narrative theme.

Another aspect of the Biblical account also serves the purpose of Solomon's glorification. Unlike what happens in all the other ancient examples of the tale-type, the competition between Solomon and Sheba is presented as a matter of purely spiritual prestige, without any dimension of interstate conflict or imperialistic ambitions. Neither Solomon nor the queen aspires to conquer territories or subdue the kingdom of the other; neither of them wishes to degrade or humiliate his opponent. The queen, of course, acknowledges Solomon's intellectual prominence (10.6-7) and offers him lavish gifts (10.2, 10.10), which echo the traditional motif of the loser paying tribute to the winner. However, there is no overt aggressiveness and tension in the Biblical narrative. Every hint of antagonism between the two rulers is eliminated, and the narration highlights instead the mutual esteem and good will of the two contestants, the queen's respectfulness, and her magnanimous reception in Solomon's court. This kind of friendly and idyllic atmosphere is extremely rare in this category of tales. It is clearly meant to exalt Solomon as a universally recognised paragon of wisdom, whose charismatic intelligence commands respect and honour from all over the world. The Hebrew king is also set up as a peacemaker; his international status and imperturbable relations with the other realms are shown to be based on his deep prudence and exquisite diplomacy.[9]

[9] See Scott (1955, p. 266-269); Noth (1968, p. 224, 226, 237); Pritchard (1974, p. 32-36); Gray (1977, p. 259); Na'aman (1997, p. 73); de Pury (2003, p. 214-217, 235-237);

The age-old tale-type of the wisdom contest is thus assimilated into the legendarium of Solomon and harnessed to the purposes of Solomonic propaganda. It is impossible to determine with precision the age of the Biblical legend. The books of *Kings*, as parts of the so-called Deuteronomistic historical trend, were compiled, in their present state, during the Exilic or post-Exilic period;[10] however, the story of Solomon and Sheba *per se* may have been a much older concoction. I would not consider it unlikely that the tale was invented during Solomon's own reign (tenth century BCE) or some decades afterwards, perhaps as a fictionalisation of a historical visit – an actual diplomatic or trade delegation which came from Southern Arabia to Jerusalem.[11] In any case, the contest with the queen of Sheba was one of the earliest episodes in the growing mythology of the wise Solomon. It must have developed from early times and continued growing well into the Rabbinical period.

One further element is worth noting. The Biblical narrative makes only vague reference to the queen's questions; it is stated that she proposed a number of problems to Solomon (10.1), but none of them is described in detail. Specific examples of the queen's riddles are included only in much later retellings of the story, in Rabbinical commentaries and exegetical interpretations of Biblical books, dated between the late Roman period and the high Middle Ages. The *Targum Sheni* to the book of *Esther* (probably composed around the third or fourth century CE) cites three questions; the *Midrash Mishle*, a Rabbinical commentary on the book of *Proverbs* (between the eighth and the eleventh century CE), and the late medieval *Midrash ha-Hefez* (ca. 1430) add several more; collectively, these questions exemplify a large variety of puzzle genres,

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Robker (2024, p. 148).

[10] On the chronology and composition of the books of *Kings*, see the surveys of Knoppers (2010); Müller (2024); Römer (2024). On the story of Solomon and Sheba in particular, cf. de Pury (2003, p. 218-222).

[11] This hypothesis has often been proposed: see e.g. Chastel (1939a, p. 215-216); Noth (1968, p. 223-227); van Beek (1974, p. 40, 47-48); Gray (1977, p. 257-260); Ahlström (1993, p. 518-519); Kitchen (1997, p. 134-153); de Pury (2003, p. 221-235). Cf. the remarks of Na'aman (1997, p. 72-74).

from proper riddles to problems of natural history, quizzes of Biblical erudition, and impossible tasks.[12]

In themselves, the riddles and questions cited in these later works do not bear a thematic relationship to the encounter of Solomon and the queen. Apparently, as the legend expanded with the passage of time, it assimilated various examples of popular and didactic puzzles, which would have been circulating broadly in the literary, educational, or folk tradition. The exemplary case of Solomon and Sheba shows that the story pattern of the wisdom contest is an ideal frame narrative, into which a virtually limitless number of multifarious tests and ordeals may be inserted, extending the narration for as long as the storyteller wishes, or as the audience can bear. This phenomenon will prove useful below as a parallel for the reconstruction of the complex textual development of the *Story of Ahiqar*.

Perhaps under the influence of the archetypical contest with the queen of Sheba, another similar cycle of stories about King Solomon was created around the Hellenistic age. In this narrative cycle, the competing rulers were Solomon and Hiram, the lord of Tyre. In the Hebrew Bible, there is plenty of information on Hiram and his transactions with Solomon, especially in connection with the building of the Temple at Jerusalem, but also with regard to diplomatic contacts and other common ventures (1 *Kings* 5.15-26, 9.10-14, 9.26-28, 10.11-12, 10.22). Nothing is said, however, about a contest of wisdom between these two kings. The relevant tales are transmitted by Josephus (*Jewish Antiquities* 8.143, 8.146, 8.148-149; *Against Apion* 1.111, 1.114-115, 1.120), who has mainly drawn them from two Hellenistic historians: Menander of Ephesus (*FGrHist* 783 F 1) and a certain Dius (*FGrHist* 785 F 1). Menander wrote an encyclopedic work of universal chronography, while Dius was the author of a specialised history of the Phoenicians. It is impossible to trace the immediate sources of these two writers. Ultimately, their novelistic tales about the riddle contest of Solomon and Hiram may have

[12] See Wünsche (1883, p. 15-24); Wünsche (1885, p. 2-3); Schechter (1890); Zachariae (1920, p. 104-108); Ginzberg (1909-1928, v. 4, p. 145-149, v. 6, p. 290-291); Silberman (1974, p. 65-66, 71-76); Lassner (1993, p. 11-17, 161-167); Stein (1996); Ego (1996, p. 21-25, 76).

stemmed from oral traditions, whether Jewish or Phoenician or both, which would have circulated in the Levant during the Achaemenid or the Seleucid period.[13]

The most interesting aspect of the legends about Hiram is the introduction of a counsellor into the contest of the two kings. As the story goes, Solomon first challenged Hiram and sent him difficult riddles, which the Tyrian ruler could not understand; as a result, Hiram was obliged to pay heavy tribute. Subsequently, however, Hiram found a helpful assistant, a Tyrian named Abdemon or Abdemounos,[14] who answered all of Solomon's questions and then made up other problems of his own to pose to the Hebrew king. Solomon was unable to solve these new puzzles, and thus paid back to Hiram a greater amount of money than he had initially received from the Phoenician ruler. In the version by Menander of Ephesus, it was specified that Abdemounos was a young boy[15] – an instance of the motif of the *puer senex*, the amazingly wise young lad, which was much loved in Semitic traditions; examples are abundant, from Joseph and Solomon himself at the beginning of his reign to the child Samuel receiving the prophetic charisma from God, from the boyish Daniel in the story of Susanna to the twelve-year-old Jesus among the rabbis of the Temple.[16]

By contrast to the earlier Mesopotamian and Biblical versions, in the cycle of tales about Solomon and Hiram, the challenged monarch's counsellor makes a dynamic appearance and determines the outcome of the contest. Abdemon emerges as a figure of intelligence even greater than

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[13] On the complex question of the sources used by these two historians, see Van Seters (1983, p. 195-199, 296-297); Troiani (1985, p. 524-525); Lemaire (1986, p. 218-219); Mendels (1987, p. 434); Briquel-Chatonnet (1992, p. 16-17); Krings (1995, p. 33); Ribichini (1995, p. 77-78); Handy (1997, p. 157-158); Lipiński (2010, p. 251-253).

[14] Both forms, Ἀβδήμων and Ἀβδήμουνος (used in various cases), occur in the codices of Josephus. See Konstantakos (2004b, p. 253-254) with references.

[15] Menander, *FGrHist* 783 F 1 = Josephus, *Jewish Antiquities* 8.146, *Against Apion* 1.120: ἐπὶ τούτου ἦν Ἀβδήμουνος παῖς νεώτερος, ὃς ἀεὶ ἐνίκα τὰ προβλήματα, ἃ ἐπέταττε Σολομὼν ὁ Ἱεροσολύμων βασιλεύς.

[16] See Gunkel (1917, p. 121-123); see also Cosquin (1899, p. 65-67); Lipiński (2010, p. 255). The classic general discussion of the *puer senex* motif is Curtius (1953, p. 98-101).

the celebrated Solomon. Not only does he find the answers to Solomon's questions, but he is also able to confound the Hebrew king with insoluble problems. Josephus' summaries of the Hellenistic narratives are brief and arid, but it may be imagined that in the original traditions Abdemon and his displays of cleverness would have taken centre stage. If considered as a whole and in its development over time, the West Asiatic tradition of the tale-type indicates a clear development from the simpler to the more complex form of structure. At some point, the counsellor makes his appearance on the challenged monarch's side and appropriates the protagonistic role, replacing the kings as a wisdom figure.

The same process of evolution over time may be traced in the Egyptian tradition of the tale-type. The first appearance of the story pattern in ancient Egyptian literature occurs in a narrative transmitted by a papyrus from the reign of Pharaoh Merenptah (ca. 1213-1203 BCE): the so-called *Quarrel of Apophis and Seqenenre*, a historical fiction set at the time of the occupation of the Nile Delta by the Hyksos invaders (ca. 1550 BCE). The historical background of the narrative consists in the long military struggles which the native Egyptian rulers of Thebes waged against the Hyksos overlords for over thirty years.[17] In the novelistic version, the wars of historical experience have been mythicised and transformed into a contest of wits between the Hyksos chief Apophis and the Theban king Seqenenre.[18]

As the story goes, Apophis reigns in Avaris, in the eastern Delta, and wishes to send a provocative insult to his vassal Seqenenre, who shows signs of religious insubordination. Apophis therefore gathers the scribes and officials of his court and asks them to formulate a suitable challenge. Following their advice, Apophis sends a messenger and poses the following paradox to Seqenenre: he complains that the noise of the sacred hippopotami, which inhabit a lake at Thebes, is heard up to Avaris, hundreds of miles in the north, and disturbs the sleep of the

[17] On the historical background of the tale, see Gunn; Gardiner (1918, p. 38-48); Säve-Söderbergh (1951, p. 64-67); Van Seters (1966, p. 159, 165-167); Redford (1970b, p. 31-39); Hayes (1973, p. 61-64, 72-73); James (1973, p. 289-290); Redford (1992, p. 125-127); Ryholt (1997, p. 177); Shaw (2000, p. 210-211).

[18] Cf. Redford (1970b, p. 35-39); Konstantakos (2008-2013, v. 1, p. 107-115).

Hyksos chief and his subjects. This outrageous statement brings much perplexity and embarrassment to Seqenenre. He sends a vague answer to Avaris, in order to buy time. Then he calls his courtiers and announces Apophis' message; they are equally bewildered and do not know what to answer. At this point, the papyrus breaks off, and the rest of the plot remains unknown.[19]

The problem posed by the Hyksos ruler represents another type of *adynaton*: not an impossible task or labour, such as those set by the lord of Aratta in the Sumerian poem, but rather an absurd statement that is meant to entrap the recipient and put him into an untenable position.[20] The political dimension of the exchange is evident, since the two opponents stand for different ethnic and power groups, which vie for dominion over the land of Egypt. It may safely be assumed that Seqenenre would have won the contest at the end, according to the standard conventions of the Egyptian genre of the historical novella, which always exalts the Egyptian monarch's superiority over the evil foreign enemies.[21] The Theban ruler would eventually find a clever retort for Apophis' absurdity, presumably a counter-paradox or a matching impossibility, which would reverse his opponent's proposition and bring forth its essential illogicality.

In the later versions of the *Story of Ahiqar*, a very similar problem is posed to the wise hero, and the narrative provides a clear idea of the method by which such a paradoxical proposition can be countered and annulled. The Pharaoh of Egypt, who is challenging the king of Assyria with difficult riddles, claims that, when the Assyrian king's stallion neighs in Nineveh, the mares of Egypt supposedly hear its voice and suffer a miscarriage. Ahiqar, the Assyrian king's vizier, devises a suitable response: he catches a cat, a sacred animal for the Egyptians, and gives it a good thrashing in public. When the Egyptian people complain for this sacrilege, Ahiqar insists that this particular cat has done him grave

[19] For text and translation of this narrative, see Gardiner (1932, p. xii, 85-89); Lefebvre (1949, p. 131-136); Brunner-Traut (1965, p. 145-147, 285-286); Maspero (2002, p. 223-228); Simpson (2003, p. 69-71); Bresciani (2007, p. 399-401).

[20] On this type of puzzle, see Ohlert (1912, p. 12-13, 72); Konstantakos (2004a, p. 121-122).

[21] Cf. Gunn; Gardiner (1918, p. 40); Lefebvre (1949, p. 133-134); Brunner-Traut (1965, p. 145); Simpson (2003, p. 69-70); Bresciani (2007, p. 399).

wrong: during the previous night it travelled from Egypt to Assyria, killed Ahiqar's fine pet cock, and returned to Egypt again. In this way, the wise man counterbalances the Pharaoh's paradox with an equally absurd statement, based again on an impossibility of space. If the sound of a horse can travel thousands of miles and be heard from Assyria to Egypt, what would prevent a cat from covering the same distance overnight?[22] This paradoxical sophism of *Ahiqar* is clearly a variation of the puzzle set by Apophis in the Egyptian novella.[23] It may thus be assumed that Seqenenre would ultimately counter the Hyksos ruler's absurdity with an analogous oxymoron. He might have claimed, for example, that Apophis' pet donkey (the sacred animal of Seth, Apophis' patron god) travelled during the night from Avaris to Thebes, defiled the sacred pond of the hippopotami with his faeces, and returned to the Delta by breakfast time.

To return to the structure of the Egyptian novella, both Apophis and Seqenenre are surrounded by their courtiers and officials, who serve as a collective royal council. This image is directly inspired from the so-called *Königsnovelle*, the characteristic Egyptian genre of official Pharaonic historical narrative, which sets forth the Pharaoh's exploits in a highly rhetorical manner ornamented with many fictional, mythical, and novelistic motifs. The Pharaoh who appears amidst the council of his scribes and courtiers, announces them a certain problem or situation, and asks for their opinion is a standard literary motif of the *Königsnovelle*, a narrative *topos* which could hardly be avoided in any ancient Egyptian text depicting royalty and the court milieu.[24] The Hyksos courtiers actually suggest to king Apophis the paradoxical puzzle to set to his opponent; but otherwise, they hardly feature in the plot. It is Apophis who has the

[22] For this problem in the various versions of *Ahiqar*, see Conybeare; Harris; Lewis (1913, p. 20, 49, 80-81, 120-121, 153-154); Lidzbarski (1896, p. 32-33); Pennacchietti (2005, p. 217); Schneider (1978, p. 151); Lusini (2005, p. 265). The same puzzle is included in the Greek adaptation of *Ahiqar* in the *Life of Aesop* 117.

[23] Cf. Maspero (1879, p. 214-216); Grottanelli (2005, p. 87-88); Betrò (2005, p. 185-186).

[24] On the Egyptian *Königsnovelle* and its typical motif of the Pharaoh's council, see Otto (1970, p. 172-175); Osing (1980); Van Seters (1983, p. 160-164); Koenen (1985, p. 172-173, 185-188); Redford (1992, p. 374-377); Loprieno (1996); Konstantakos (2008-2013, v. 1, p. 256-259).

main initiative for the confrontation with the Theban enemy. Seqenenre's courtiers, on the other hand, are completely unable to find a solution to the puzzle. In this respect, they resemble many other incompetent royal councils that appear in further examples of the tale-type of the riddle contest – including, most prominently, the insipid and unhelpful courtiers of the Assyrian king in *Ahiqar*.[25]

Thus, Seqenenre's council seems to be no more than a typical relic of the *Königsnovelle* form imprinted on the fictionalised pseudo-historical tale. It is unlikely that the counsellors would have provided the answer in the lost final part of the text. The Theban ruler must have discovered on his own a way to counter Apophis' paradox, perhaps after prayer and inspiration from a god, as happens also with Enmerkar in the Sumerian epic. It is significant that the Egyptian narrative places great emphasis on religious cult and stresses Seqenenre's devotion to his patron deity Amun-Re of Thebes. From the very beginning, it is suggested that Apophis feels irritated because the Theban ruler worships only Amun-Re and pays no attention to Seth, the tutelary god of the Hyksos.[26] Apophis sends his challenge to Seqenenre precisely in order to test whether the Theban god is powerful enough to help and save his protégé from the impasse.

Thus, the very contest of wisdom in the Egyptian tale is instigated by an opposition of a fundamentally religious nature; behind the conflict of the two kings, a competition of force is waged between their respective patron deities. The entire novella may be read as a confrontation between Seth and Amun-Re: the god of the foreign enemies stands against the official patron god of Egyptian monarchy, the god of storms against the god of the sun, the god of confusion and destruction against the greatest deity of creation.[27] In view of this underlying theological pattern, it

[25] See a collection of examples in Konstantakos (2008-2013, v. 1, p. 113).

[26] See Gardiner (1932, p. 85-88); Lefebvre (1949, p. 134-135); Brunner-Traut (1965, p. 145-146); Maspero (2002, p. 224-226); Simpson (2003, p. 70); Bresciani (2007, p. 399-400).

[27] On the religious background of the tale, see Gunn-Gardiner (1918, p. 44); Pieper (1935, p. 26); Lefebvre (1949, p. 132); Säve-Söderbergh (1951, p. 64-65); Brunner-Traut (1965, p. 286); Van Seters (1966, p. 171-173); Redford (1970b, p. 35-37); Hofmann (1981).

is plausible to suppose that Amun-Re would have been appropriately mobilised in the narrative as Seqenenre's helper: he might have inspired the Theban ruler with a suitable solution or a way out,[28] for example through a prophecy or a dream. This is indeed a motif known from many Egyptian legends and fictions.[29] In spite of the auxiliary participation of Apophis' court council and possibly of Seqenenre's god, the riddle contest of the Egyptian tale essentially represents the simple form of the pattern, with the two opposed kings in the protagonistic roles. There is no indication for a counsellor undertaking a substantial and weighty part in the action, like Abdemon in the tales of Solomon and Hiram.

The tale-type of the wisdom contest of kings may actually have reached Egypt from West Asia, where the same story pattern is attested from much older times. During the New Kingdom, thanks to the wars and conquests of the Tuthmosid Pharaohs in Syria and the Levant, the Egyptians came in close contact with the cultural traditions of West Asia. Much Asiatic narrative material, from mythical patterns to clusters of narrative motifs and novelistic themes, passed into the Egyptian imaginary at that period and is attested in the literary production of Egypt.[30] The tale-type of the wisdom contest of kings is likely to have been another instance of this phenomenon of cultural and literary exchange. A Mesopotamian or Levantine story of the type of Enmerkar

[28] Cf. Lefebvre (1949, p. 132).

[29] See e.g. the *Story of Setne Khaemwaset and Si-Osire* (the priest-magician Hor receives a revelatory dream from Thoth; Brunner-Traut, 1965, p. 205-206; Lichtheim, 1973-1980, v. 3, p. 146; Maspero, 2002, p. 130-131; Simpson, 2003, p. 482-483; Bresciani, 2007, p. 903); the so-called *Famine Stela* (Pharaoh Djoser is vouchsafed a propitious dream by the god Khnum; Lichtheim, 1973-1980, v. 3, p. 94-103; Hallo, 2003, p. 130-134; Simpson, 2003, p. 386-391; Bresciani, 2007, p. 648-652); the tale of Pharaoh Sethos in Herodotus 2.141 (Sethos is granted a salutary dream from Hephaestus/Ptah); and see Bonnet (1971, p. 836-837) for further examples.

[30] Several extant Egyptian tales, both mythical and novelistic, attest the influence from West Asiatic narrative themes and motifs: see e.g. the *Contendings of Horus and Seth*, the *Doomed Prince*, the *Tale of the Two Brothers*, the *Contest of Truth and Falsehood*, the *Destruction of Mankind*, the *Tale of Astarte and the Sea*, the *Myth of Seth and Anath*. See Lefebvre (1949, p. 108-109); Van Seters (1966, p. 175-179); Spiegel (1970, p. 163-164); Giveon (1980); Helck (1980); Redford (1992, p. 231-236); Hallo (2003, p. 35); Simpson (2003, p. 108); Bresciani (2007, p. 242, 361-362).

and the lord of Aratta, with two kings opposing each other and helped by their gods in their competition of wits, may well have been the ultimate model of the Egyptian novella of Apophis and Seqenenre. The Egyptian narrators took over the Asiatic story pattern and enriched it with elements from their native tradition of the *Königsnovelle*, such as the council of courtiers; but the core structure of the pristine Mesopotamian archetype was substantially preserved.

On the other hand, the later Egyptian tradition of the tale-type, in the course of the first millennium BCE, brings the personage of the Pharaoh's counsellor to the fore and makes him the main hero of the intellectual contest. As in the Hellenistic tales about Abdemon, it is a wise courtier, priest, or magician that shoulders the chief burden of the competition, devises the solutions on the Pharaoh's behalf, and impresses the readers with the display of his mental power. This is the case in an episode from the Demotic cycle of Setne Khaemwaset, a series of fantastic novellas illustrating the magical exploits of a legendary archpriest and wizard. The texts of these works are preserved on Demotic papyri of the Ptolemaic and Roman period, but the narrative material may go back to the times of the Saite Dynasty.[31] In the relevant episode, from the long magical novella known as *The Story of Setne Khaemwaset and Si-Osire*, a dark lord from Kush arrives at the court of Pharaoh Ramses at Memphis, carrying a sealed letter. He asks for a wise man that will be able to guess the contents of the letter without opening it; this is a physically impossible task like the *adynata* set to Enmerkar. King Ramses orders his son and chief priest Setne Khaemwaset to accomplish this labour, but Setne is at a loss and falls into depression. Finally, Setne's gifted son, Si-Osire, comes to the Pharaoh's assistance and reads the closed epistle thanks to his magical powers of clairvoyance. Thus, the shameful defeat is avoided and the honour of Egypt is saved.[32]

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[31] On the cycle of narratives about Setne Khaemwaset, see Pieper (1935, p. 54-60); Brunner-Traut (1965, p. 296-301); Tait (1991); Grimal (1994); Quack; Ryholt (2000); Hoffmann (2000, p. 207-213); Quack (2005, p. 30-42); Holm (2013, p. 98-104, 137-147, 157-158); Vinson (2018, p. 5, 22-40).

[32] For the text of this episode, see Griffith (1900, p. 162-173); Brunner-Traut (1965, p. 198-202); Maspero (2002, p. 125-128); Simpson (2003, p. 476-479); Bresciani (2007,

An analogous story about Pharaoh Amasis, the last king of the Saite dynasty, is related in Greek texts, integrated in the cycle of legends regarding the Seven Sages of ancient Greece. The narrative is included in Plutarch's *Banquet of the Seven Sages* (*Moralia* 151a-e) but must have been drawn from earlier sources, presumably collections of anecdotes and *chreiai* about the famous Greek wise men.[33] As the story goes, Amasis has an ongoing contest of wisdom with the king of Ethiopia (that is, the realm of Kush at the south of Egypt, as in the novella of Setne).[34] The Ethiopian monarch poses to the Pharaoh another *adynaton* of natural impossibility, namely, to drink up the sea. Amasis does not know how to answer to this absurdity and sends an envoy to Greece, to ask for the advice of Bias of Priene, one of the Seven Sages. Bias cleverly suggests a counter-impossibility, by which Amasis may turn the Ethiopian's sophism against its own creator: tell the Ethiopian king to block first the mouths of all the rivers, so as to prevent any further additions to the quantity of sea water to be consumed.

This story may well be based on an originally Egyptian legend. Amasis was a popular Pharaoh and acquired great importance in the folk imaginary of the Egyptians, because he was the last king of free Egypt before the Persian occupation. Therefore, many anecdotes and humorous tales accumulated around his figure, and some of them found their way into the Greek tradition, through Herodotus and other Greek authors who wrote about Egypt.[35] In the case of the aforementioned riddle contest, the very problem of drinking up the sea is woven around a motif known from

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p. 898-900); Agut-Labordère; Chauveau (2011, p. 49-52); Hoffmann; Quack (2018, p. 132-135).

[33] See Hirzel (1895, p. 133-142); Ziegler (1951, p. 883-885); Defradas (1954, p. 12, 23-29); Aune (1978, p. 54-56, 60); Adrados (1996, p. 130-139); Lo Cascio (1997, p. 11-13, 32-38); Konstantakos (2004a, p. 87-89).

[34] The Greek term Αἰθιοπία was broadly used to denote the entire African hinterland beyond the southern frontiers of Egypt. In historical terms, therefore, it largely coincided with the territory of the kingdom of Kush, the main opponent of Egypt in the Late Period. See Eide; Hägg; Pierce; Török (1994, p. 9, 319); Török (1997, p. 41, 69-70); Konstantakos (2004a, p. 91-92) with further references.

[35] See Pieper (1935, p. 52-54); De Meulenaere (1951, p. 93-96); Froidefond (1971, p. 183-185); Lloyd (1975-1988, v. 1, p. 103-104, v. 3, p. 212-215); Müller (1989); Quaegebeur (1990, p. 241, 265-270); Haziza (2009, p. 281-285).

Egyptian literature; the same absurd idea occurs in a Demotic animal fable, in which a swallow attempts to empty the sea with its beak, in order to take revenge for its small nestlings which were drowned in the tide.[36] In the original Egyptian version, Amasis might have resorted to the help of a local Egyptian courtier or priest, like Setne and Si-Osire in the Demotic novella mentioned above. When the story was taken over in the Greek tradition, the Egyptian courtly counsellor was replaced by a member of the Seven Sages, the most famous spiritual luminaries in the collective imagination of Hellas.[37]

In both these Egyptian narratives (about Setne and Amasis), which belong to the Saite age or to an even later period, the character of the Pharaoh's adviser is the main bearer of wisdom, the saviour of the king and the realm, the true champion of the contest. In Egypt, as also in West Asia, the tradition of the tale-type moves from a simpler form towards a more expanded one, and the narrative focus shifts to the personage of the clever courtier and assistant of the king.

From the late first millennium onwards, the plainer form, with the two kings in the protagonistic roles, disappears, and the counsellor-centred variant dominates completely in ancient narrative traditions. The Iranian and Indian legends of late antiquity, woven around the Sasanian monarchs Bahram Gur and Khusrau Anushirvan or the Indian emperor Nanda, similarly privilege the wise adviser's figure. When an enemy ruler poses difficult riddles, the wise vizier, such as Buzurjmihr in Sasanian Persia or Śakaṭala in India, steps up, solves the puzzles, and confounds the enemy with new, insoluble questions of his own.[38] The self-championing

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[36] For the text of the fable, which is inscribed on a jar of the first or second century CE, see Spiegelberg (1912, p. 7-11, 16-17); Brunner-Traut (1965, p. 126-127, 280-281); Bresciani (2007, p. 992-993); Hoffmann; Quack (2018, p. 257-258).

[37] On the Egyptian provenance of the tale, see Pieper (1935, p. 65); Sauneron; Yoyotte (1952, p. 193-194); Konstantakos (2004a, p. 89-95).

[38] The Persian legends of the riddle contests of Bahram Gur and Khusrau Anushirvan are transmitted in Firdausi's vast epic *Shahnameh* and in Tha'alibi's *History of the Kings of the Persians* (early eleventh century CE). See Mohl (1876-1878, v. 6, p. 1-9, 306-319, 366-378); Warner; Warner (1905-1925, v. 7, p. 101-105, 380-394, v. 8, p. 8-13); Davis (2006, p. 652-655, 698-704, 711-714); Zotenberg (1900, p. 622-624, 633-636).

kings, of the type of Enmerkar, Seqenenre, and the Biblical Solomon, are rendered into an obsolete species. The vizier deals with all the problems and saves the country. The wise kingship cedes its place to the clever court bureaucracy, and this situation is established in the folk narrative traditions all over the world, up to the modern age.

The *Story of Ahiqar* and the Wisdom Contest

It is now the time to turn to a celebrated Near-Eastern text, a seminal narrative work of Semitic culture, which seems to have been the single most important fountainhead for the later development and diffusion of the tale-type of the wisdom contest, both in the East and more broadly in world tradition. This is the *Story of Ahiqar*, a wisdom romance narrating the adventures of a sagacious vizier in the Neo-Assyrian kingdom, a book that became the first "international bestseller" in world literature. It is generally agreed that *Ahiqar* was originally composed in Aramaic, possibly in the early sixth century BCE, some time after the fall of the Neo-Assyrian Empire, which serves as a graphic pseudo-historical setting to the fictional narrative.[39] From an early time, the work was translated in several languages and enjoyed a wide circulation throughout the Orient

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One of the tales, featuring Buzurjmihr in the wise counsellor's role, is also presented in a short narrative work in Middle Persian (Pahlavi), composed in the late Sasanian age (seventh century CE), under the title *Wizārišn ī čatrang ud nihišn ī nēw-Ardaxšīr* ("The Explanation of Chess and the Invention of Backgammon"). See Pagliaro (1951); Nyberg (1964, p. xxi-xxii, 120-122, 206); Brunner (1978); Panaino (1999); Daryaee (2016). The tales about Emperor Nanda and his wise adviser Śakaṭala are transmitted in an Indian framed collection of stories, the *Śukasaptati* ("Seventy Tales of the Parrot"). See Schmidt (1894, p. 68-71); Schmidt (1897, p. 129-131); Schmidt (1913, p. 82-85); Haksar (2000, p. 155-160); cf. Benfey (1892, p. 164-167).

[39] See most notably Lindenberger (1985, p. 481-483); Fales (1993, p. 147-148); Greenfield (1995, p. 47-50); Denis (2000, p. 1032-1036); Contini (2005b, p. 13-21, 38-43); Parpola (2005); Briquel-Chatonnet (2005, p. 20-24); Niehr (2007, p. 7-12, 20-22); Konstantakos (2008-2013, v. 1, p. 27-31); Weigl (2010, p. 677-709, 756-763); Toloni (2013, p. 10-21); Bledsoe (2021, p. 37-48); Quack (2022, p. 277).

and the Eastern Mediterranean, from Greece and Egypt to Iran and India.[40] Its popularity remained unabated for almost two millennia, up to the late Medieval and early modern period, and could only be rivalled by other popularised romances and story collections of the same kind, such as the *Alexander Romance*, the *Pañcatantra*, and the *Book of Sindbad*.

The earliest extant version of *Ahiqar* survives in a very fragmentary form on an Aramaic papyrus of the late fifth century BCE, discovered in Elephantine, Egypt, among the ruins of the Jewish colony of mercenaries situated there.[41] In this pristine form, the work is made up of two distinct parts: a narrative, in which the central hero Ahiqar relates his life and adventures in the first person; and a large collection of didactic sayings, maxims, and parables, which epitomise the protagonist's wisdom.[42] The narrative part unfolds in the first five columns of the papyrus. As the story goes, Ahiqar is the vizier and counsellor of Esarhaddon, the king of Assyria. He is an old and experienced man with many years of service in court, but he is childless and worried about his lack of heir. He therefore adopts his nephew Nadin and raises him as his own son, with a view to promoting him as his successor in his high office. The ungrateful Nadin, however, hatches an insidious plot against Ahiqar and calumniates him before the Assyrian sovereign, accusing him of treason and seditious rebellion. The king is led astray by Nadin's false charges and condemns Ahiqar to death. An officer by the name of Nabusumiskun is entrusted with the execution of the sentence. Luckily, this same man is a great friend

[40] On the diffusion and the multifarious versions of *Ahiqar*, see the surveys of Küchler (1979, p. 333-357); Denis (2000, p. 993-1037); Niehr (2007, p. 23-32); Weigl (2010, p. 1-51); Konstantakos (2008-2013, v. 1, p. 32-36); and the essays collected in the volume of Contini; Grottanelli (2005).

[41] The Aramaic text of Elephantine is edited and translated in Porten; Yardeni (1993, p. 24-53); see also Lindenberger (1985); Grelot (2001); Contini (2005a); Niehr (2007); Wigand (2022, p. 25-30); cf. Kottsieper (1990) and Weigl (2010), who edit only the sayings.

[42] On the "diptych", bipartite structure of the text of Elephantine, see Lindenberger (1985, p. 479-482); Greenfield (1995, p. 45-47); Grelot (2001, p. 515-516); Weigl (2001, p. 26-27); Contini (2005b, p. 16-17); Briquel-Chatonnet (2005, p. 24-27); Niehr (2007, p. 6, 21); Konstantakos (2008-2013, v. 1, p. 24-26, 55-62, v. 3, p. 465-467); Bledsoe (2021, p. 128-136); Wigand (2022, p. 72-80).

of Ahiqar's and owes him his life: Ahiqar had once saved Nabusumiskun from the wrath of the Assyrian monarch. The officer now pays back that earlier benefaction and refrains from killing the wise vizier. Instead, he hides Ahiqar in his own house and lies to the king.

Unfortunately, the ancient Aramaic papyrus breaks off at this point. When the text resumes, after a large gap, the surviving nine columns contain the collection of Ahiqar's sayings. The lost middle part of the papyrus must have covered the continuation and end of the narrative, with the final fate of Ahiqar, as well as the beginning of the list of his maxims. As it happens, it is possible to calculate approximately the length of the missing middle portion. The papyrus is a palimpsest; the underlying text, which was erased to make space for the *Story of Ahiqar*, consisted of custom catalogues from the eleventh year of the reign of Xerxes. These catalogues recorded month by month the incoming and outgoing cargoes of ships that sailed to or from Egypt, following the traditional month sequence of the Egyptian calendar.[43] Thanks to the dating system of the underlying text, it can be estimated that the lost middle part of the papyrus extended to four columns or thereabouts.[44]

The development of the storyline, after the main hero has gone into hiding, can only be read in later translations and adaptations of the *Story of Ahiqar*, which circulated widely from the Roman period onwards. The earliest fully extant specimen is the Greek rendering

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[43] The underlying text of the custom lists was first published in Porten; Yardeni (1993, p. 82-193).

[44] See Porten; Yardeni (1993, p. xiii, xx-xxi, 23, 35). This reconstruction has been accepted by most scholars, even though the dates in the text of the accounts are not always clearly legible (see Kratz, 2022, p. 309 for a sceptical view). See Grelot (2001, p. 512-516); Contini (2005a, p. 113-116, 122); Contini (2005b, p. 15-16); Briquel-Chatonnet (2005, p. 19, 28); Niehr (2007, p. 5-7, 21); Weigl (2010, p. 29-30, 39-40); Bledsoe (2021, p. 25-33); Wigand (2022, p. 18-19). Strugnell (1999) postulated that the collection of sayings was positioned in the middle of the work, as an admonitory discourse addressed by Ahiqar to his ungrateful adoptive son, and that several more lost columns of narrative must have originally followed after the end of the sayings. His theory has not gained wide acceptance; see the criticisms of Contini (2005b, p. 19-21); Konstantakos (2008-2013, v. 3, p. 465-466); but see also now the careful reappraisal by Bledsoe (2021, p. 129-131).

included in the *Life of Aesop*, a biographical romance that sets out the picaresque life and adventures of the homonymous legendary fabulist, composed around the first or second century CE.[45] In this Greek fiction, the storyline of *Ahiqar* has been transplanted to Aesop, who is supposed to have established himself in Babylon and have become the acclaimed vizier of the Babylonian king. Otherwise, the traditional plot of *Ahiqar* is faithfully followed, and Aesop performs all the roles and functions of the original Assyrian vizier (chapters 101-123).[46] Afterwards, the same expanded storyline is read in the sundry later redactions of *Ahiqar* in many languages of the Near East and Eastern Europe: Syriac and Neo-Aramaic, Armenian, Arabic, Ethiopic, and further Old Turkish, Old Slavonic, Russian, Georgian, Romanian etc.[47] The oldest among these versions are the Syriac and the Armenian, which may have been compiled towards the end of the Roman age, in the fourth or fifth century CE.[48] All these later redactions reflect the same essential storyline as the Greek *Life of Aesop*. Clearly, at least from the early Roman or late Hellenistic period, this form had been established as the standard model scenario of the *Story of Ahiqar*.

In the later versions, the narrative develops into a fully-fledged riddle contest of kings, with Ahiqar taking centre stage in the clever counsellor's role. After the condemned vizier is hidden and presumed dead, the Pharaoh of Egypt sends the Assyrian monarch a letter and challenges him with an impossible task: to build a castle in mid-air,

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[45] On the dating, see Konstantakos (2008-2013, v. 3, p. 62-64), with a long bibliography.
[46] For a detailed comparison of this part of the *Life of Aesop* with *Ahiqar*, see Konstantakos (2008-2013, v. 3). See also Perry (1952, p. 5-9); Marinčič (2003, p. 60-70); Contini (2005b, p. 29-31); Grottanelli (2005, p. 67-70); Jouanno (2006, p. 239-243); Quack (2022, p. 285-290).
[47] A collection of later redactions of *Ahiqar* (Syriac, Armenian, Arabic, Old Turkish, Slavonic) has been published by Conybeare; Harris; Lewis (1913). Other editions: see Lidzbarski (1896, p. 5-41) for the Neo-Aramaic; Schneider (1978) and Lusini (2005) for the Ethiopic; Pennacchietti (2005) for the Syriac; Gaster (1900) for the Romanian; cf. Giaiero (2005) for the Arabic versions.
[48] See Conybeare; Harris; Lewis (1913, p. xxi-xxiii, 174-176); Küchler (1979, p. 21-22); Denis (2000, p. 1004-1007); Contini (2005b, p. 35-36); Pennacchietti (2005, p. 193-196); Niehr (2007, p. 22, 27).

between heaven and earth. The Assyrian king is asked to dispatch to Egypt a wise man capable of constructing such an edifice and of solving all the other riddles that the Pharaoh will propound to him. Otherwise, Assyria will have to pay tribute to Egypt. The Assyrian king consults with his officials and courtiers, but they prove unable to cope with the problem. As they point out, only Ahiqar was accustomed to answering such questions in the past, thanks to his great sagacity. The monarch then realizes the value of Ahiqar for the kingdom; he laments for the loss of his wise vizier and wishes he could have him back.

At that point, Nabusumiskun intervenes and confesses that he has kept the condemned sage alive. The Assyrian king is filled with enthusiasm. By his order, Ahiqar is immediately brought out of his hiding place and restored to his former position. Then Ahiqar duly travels to Egypt, where he confronts the Pharaoh in the contest of wisdom and cleverly handles the problem of the castle in the air, as well as a series of other riddles. He thus returns to Assyria triumphant and brings with him the tribute of Egypt and many more precious gifts from the Pharaoh. The Assyrian king bestows great honours on Ahiqar and delivers the treacherous Nadin into his hands, to be harshly punished for his ingratitude.

In the later versions, therefore, the hero's restoration and final triumph are inextricably associated with an extensive wisdom contest, which comprises a journey of the wise Ahiqar to Egypt and the ingenious solution of a lengthy series of puzzles set by the Pharaoh. Depending on the version, the narrative includes between five and seven problems of different genres, from impossible tasks and paradoxical sophisms to proper conundrums and quizzes of simile and comparison.[49] Clearly, this ample and complex contest of wisdom could not have been accommodated within the limits of the missing four columns in the papyrus text of Elephantine; it would have been impossible to cram in such a short space the solution of so many riddles, together with Ahiqar's restoration, Nadin's punishment, and the beginning of Ahiqar's collected

[49] For a full survey, see Konstantakos (2008-2013, v. 1, p. 39-53, v. 3, p. 177-246); Konstantakos (2019, p. 315-319).

sayings.[50] So, what happened to the hero in the Aramaic version of Elephantine, and by extension in the earliest phases of the tradition of *Ahiqar*? How was the wise vizier released from his secret confinement and vindicated before the king?

One of the theories forwarded for the explanation of the discrepancy is that the papyrus of Elephantine does not reflect the full text of the early Aramaic *Ahiqar* but only an epitomised and curtailed form of it. The original *Story of Ahiqar* in Aramaic would have comprised a much more expanded narrative, similar to the ample novelistic account of the *Life of Aesop* and the later redactions.[51] Following this line of thought, the extant Aramaic papyrus should represent a synoptic abridgement of the original *Ahiqar*, an anthology of shortened excerpts and summarised episodes from the pristine Aramaic narration, designed mainly for didactic purposes. This would also be the reason why the papyrus text gives emphasis to the collection of Ahiqar's instructive sayings and to the moralistic tone of the story, at the expense of the more adventurous and novelistic motifs of the plot. If this theory is adopted, then the extensive riddle contest, as seen in the later redactions, would have been an integral part of *Ahiqar* from the beginning, included already in the earliest version or versions of the work that were created in the sixth century. It is only in the anthology of Elephantine that the contest episode was omitted or severely curtailed, because its adventurous and romance-like character did not suit the didactic aims of the compilation.

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[50] Cf. Contini (2005b, p. 21); Bledsoe (2021, p. 129-130).

[51] See Luzzatto (1992, p. 10-15); Luzzatto (1994, p. 253-277). A similar suspicion was already voiced by Meissner (1917, p. 23). Moore (2022, p. 242-253) supports this theory by tracing indications for alternative versions of Ahiqar's story in an erased or faded note on the verso of the papyrus of Elephantine. However, even if this obscure piece of scribbling is interpreted in this way, nothing in it points to a version substantially longer and more expanded than the Elephantine text. The Demotic Egyptian adaptation of *Ahiqar*, preserved on several papyrus fragments of the early Roman period, clearly unfolded a more extended narrative scenario than the Elephantine text and most probably included the episode of the wisdom contest (Quack, 2011, p. 376-382; Quack, 2022). It cannot be proved, however, that the Demotic translation goes back to a considerably earlier tradition of *Ahiqar*, datable long before Roman times; cf. Bledsoe (2021, p. 131).

The majority of scholars and historians of Near-Eastern literature have rejected this bold hypothesis. Admittedly, the papyrus of Elephantine does give the impression of a didactically oriented anthology of excerpts. However, it remains true that there is no piece of hard evidence or solid proof to support this impression. The text of Elephantine is the earliest form of *Ahiqar* that survives; what remains of its narrative part is fully cohesive and presents a plausibly evolving scenario with a logical succession of continuous scenes and episodes, not a disjointed patchwork of dislocated passages. In view of this, the most economical solution is to suppose that the papyrus of Elephantine represents the most pristine form of *Ahiqar*;[52] the later redactions would be the result of subsequent expansion and amplification of an originally tighter and more laconic narrative.

In that case, how would the story have evolved and concluded in the missing part of the version of Elephantine? Clearly, as required by poetic justice and by the general conventions of this genre of novelistic pseudo-historical fiction, the main hero must have been saved and restored in the end. An important event must have occurred in the course of the plot, obliging the Assyrian king to repent for his persecution of Ahiqar, feel again the need for his wise old counsellor, and wish he could have him back.[53] The officer Nabusumiskun would then bring the hidden vizier forth, and Ahiqar would come out of his lair and regain his position in the royal court. In the surviving part of the narrative, this kind of outcome is indeed foretold on more than one occasion, both by Ahiqar himself and by Nabusumiskun. Both of them predict that the Assyrian monarch will eventually feel the need for Ahiqar's advice and counsel, and the officer will then find occasion to present Ahiqar live in the court again.[54]

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[52] See Fales (1993, p. 145-149); Contini (1998, p. 83-89); Contini (2005b, p. 18-19); Konstantakos (2008-2013, v. 1, p. 30-32).

[53] Cf. Meissner (1917, p. 23); Cowley (1923, p. 209); Greenfield (1995, p. 45, 47).

[54] Thus, when Ahiqar begs Nabusumiskun to hide and save him from execution, he characteristically predicts: "Esarhaddon the King is merciful, as known. At last, he will remember me and my counsel he will seek. Then, you will present me to him and he will let me live" (Porten; Yardeni, 1993, p. 32-33; Lindenberger, 1985, p. 496;

This prediction, and especially the emphasis on the need for Ahiqar's wise advice, indicates what must have happened in the lost sequel of the narrative. The Assyrian king must have faced some kind of hard problem or difficult crisis which would require sagacity and intellectual alertness to settle[55] – exactly the spiritual gifts that Ahiqar used to display in his career as the king's wise vizier and counsellor. Ahiqar would thus be rediscovered and reinstated in order to deal with the crucial problem by means of his intelligence. It is noteworthy that the wisdom contest of the later redactions is fully consistent with this implied scenario. A challenge from a foreign ruler involving an impossible riddle, which the Assyrian monarch would be obliged to solve or else submit and pay tribute to the enemy – this kind of problem is both dangerous for the king and calling for great mental perspicacity. Such an intellectual provocation, coming from an enemy kingdom, would offer the ideal opportunity for Ahiqar's good service and final restoration.

It is thus plausible to argue that the riddle contest between the Assyrian king and the Pharaoh was already included as a core element in the earliest form of *Ahiqar* and was contained in the missing part of the papyrus of Elephantine.[56] Obviously, the long series of puzzles posed by the Pharaoh in the later versions could not have been included in the

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Contini, 2005a, p. 120; Niehr, 2007, p. 41; Wigand, 2022, p. 28-29). Subsequently, Nabusumiskun uses the same argument to convince the two royal guards to become his accomplices in this plan: "until at last Esarhaddon [the King will remember this Ahiqar and his advice he will seek. Then, I shall present him] to him and the heart of Esarhaddo[n the King will rejoice abundantly and copious goods he will give me … Then] goods I will give to you as much [as …]" (Porten; Yardeni, 1993, p. 34-35; Lindenberger, 1985, p. 497; Contini, 2005a, p. 121; Niehr, 2007, p. 41; Wigand, 2022, p. 30).

[55] Cf. Luzzatto (1992, p. 14-15).

[56] The same hypothesis (that some kind of intellectual competition or wisdom contest was included in the missing part of the Elephantine text) has been forwarded by several scholars: see La Penna (1962, p. 288); Grelot (1972, p. 452); Haslam (1986, p. 150); Contini (2005b, p. 21-22); Briquel-Chatonnet (2005, p. 19, 27-28); Konstantakos (2008-2013, v. 1, p. 143-158); Weigl (2010, p. 29-30); Toloni (2013, p. 14-15, 21-22); cf. also Cowley (1923, p. 209); Perry (1952, p. 6-8); Grottanelli (1982a, p. 558); Bledsoe (2021, p. 35-36); Quack (2022, p. 275-277, 281).

brief remaining space of the papyrus. Presumably, the wisdom contest of the early Aramaic text was much shorter and simpler. It may have vaguely stated that the Pharaoh sent difficult riddles to the Assyrian king, without specifying their details and content. The same layout is found in the Biblical episode of Solomon and Sheba (1 *Kings* 10.1-3) and in Josephus' summary retelling of the legends about Solomon and Hiram (*Jewish Antiquities* 8.143, 8.146, 8.148-149; *Against Apion* 1.111, 1.114-115, 1.120). With this kind of arrangement, the description of the wisdom contest might be limited to no more than a few sentences.

Alternatively, the papyrus text may have mentioned one particular problem (for example, the castle in the air or another impossibility), which should have been described briefly and countered by Ahiqar in a cleverly economical manner.[57] The same structure is found in some later Iranian and Indian tales, which are ultimately inspired from the *Story of Ahiqar*. The wise Buzurjmihr, vizier of the Sasanian monarch Khusrau, and the prudent Śakaṭala, minister of the Indian emperor Nanda, similarly have to deal with a single problem, one impossible task propounded by the enemy of their patron king.[58] Whether in the original Aramaic version Ahiqar went personally to Egypt, to confront the Pharaoh and solve his riddle in situ, this cannot be determined. The counsellor's journey is not organically necessary for the plot of the wisdom contest, as is shown again by the aforementioned Persian and Indian narratives. Buzurjmihr and Śakaṭala remain in their king's palace, in Iran or India respectively;

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[57] On this possibility, cf. Meissner (1917, p. 29-31); Hausrath (1918, p. 39). In particular, on the great antiquity of the problem of the castle in the air, cf. Briquel-Chatonnet (2006); Moore (2021, p. 46).

[58] See the Iranian and Indian works mentioned above, in n. 38. In one of the tales, Buzurjmihr does travel to India, the rival king's country, in the second part of the narrative, to pose a problem of his own to the Indian monarch. However, this only happens in a later, secondary phase of the plot. Initially, it is the Indian ruler that poses the first challenge, by sending a puzzle to the Persian king Khusrau in Iran, and Buzurjmihr solves the puzzle on the spot, without moving from the Persian palace. See the *Wizārišn ī čatrang* and the relevant episodes in Firdausi's *Shahnameh* and Tha'alibi's *History* (Mohl, 1876-1878, v. 6, p. 306-319; Warner; Warner, 1905-1925, v. 7, p. 380-394; Davis, 2006, p. 698-704; Zotenberg, 1900, p. 622-624).

they only listen to the difficult puzzle, which a messenger of the enemy ruler has come to announce, and give their clever answer on the spot. In any case, if a journey of Ahiqar was included in the missing part of the papyrus of Elephantine, its narration must have been very concise and arid, without graphic details.

If this hypothesis is accepted, the expanded riddle contest of the later redactions of *Ahiqar*, with its series of suspenseful problems and amusing solutions, must have been a later novelistic and romance-like development of an originally tinier and plainer core. In this respect, the tradition of the Jewish story of Solomon and Sheba offers again a characteristic parallel. The earliest, Biblical version of the story, in the first book of *Kings*, is brief, extending to no more than a page of text in a stereotype edition; the contest of wit between the two monarchs is summarily told and includes no specific examples of riddles. By contrast, later Rabbinical retellings of the legend, in the targum and the midrashim, amplify the Biblical core by adding a series of puzzles of various different genres.[59] The same process may be imagined with regard to the textual tradition of the *Story of Ahiqar*. The early Aramaic text, as reflected in the papyrus of Elephantine, would have been restricted to a brief statement of the competition and of Ahiqar's triumph of wit. The later redactions enlarged this rudimentary core by introducing a sequence of multifarious graphic riddles and their clever solutions.

The *Story of Ahiqar*: A Seminal Point in the Development of the Tale-Type

As transpires from this literary-historical investigation, the expanded versions of *Ahiqar* introduced an important innovation into the tale-type of the wisdom contest; they offered a new and more sophisticated version of the age-old theme, recasting it into a more complex structure and with a richer range of materials. By transforming a miscellany of various different kinds of riddle into a narrative plot, the later adapters

[59] See above with regard to the *Targum Sheni*, the *Midrash Mishle*, and the *Midrash ha-Hefez*, and the bibliography cited in n. 12.

of *Ahiqar* secured a way to maintain the interest of readers and develop suspense. If the wisdom contest is restricted to a single problem of a particular kind, as happened in the Egyptian *Quarrel of Apophis and Seqenenre* and probably in the early Aramaic version of *Ahiqar*, the competition ends too quickly. The storyline is thus deprived of agonistic tension and narrative enthralment. On the other hand, if the contest were to be prolonged by accumulating riddles of the exact same kind one after the other, the narrative would run the risk of repetitiveness and dullness. This is perceptible in the Sumerian epic of *Enmerkar and the Lord of Aratta*, and also in other riddle contests from a wide range of poetic traditions – from the Sasanian legends of King Bahram Gur in the *Shahnameh* to Yudhisthira's contest with the demonic Yaksa in the *Mahabharata* and the confrontation between the giant Vafthrudnir and the god Odin in the Norse *Vafthrudnismal*.[60] In all these cases, the contest of wisdom is built up by means of repetition of the same genre of puzzle; the competitors exchange a long series of problems of identical type. As a result, the storyline is characterised by a feeling of archaic rigidity, a slothful narrative flow and a monotonous lack of variation.

The expanded adaptations of the *Story of Ahiqar* aim at a higher level of novelistic sophistication, rising over and above the primitive repetitiousness of archaising epic or the simple manner of popular storytelling. By stringing together a variegated miscellany of diverse genres of intellectual puzzle, which are matched by an equal variety of clever methods of solution, the narrator of *Ahiqar* creates a good deal of suspense and surprise effects; the readers are amused at the inexhaustible inventiveness of the two opponents and interested in what may come next. It was a suitable narrative structure for a wisdom romance designed

[60] For the story of Bahram Gur and his wisdom contest with the Emperor of Byzantium, narrated in Firdausi's *Shahnameh*, see Mohl (1876-1878, v. 6, p. 1-9); Warner; Warner (1905-1925, v. 7, p. 101-105); Davis (2006, p. 652-655). For the deadly competition between the hero-king Yudhisthira and the demon Yaksa in the *Mahabharata*, see van Buitenen (1975, p. 181, 797-804); Sternbach (1975, p. 23-26); Shulman (1996). For the Norse poem *Vafthrudnismal*, which mainly consists of an extended riddle contest between Odin and Vafthrudnir, see Genzmer (1981, p. 36-43); Larrington (1996, p. 39-49).

to exalt the intellectual feats and labours of a great cultural hero, a man able to solve every conceivable puzzle in the world.

This innovative trait of the *Story of Ahiqar* exercised an immense influence on posterity and conditioned the structure of many subsequent narratives about confrontations of wise men. In the Rabbinical Jewish tradition, apart from the later reworkings of the legend of Solomon and Sheba, the mixture of many diverse forms of mental puzzle is found in the contest between Rabbi Joshua ben Hananiah and the wise men of Athens, narrated in the *Babylonian Talmud*.[61] The model also spread to the Far East, mainly through the edifying parables and narratives of Buddhist preachers. In Buddhist novelistic works, such as the *Mahā-ummagga-jātaka* and the Chinese storybook *Tsa pao tsang ching*, the assortment of various different types of problem, as emblematised in *Ahiqar*, reaches its furthest point of development and complexity.[62]

The *Story of Ahiqar* proved to be seminal for the further development of the theme of the wisdom contest also in another respect. The most striking feature of the spiritual competition of *Ahiqar*, whether in the hypothetical Aramaic model or in the extant later redactions, is the capital importance of the king's counsellor and his role in the whole process. Ahiqar, the sagacious vizier who counters the enemy's puzzles on behalf of his king, is not only the main figure of the wisdom contest but actually the protagonist of a much broader composition, into which the

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[61] See *Bekhoroth* 8b-9a: Wünsche (1883, p. 34-39); Wünsche (1889, p. 63-66); Goldschmidt (1935, p. 26-28); Elkaïm-Sartre (1982, p. 1295-1298); Bialik; Ravnitzky (1992, p. 228-229). On this Talmudic legend and its dependence on *Ahiqar*, see Meissner (1894, p. 194-196); Meissner (1917, p. 17-18); Yassif (1999, p. 101-103, 214-215); Konstantakos (2008-2013, v. 2, p. 278, v. 3, p. 181-184).

[62] For the *Mahā-ummagga-jātaka*, one of the fictional biographical narratives about the former lives of the Buddha that form part of the classic Buddhist canon in Pāli, see Cowell (1907, p. 159-172); Sternbach (1975, p. 27-28); cf. Zachariae (1920, p. 55-67) and Konstantakos (2008-2013, v. 3, p. 182-185), who also remark on its connections with *Ahiqar*. The *Tsa pao tsang ching* ("The Storehouse of Sundry Valuables") is a Chinese collection of edifying parables translated from a lost Indian original in 472 CE. Among other didactic tales, it includes a long series of multifarious tricky questions posed by a celestial spirit to a king: see Chavannes (1911, p. 3-9); Willemen (1994, p. 15-18).

contest has been inserted as an individual episode. Unlike what happens in other Near-Eastern and Egyptian traditions and in a good number of folktales, the competition of kings is not the central narrative theme, the chief episode that permits the emergence of the wise counsellor as the key character for the settlement of the conflict and the achievement of a happy ending. Rather, the kings' contest has been subordinated to a larger biographical narration, which revolves entirely around the central personage of the counsellor and serves to highlight his spiritual gifts and glorify his achievements. The intellectual contest is now one of several ingredients employed to illustrate the counsellor's wisdom in the context of a complex court tale. In *Ahiqar*, the character of the king's adviser and assistant is invested with the utmost importance and gravity, much more than in any other known specimen of the tale-type of the contest in the entire literary and folk tradition of the ancient world.

The reason for this extraordinary promotion of the counsellor's personage lies in the composite narrative constitution of the *Story of Ahiqar*. The plot of this work has been constructed by joining together two different story patterns, which were widely diffused as separate and autonomous tale-types in the folk imaginary and the literary traditions of the Near East. One of these types is the riddle contest of kings, whose long history has been sketched above. The other story pattern may be called "disgrace and rehabilitation of the wise adviser", and enjoyed an equally long-lasting reception, from Mesopotamian wisdom compositions to Biblical books and Demotic Egyptian fictions.[63]

A good synopsis of this story pattern is provided by an old Sumerian saying, preserved on a bilingual tablet from the library of Ashurbanipal. This is one of the earliest manifestations of the theme in Near-Eastern literature: "The wise vizier, whose wisdom his king has not heeded, and any valuable person forgotten by his master, when

[63] On this story pattern and its diffusion in the ancient world, see most notably Grottanelli (1982b, p. 654-657); Griffiths (1987, p. 40-42); Wills (1990, p. 39-74); Grottanelli (2005, p. 49-86); Konstantakos (2008-2013, v. 1, p. 185-231).

a need arises for his wisdom, he will be reinstated".[64] This concise formulation actually condenses the substance of an entire tale about the wise counsellor's fall and rise; it might well serve as the concluding moral of such a tale.

The narrative development of the same pattern underlies a famous Mesopotamian composition, the *Poem of the Righteous Sufferer*, probably from the Kassite period (ca. 1595-1155 BCE).[65] The protagonist and narrator, Šubši-mešrê-Šakkan, is a great lord and state official, who inadvertently incurs the wrath of the god Marduk and experiences a series of terrible misfortunes as a result. Among other calamities, the king is angered with the protagonist and shows him overt hostility. The other courtiers conspire and weave intrigues against Šubši-mešrê-Šakkan; they spread calumnies about him, and as a result he loses his possessions and his state office.[66] In the end, however, Marduk forgives Šubši-mešrê-Šakkan and protects him from his enemies. It may be assumed that the protagonist was ultimately restored to his wealth and position, although the description of his reinstatement has been lost among the fragmentary remains of the finale of the poem.[67]

In the Hebrew Scripture, the story pattern of disgrace and rehabilitation is applied to the adventures of many wise prophetic figures. Joseph in the *Genesis* loses his master's favour and is thrown into prison because of the unjust accusations of Potiphar's wife (*Genesis* 37); but when the Pharaoh has obscure symbolic dreams, Joseph is brought out of his imprisonment to explain them, and is raised to the position of grand vizier thanks to his perceptive and divinely inspired interpretation

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[64] See Lambert (1960, p. 239, 241) for the saying K 4347, col. 2, vv. 56-63; Reiner (1961, p. 7-8). Cf. the comments of Oettinger (1992, p. 5-6); Greenfield (1995, p. 43-44); Moore (2021, p. 67-68).

[65] For the text of this poem, see Lambert (1960, p. 21-62, 283-302); Hallo (2003, p. 486-492); Foster (2005, p. 392-409). For comparison with the *Story of Ahiqar*, cf. Niehr (2007, p. 12); Bledsoe (2021, p. 64).

[66] See Lambert (1960, p. 32-36); Hallo (2003, p. 487-488); Foster (2005, p. 396-397).

[67] See Lambert (1960, p. 24-26).

(*Genesis* 39-41).[68] During the siege of Jerusalem by the Babylonians, Jeremiah is thrown into a pit or a subterranean dungeon by order of King Zedekiah and his officers, because he prophecies the fall of the city and demoralises the people. However, the king needs Jeremiah's advice and therefore takes him out of confinement and consults him about the war (*Jeremiah* 37.11-21 and 38).[69]

Further, Daniel, as a wise official in the palace of the Babylonian or the Persian king, is repeatedly calumniated by the envious courtiers, sentenced to death, and even thrown into the lions' den. Nevertheless, God saves him from danger, and Daniel is therefore admired by the monarch and restored to greater glory (*Daniel* 1, 2, 6, and the apocryphal text *Bel and the Dragon* 28-40).[70] Mordecai, in the book of *Esther* (2.19, 2.21-23, 4.1-3, 6.1-8.17), and Tobit, in the first chapters of the homonymous Biblical work (1.13-22), undergo similar experiences.[71] There are also parallels in the Egyptian novelistic literature of the Late Period. In the *Tale of Merire*, from a papyrus of the seventh or sixth century BCE, the eponymous hero is the most competent scribe and magician among all the Pharaoh's courtiers, but he has been marginalised and pushed into obscurity because of the envy of his colleagues. Only when the Pharaoh faces a mortal illness and none of the other magicians is able to save

[68] On the theme of "disgrace and rehabilitation" in the Biblical story of Joseph, see Redford (1970a, p. 95-97); Niditch; Doran (1977, p. 185-187, 190); Grottanelli (1982a, p. 559); Grottanelli (1982b, p. 656-657); Grottanelli (1987, p. 14-15, 26-27); Griffiths (1987, p. 41); Redford (1992, p. 428-429); Niditch (2000, p. 112-114); Westermann (2002, p. 24, 26-28, 60, 85); Grottanelli (2005, p. 51-55).

[69] These two successive episodes in the book of *Jeremiah* are practically doublets or alternative variants of the same basic story-pattern. See Rofé (1988, p. 107-121).

[70] On the theme of disgrace and rehabilitation in the narratives of *Daniel*, see most notably Collins (1975); Niditch; Doran (1977, p. 187-193); Wills (1990, p. 79-152); Collins (1993, p. 38-47); Wills (1995, p. 41-42, 63, 83-84, 93); Holm (2013, p. 195-198, 379-381).

[71] On Mordecai, see Humphreys (1973, p. 213-217); Wills (1990, p. 185-188); Niditch (2000, p. 126-128, 130, 137-139); Berlin (2001, p. xxxiv-xli). On Tobit, see Grottanelli (2005, p. 63-67); Toloni (2005); Weigl (2006, p. 226-243).

him, does Merire's name come up, and he is summoned before the king to offer his valuable services.[72]

In the *Story of Ahiqar*, the pattern of the disgraced and reinstated minister is artfully combined with the tale-type of the contest of kings.[73] The competition of wisdom, to which the king is challenged, is interposed between the vizier's fall into disfavour and his restoration and provides the cause for the latter. The personage of the clever royal counsellor is the link between these two narrative patterns, which jointly make up the plot of *Ahiqar*. Therefore, the contest of kings is refashioned and arranged in such a way as to revolve around the central character of the counsellor, who is also the protagonist in the surrounding story of disgrace and rehabilitation. This is why the character of the king's adviser is charged with so great importance in the *Story of Ahiqar*. The age-old figure of the disgraced and reinstated courtier is the main hero of the narrative, and therefore he must also become the chief operator in the episode of the competition of wisdom. Hence, the challenged Assyrian king must prove unable to deal by himself with his opponent's difficult puzzles, and the entire contest is shifted to the shoulders of his champion and counsellor. By artfully combining two distinct popular tale-types of the Near-Eastern imaginarium, the creator of *Ahiqar* shaped a new, innovative and groundbreaking variant of the theme of the kings' contest.

It is not fortuitous that all known ancient examples of the simple form of this tale-type, in which the kings pose and solve the problems

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[72] See Posener (1985, p. 22-28, 39-64); Bresciani (2007, p. 611-613); Agut-Labordère; Chauveau (2011, p. 3-8). Cf. Grottanelli (2005, p. 81-86); Konstantakos (2008-2013, v. 1, p. 208-211, 223-225); and Wigand (2022, p. 139-144, 164-171, 206-208), who also discuss further Egyptian specimens of the same story pattern (the *Tale of the Magician Hihor*, the *Instructions of 'Onchsheshonqy*), most probably influenced from the *Story of Ahiqar*.

[73] On the use of the "disgrace and rehabilitation" theme in *Ahiqar*, see Marc (1902, p. 400-405); Krappe (1941, p. 281-282); Niditch; Doran (1977, p. 182-185); Grottanelli (1982a, p. 559-560); Lindenberger (1985, p. 483, 490-491); Oettinger (1992, p. 5-6); Greenfield (1995, p. 47-49); Grottanelli (2005, p. 49-79); Briquel-Chatonnet (2005, p. 24-25); Niehr (2007, p. 11-12); Konstantakos (2008-2013, v. 1, p. 185-187); Weigl (2010, p. 706-709); Wigand (2022, p. 62-69, 206-214).

without assistance, are earlier than *Ahiqar*: the Sumerian epic of Enmerkar, the Egyptian novella of Seqenenre, the early Israelite legend of Solomon and Sheba. By contrast, the specimens of the expanded structure, in which the king's counsellor plays an important role, are all encountered in works composed after the time of *Ahiqar*: the Hellenistic accounts of Solomon and Hiram, the late Egyptian novellas of Setne and Amasis, the Iranian and Indian tales from the last centuries of antiquity. Thus, a literary-historical scheme seems to emerge: the *Story of Ahiqar* must have been the catalyst for the development of the tale-type of the wisdom contest in the traditions of the ancient world.

It was presumably the *Story of Ahiqar* that first introduced the counsellor's figure into the narrative pattern of the contest of kings; it was in *Ahiqar* that the king's adviser first appeared in the context of this tale-type and was made a main operator, organically integrated in the intellectual competition of the two monarchs. The later examples of this expanded, counsellor-oriented structure arose precisely because of the great diffusion and influence of *Ahiqar* in the traditions of the entire Near East, over the many centuries that followed. The stories in which the counsellor undertakes the solution of the problems and helps his king out were ultimately descendants of *Ahiqar*. All of them imitated the form of the tale-type which had been first fashioned and introduced in that seminal Aramaic novel of wisdom.

In time, the new figure of the royal vizier and counsellor, as exemplified by the sage Ahiqar, proved to be exceedingly successful and attractive. The wise adviser, as a subordinate who yet proves wiser than his patron king and saves the entire realm, was a character more familiar and enjoyable for the audience, by comparison to the great authoritative king who shows superhuman force and intelligence in every respect. The counsellor was also a figure better suited to folk tradition and popularised fiction. The cunning intelligence and trickster's wit, which were necessary qualities for the amusing solution of a series of baffling puzzles, befitted the agile and sagacious minister to a greater degree than the powerful and magnificent monarch.

In this respect too, the *Story of Ahiqar* was an ingenious creation, and its innovations came to dominate the collective imaginary of the later ages. Today, as already noted, the simple form of the riddle contest of kings is all but vanished from international folk tradition. Only rarely do examples come up, in very archaic oral epics or legends that happen to be recorded among tribes of the Caucasus or of the Pacific islands.[74] The expanded variant, with the king's counsellor at its centre, has become standard in folktales and sagas, fabliaux and novellas, anecdotes and folksongs, from Scandinavia to Mongolia, from the Slavs to Indonesia. We are all part of the extended audience of Ahiqar.

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[74] See e.g. the contest between the two chieftains Altyn and Järän in a folk legend of the Tatars of Southern Siberia (Cosquin, 1899, p. 64; Chadwick; Chadwick, 1940, p. 107-108); and the competition between two wise rajahs in a cycle of tales from Central Celebes, Indonesia (Frazer, 1919, p. 566-567).

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