

## THE ANCIENT STORY OF AHIQAR FROM MESOPOTAMIA AND EGYPT

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The story of Ahiqar was an international piece of literature in antiquity.

The oldest version of the story of Ahiqar was found on the Nile Island Elephantine in Egypt. An Aramaic speaking community lived there in the 5<sup>th</sup> century BCE serving as mercenaries at this military settlement on the southern border of Egypt. At the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, German archaeologists excavated the houses of this community, and found several hundred papyri describing their everyday life as well as the story of Ahiqar. The story of Ahiqar is one of the few works of literature the Elephantine community preserved. All but one fragment of the Aramaic papyrus of Ahiqar is, therefore, kept today at the Egyptian Museum and Papyrus Collection in Berlin on ten different glass plates. The text is written on a papyrus that was previously used for an administrative text with a tax list that includes dates. This text was erased in antiquity and overwritten with the story of Ahiqar. Thanks to special photography these dates are visible again, and help to order the individual fragments of the eleven (ten in Berlin and one in Cairo) plates of this papyrus.

The Aramaic story of Ahiqar comprises two parts, a narrative that frames a long list of proverbs and wisdom sayings. Here we find many parallels with biblical passages, such as similar sayings in the *Book of Proverbs*, and also with other traditions of texts from the ancient Near East. The narrative depicts

Ahiqar speaking these sayings to his nephew. So this too is an example of ancient storytelling.

Ahiqar was the chancellor of two kings of ancient Assyria, the empire based in Mesopotamia. He had no children himself and, therefore, adopted his nephew to raise him as his successor. His nephew, however, was ungrateful. He denigrates his uncle before the king, pretending that Ahiqar had committed treason. His executioner spares his life, just as Ahiqar had previously spared the life of the executioner. Ahiqar is hid in a home until an opportunity arises for him to save the kingdom. Ahiqar is saved and another is executed in his place.

In the Mesopotamian city of Uruk we find a cuneiform tablet that mentions a scholar named Aḥu'aqāri who served the 7<sup>th</sup>-century Assyrian king Esarhaddon. It is very plausible to assume that the original text of the Ahiqar story was composed in Aramaic in Mesopotamia around the time of these two Assyrian kings. However, it is still unclear whether Ahiqar was actually a historic figure.

The Elephantine papyrus consists of 14 columns of texts. The first five columns contain the framing story of Ahiqar told in the 1<sup>st</sup> person. Nine columns comprise the sayings and words of wisdom that he utters. Here is a translation from the Aramaic copy, Papyrus Berlin P 13446, G, col. i lines 1–6:

“[Do not draw] your bow and shoot your arrow at the righteous man, lest the gods come to help him and turn it back against you.

[Listen], O my son: harvest any harvest, and do any work, then you may eat your portion and provide for your children.

[If] you have [dr]awn your bow and shot your arrow at a more righteous man than yourself, it is a sin against the gods.

[Listen], o my son: borrow grain and wheat so that you might eat your portion and provide for your children with you.

Do not accept a big loan from an evil man. But if you take a loan, have no rest until [you have paid] it back.”

lines 14–16

“My distress is my own mistake, before whom will I be innocent?

My own son lurked about out my house, so what should I say to strangers?

[My son] was a destructive witness against me, who then will announce me innocent?

[My] poisoner came from my own house, with whom can I dispute or align?

Do not reveal your [secr]ets in front of your friends, so that your reputation shall not be ruined in their presence.“

The story of Ahiqar has been translated into several languages. There are early versions in Aramaic, Syriac, Arabic, Armenian, Ethiopic, Old Turkish, Greek, Sogdian, and Slavonic languages.

The Arabic Ahiqar is also found as a supplement attached to the end of some manuscripts of *Alef laylah wa-laylah*, suggesting that they were read together. The courtly setting of *1001 Nights*, the themes of an ingrate, the rise and fall of a courtly minister, can be seen as evidence that Ahiqar influenced the editor of *1001 Nights* and that even medieval Arab scholars knew this connection, hence the stories were copied together.

## Literature

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