

The proverbs of the Aramean Ahikar (700 B.C.)

'0 my son! hear my speech and follow my advice and remember what I say:

2 0 my son! if thou hearest a word, let it die in thy heart, and reveal it not to another, lest it become a live coal and burn thy tongue and cause a pain in thy body, and thou gain a reproach, and art shamed before God and man.

3 0 my son! if thou hast heard a report, spread it not; and if thou hast seen something, tell it not.

4 0 my son! make thy eloquence easy to the listener, and be not hasty to return an answer.

5 0 my son! when thou hast heard anything, hide it not.

6 0 my son! loose not a sealed knot, nor untie it, and seal not a loosened knot.

7 0 my son! covet not outward beauty, for it wanes and passes away, but an honourable remembrance lasts for aye.

8 0 my son! let not a silly woman deceive thee with her speech, lest thou die the most miserable of deaths, and she entangle thee in the net till thou art ensnared.

9 0 my son! desire not a woman bedizened with dress and with ointments, who is despicable and silly in her soul. Woe to thee if thou bestow on her anything that is thine, or commit to her what is in thine hand and , she entice thee into sin, and God be wroth with thee.

10 0 my son! be not like the almond-tree, for it brings forth leaves before all the trees, and edible fruit after them all, but be like the mulberry - tree, which brings forth edible fruit before all the trees, and leaves after them all.

11 0 my son! bend thy head low down, and soften thy voice, and be courteous, and walk in the straight path, and be not foolish. And raise not thy voice when thou laughest, for if it were by a loud voice that a house was built, the ass would build many houses every day; and if it were by dint of strength that the plough were driven, the plough would never be removed from under the shoulders of the camels.

12 0 my son! the removing of stones with a wise man is better than the drinking of wine with a sorry man.

13 0 my son! pour out thy wine on the tombs of the just, and drink not with ignorant, contemptible people.

14 0 my son! cleave to wise men who fear God and be like them, and go not near the ignorant, lest thou become like him and learn his ways.

15 0 my son! when thou hast got thee a comrade or a friend, try him, and afterwards make him a comrade and a friend; and do not praise him without a trial; and do not spoil thy speech with a man who lacks wisdom.

16 0 my son! while a shoe stays on thy foot, walk with it on the thorns, and make a road for thy son, and for thy household and thy children, and make thy ship taut before she goes on the sea and its waves and sinks and cannot be saved.

17 0 my son! if the rich man eat a snake, they say, "It is by his wisdom," and if a poor man eat it, the people say, "From his hunger."

18 0 my son! be content with thy daily bread and thy goods, and covet not what is another's.

19 0 my son! be not neighbour to the fool, and eat not bread with him, and rejoice not in the calamities of thy neighbours. (Psalms CXLI. 4) If thine enemy wrong thee, show him kindness.

20 0 my son! a man who fears God do thou fear him and honour him.

21 0 my son! the ignorant man falls and stumbles, and the wise man, even if he stumbles, he is not shaken, and even if he falls he gets up quickly, and if he is sick, he can take care of his life. But as for the ignorant, stupid man, for his disease there is no drug.

22 0 my son! if a man approach thee who is inferior to thyself, go forward to meet him, and remain standing, and if he cannot recompense thee, his Lord will recompense thee for him.

23 0 my son! spare not to beat thy son, for the drubbing of thy son is like manure to the garden, and like tying the mouth of a purse, and like the tethering of beasts, and like the bolting of the door.

24 0 my son! restrain thy son from wickedness, and teach him manners before he rebels against thee and brings thee into contempt amongst the people and thou hang thy head in the streets and the assemblies and thou be punished for the evil of his wicked deeds.

25 0 my son! get thee a fat ox with a foreskin, and an ass great with its hoofs, and get not an ox with large horns, nor make friends with a tricky man, nor get a quarrelsome slave, nor a thievish handmaid, for everything which thou committest to them they will ruin.

26 0 my son! let not thy parents curse thee, and the Lord be pleased with them; for it hath been said, "He who despiseth his father or his mother let him die the death (I mean the death of sin); and he who honoureth his parents shall prolong his days and his life and shall see all that is good."

27 0 my son! walk not on the road without weapons, for thou knowest not when the foe may meet thee, so that thou mayst be ready for him.

28 0 my son! be not like a bare, leafless tree that doth not grow, but be like a tree covered with its leaves and its boughs; for the man who has neither wife nor children is disgraced in the world and is hated by them, like a leafless and fruitless tree.

29 0 my son! be like a fruitful tree on the roadside, whost fruit is eaten by all who pass by, and the beasts of the desert rest under its shade and eat of its leaves.

30 0 my son! every sheep that wanders from its path and its companions becomes food for the wolf.

31 O my son! say not, "My lord is a fool and I am wise," and relate not the speech of ignorance and folly, lest thou be despised by him.

32 O my son! be not one of those servants, to whom their lords say, "Get away from us," but be one of those to whom they say, "Approach and come near to us."

33 O my son! caress not thy slave in the presence of his companion, for thou knowest not which of them shall be of most value to thee in the end.

34 O my son! be not afraid of thy Lord who created thee, lest He be silent to thee.

35 O my son! make thy speech fair and sweeten thy tongue; and permit not thy companion to tread on thy foot, lest he tread at another time on thy breast.

36 O my son! if thou beat a wise man with a word of wisdom, it will lurk in his breast like a subtle sense of shame; but if thou drub the ignorant with a stick he will neither understand nor hear,

37 O my son! if thou send a wise man for thy needs, do not give him many orders, for he will do thy business as thou desirest: and if thou send a fool, do not order him, but go thyself and do thy business, for if thou order him, he, will not do what thou desirest. If they send thee on business, hasten to fulfil it quickly,

38 O my son! make not an enemy of a man stronger than thyself, for he will take thy measure, and his revenge on thee.

39 O my son! make trial of thy son, and of thy servant, before thou committest thy belongings to them, lest they make away with them; for he who hath a full hand is called wise, even if he be stupid and ignorant, and he who hath an empty hand is called poor, ignorant, even if he be the prince of sages.

40 O my son! I have eaten a colocynth, and swallowed aloes, and I have found nothing more bitter than poverty and scarcity.

41 O my son! teach thy son frugality and hunger, that he may do well in the management of his household.

42 O my son! teach not to the ignorant the language of wise men, for it will be burdensome to him.

43 O my son! display not thy condition to thy friend, lest thou be despised by him.

44 O my son! the blindness of the heart is more grievous than the blindness of the eyes, for the blindness of the eyes may be guided little by little, but the blindness of the heart is not guided, and it leaves the straight path, and goes in a crooked way.

45 O my son! the stumbling of a man with his foot is better than the stumbling of a man with his tongue.

46 O my son! a friend who is near is better than a more excellent brother who is far away.

47 O my son! beauty fades but learning lasts, and the world wanes and becomes vain, but a good name neither becomes vain nor wanes.

48 0 my son! the man who hath no rest, his death were better than his life; and the sound of weeping is better than the sound of singing; for sorrow and weeping, if the fear of God be in them, are better than the sound of singing and rejoicing.

49 0 my child! the thigh of a frog in thy hand is better than a goose in the pot of thy neighbour; and a sheep near thee is better than an ox far away; and a sparrow in thy hand is better than a thousand sparrows flying; and poverty which gathers is better than the scattering of much provision; and a living fox is better than a dead lion; and a pound of wool is better than a pound of wealth, I mean of gold and silver; for the gold and the silver are hidden and covered up in the earth, and are not seen; but the wool stays in the markets and it is seen, and it is a beauty to him who wears it.

50 0 my son! a small fortune is better than a scattered fortune.

51 0 my son! a living dog is better than a dead poor man.

52 0 my son! a poor man who does right is better than a rich man who is dead in sins.

53 0 my son! keep a word in thy heart, and it shall be much to thee, and beware lest thou reveal the secret of thy friend.

54 0 my son! let not a word issue from thy mouth till thou hast taken counsel with thy heart. And stand not betwixt persons quarrelling, because from a bad word there comes a quarrel, and from a quarrel there comes war, and from war there comes fighting, and thou wilt be forced to bear witness; but run from thence and rest thyself.

55 0 my son! withstand not a man stronger than thyself, but get thee a patient spirit, and endurance and an upright conduct, for there is nothing more excellent than that.

56 0 my son! hate not thy first friend, for the second one may not last.

57 0 my son! visit the poor in his affliction, and speak of him in the Sultan's presence, and do thy diligence to save him from the mouth of the lion.

58 0 my son! rejoice not in the death of thine enemy, for after a little while thou shalt be his neighbour, and him who mocks thee do thou respect and honour and be beforehand with him in greeting.

59 0 my son! if water would stand still in heaven, and a black crow become white, and myrrh grow sweet as honey, then ignorant men and fools might understand and become wise.

60 0 my son! if thou desire to be wise, restrain thy tongue from lying, and thy hand from stealing, and thine eyes from beholding evil; then thou wilt be called wise.

61 0 my son! let the wise man beat thee with a rod, but let not the fool anoint thee with sweet salve. Be humble in thy youth and thou shalt be honoured in thine old age.

62 0 my son! withstand not a man in the days of his power, nor a river in the days of its flood.

63 0 my son! be not hasty in the wedding of a wife, for if it turns out well, she will say, 'My lord, make provision for me'; and if it turns out ill, she will rate at him who was the cause of it.

64 O my son! whosoever is elegant in his dress, he is the same in his speech; and he who has a mean appearance in his dress, he also is the same in his speech.

65 O my son! if thou hast committed a theft, make it known to the Sultan, and give him a share of it, that thou mayst be delivered from him, for otherwise thou wilt endure bitterness.

66 O my son! make a friend of the man whose hand is satisfied and filled, and make no friend of the man whose hand is closed and hungry.

67 There are four things in which neither the king nor his army can be secure: oppression by the vizier, and bad government, and perversion of the will, and tyranny over the subject; and four things which cannot be hidden: the prudent, and the foolish, and the rich, and the poor.