

## KALILA AND DIMNA - COLLECTION OF MORAL TEACHINGS

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### Abstract

«Kalila and Dimna» is a monument of didactic literature, a kind of mirror for the feudal ruler, teaching him how to rule justly. In terms of composition, the book goes back to ancient Indian literature

Plot borrowings from «Kalila and Dimna» were widely used in European, including Russian literature (fables by La Fontaine and Krylov, «The Frog Traveller» by Garshin, fairy tales-fables by L. Tolstoy, etc.).

### Introduction

The collection of fables and parables, edifying and instructive stories under the title «Kalila and Dimna» is a transposition and reworking of the texts of the famous Indian book «Panchatantra», but the fate of «Kalila and Dimna», the creation of the talented Arab medieval writer and stylist Ibn al-Mukaffa, was truly amazing: the book, which became a masterpiece of medieval literature, existed completely independently, bypassing in translations and translations almost all countries of Europe and Asia.

«Kalila and Dimna», a literary and didactic monument in Arabic and Persian. It is derived from the Indian book «Panchatantra», which was translated into Middle Persian in the 6th century and named Kalila and Dimna (after the names of two jackals acting in the first chapter). The Arabic retelling was realised in the 8th century by the Persian Ibn al-Mukaffa and subsequently versioned several times. The plots of «Kalila and Dimna» were repeatedly used in works of fiction<sup>1</sup>.

The story of Brahman Beideb's invitation to the palace of the local ruler. The sage warns the king against wrong actions and judgements and gives examples from human and animal life to prove his words right. These stories form the basis of the book.

As a treasury of ancient wisdom from the East, Persian tales are, among other things, aesthetic. The wisdom of the storyteller lies in maintaining a fine balance between superstructive wisdom, designed to provoke deep reflection, and entertaining light stories and magical tales, intended to amuse and entertain the listener. This aspect of Persian tales explains their relevance and enduring popularity among different peoples in different eras.

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<sup>1</sup> The Book of Kalilah and Dimnah, trans. from Arabic. M. O. Attai and M. V. Ryabinin, M., 1889; Kalila and Dimna, trans. from Arabic. I. Y. Krachkovsky and I. P. Kuzmin, intro. P. Kuzmin, introductory article and notes by I. Y. Krachkovsky, M., 1957.

In the days when the wise Anushirvan was the king of Iran (6th century), his court physician Burzoe went to India on the orders of his lord to retrieve a book called «Kalila and Dimna», which was kept in the treasury of the Indian kings. News of this book as a mysterious source of wisdom was spread to all corners of the earth by merchants and travellers, scientists and philosophers, who visited Indian lands, but could not get acquainted with this work, forbidden for strangers. The Indians kept the Kalila and Dimna sacredly, for this was the bequest of Baidaba, the philosopher and head of the Brahmans, who had written it for the mighty king Dabshalim to guide him in the affairs of government.

Having obtained the coveted book with the help of the treasurer of the Indian ruler, Burzoe transcribed it and translated it into Pahlavi, the ancient language of the Persians, and secretly brought his translation to Iran, where he read it before Anushirvan and his kings. From this book the Persians drew wisdom, which was adopted by other peoples, including the Arabs, for two hundred years later it was translated into Arabic by Ibn al-Muqaffa. This is the brief history of the appearance in Arabic of "Kalila and Dimna", as narrated by a certain Bahnud ibn Sahwan (apparently the first scribe of the manuscript) and, on behalf of Burzoe, the wise Buzurgmihr, the wazir of Anushirvan.

The whole story bears a clear imprint of legend, because the translation of the «book of Indian wisdom» is dated to the time of Anushirvan and Buzurgmihr, the famous Persian sages, and the adventures of the court physician Burzoe were given a peculiar fairy-tale character. Perhaps the book was translated into Pahlavi earlier or later than the time when Khosrow Anushirvan ruled, or perhaps it was translated from Sanskrit not into Pahlavi but into Syriac (Aramaic) at first. It is noteworthy that there are many Syriac manuscripts of «Kalila and Dimna» preserved, while there is not a single Pahlavi manuscript. Of course, the Syrians had a rich experience of translating philosophical, medical, theological works, though mainly from Greek. Nevertheless, this story or legend faithfully conveys two important points.

Firstly, it points to the source of «Kalila and Dimna» - the Sanskrit book «Panchatantra», literally «Pentateuch», which begins with the story of the king of beasts, a lion and two jackals - Karatak and Damanak, whose names in Arabic became «Kalila and Dimna». The author of the Panchatantra is unknown. Sanskritologists believe that its original version, which has not survived to us, appeared in the III-IV centuries, but, no doubt, individual fables about people and animals, of which the «Panchatantra» consists, appeared much earlier, because they were part of the folklore of India. From them come the so-called «travelling» or «wandering» stories in the folklore of many peoples of the world, such as the story of the «travelling frog».

Secondly, the legend reflects the inherent attitude of ancient and medieval people to the word as a kind of magic talisman, the greatest jewel worthy to be kept in the royal treasury. After all, the word is wisdom clothed in words and at the same time its weapon, that is why wisdom is valued above wealth, more valuable than royal power. The legend emphasises the universal significance of «Kalila and Dimna»: The wisdom contained in it, according to Bahnud ibn Sahwan, is instructive and necessary not only for Indians or Persians, but for all

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nations and all people who wish to acquire it; it is necessary not only for «wise men and philosophers» who wish to comprehend its depths, but also for everyone who will read it, attracted by the amusing stories, and will imperceptibly begin to be imbued with the highest wisdom to the extent that his temper and reason will allow him.

And indeed, it is hard to name a book in world literature that would have earned the same truly enduring popularity. It proved to be understandable and close to people of the Middle Ages and New Age, it was read in translations and arrangements in Western Europe and Russia, in Iran, Turkey and Indonesia.

Why has «Kalila and Dimna» excited minds for so many centuries? After all, the literatures of those countries, where translations and translations of this work were carried out, abound with works of the most diverse genres, both poetic and prose, which in their importance and artistic merits far surpass the collection of funny fables about animals. Obviously, the reason for its popularity lies in the fact that the purpose proclaimed by the book, supposedly «accessible only to a philosopher», is not so deeply hidden and therefore understandable to the ordinary reader, unsophisticated in philosophical matters. And this goal is to show the relationship between man and society, to reveal the most common human vices, to find ways to get rid of them, that is, to form the personality of a reasonable person.

In different epochs, readers found in «Kalila and Dimna» what was interesting for all classes: Scholars penetrated into the hidden meaning of amusing fables and tales, realising the wisdom for the sake of which Anushirvan sent Burzoe on a dangerous journey; ordinary townspeople laughed when they read about the misadventures of a shallow husband who believed an unfaithful wife, or the cunning of a monkey who deceived a tortoise who wanted a monkey's heart, or the foolishness of a donkey who «went for horns but returned with his ears cut off». Many people recognised in the willful and cruel lion - the king of beasts - the rulers of their time, in tigers, wild boars and jackals - princes and nobles, and in small birds, who managed to defeat the mighty elephant, - the small people of this world, and themselves, and their neighbours and acquaintances. Well, say, theologians saw the book as a «divine» allegory, telling about the vanity of the mortal world and the virtues that every believing and pious person must possess in order to spend his life worthily and receive a good reward in the next world.

The book turned out to be a truly huge treasury of stories, an inexhaustible storehouse from which one could draw and draw. It contained material for amusing fables, short novellas, and edifying and moralistic works. Wisdom and entertainment combined in one book existed as if separately: each of the parts of «Kalila and Dimna» could become a plot basis for a work of any genre, prose or poetic.

«Panchatantra» was destined to conquer the world in an «alien» guise, so to speak, dressed in Arabic garb, for it is not without reason that Arabic has been one of the most widespread literary languages of the world for almost a millennium. The translator may well have significantly revised the original, adding a preface - the most philosophically interesting part of the book - and excluding those chapters that were too specifically Indian and alien to the Muslim and Christian monotheistic worldview.

Kalila and Dimna became particularly popular about three hundred years after its appearance, in the eleventh century, when the nearest neighbours of the Arabs, the Byzantines, took an interest in Arabic literature, especially its prose fiction. Around 1080, the Byzantine novelist Simeon Sif translated «Kalila and Dimna» from Arabic into Greek, giving it the title «Stephanit and Ihnilat» (lit. «Crowned and Pathfinder»), as the translator «etymologized» the names of the jackals, deriving the name Kalila from «iklil» (Arabic for «crown») and Dimna from a word meaning «remnants of a nomad». The Greek translation served as the basis for many translations and translations into Slavic languages, and already in the XII century the book «Crowned and Pathfinder» came to Russia, where it became widely known as a moral mirror. Ancient Russian translators considered it an instruction in Christian piety and even claimed that the author was none other than John Damascene, the famous Christian theologian.

Bahnud ibn Sahwan, beginning his preface, speaks of the reason which induced Baidaba, a philosopher from the lands of India, the head of the pious Brahmans, to compose a book for King Dabshalim of India, which he called Kalila and Dimna.

In this book Baidaba put his innermost thoughts in amusing stories about animals and birds, endowing them with human speech. He clothed wisdom in the garb of laughter in order to conceal the true purpose of the book from the uninitiated ignorant, to prevent the unworthy from plundering its treasures and to protect from defilement the pure source and eternal beauty of wisdom, which is accessible only to the philosopher, who loves perfection and strives for it only, reveals itself only to the true mind, purifying thoughts and ennobling actions.

The sage called his work «Kalila and Dimna», the name of two jackals, the heroes of this book, in which various animals and birds speak intelligently like men, but act unreasonably, as they should. He did this so that the work would appear to be a collection of amusing stories for the amusement of nobles and common people, but in essence it would be food for the chosen ones whose minds are sophisticated in philosophy and science. He included in his work everything that could be useful in earthly and future life, that is necessary for man to govern himself and his passions, as well as his household and followers, to induce obedience to kings and shun that which does not lead to good. Funny stories about animals have long been known among the people, and that is why Baydaba has given his book such an appearance, for the narrative in it is fascinating, and the actions of the animals are amusing, but in their speeches there is useful instruction and great wisdom.

And it was not by chance that he compiled the book in such a form. Before choosing the manner of presentation and starting the work, Baydaba and his disciple had been thinking for a long time how to fulfil the command of king Dabshalim by making the book both wise and interesting, and at last, as if an illumination came upon them, and they decided that the wordless creatures, which they had endowed with human speech, would express wise thoughts. They found it funny and amusing to liken animals to humans, and they hid their wisdom under the cover of laughter. Reasonable and learned people, listening to these stories, will not laugh at the pranks of animals, realising that all this is just a trick, an excuse

to express the thoughts for which the book was compiled. But the fools and ignorant will not doubt in the slightest that the wise Baidaba wished to amuse them, will marvel at his art and laugh heartily when they read about the way the unintelligent beasts talk to each other. They will neither understand the meaning of the animals' speech nor the true purpose of Kalila and Dimna.

Meanwhile, the book contains many important thoughts. In the first chapter, the philosopher talks about friendship and how it can only be strong if people shun informers and their plots and beware of those who seek to sow enmity between friends for their own benefit and advantage. Therefore, the philosopher began his book by telling how a cunning informer quarrels two faithful friends.

Baidaba told his disciple to write down at the very beginning of the book the condition<sup>2</sup> that the king had set: the work must be both wise and amusing. He did this so that people would have no doubts about how Kalila and Dimna should be understood. Then Baidaba ordered his disciple to mention that when he cited sayings of various philosophers and sages, he did not always mention their names, for if before each saying and story he referred to names and cited isnads<sup>3</sup>, it would spoil the book and diminish its power.

As it was said, Baydaba and his disciple did not leave the vazir's chamber for a whole year until they had completed the book. And when the appointed time came, the king Dabshalim sent a messenger to the philosopher and said: «The agreed time has come, answer me, have you fulfilled what you promised me?». And the wazir Baidaba ordered him to tell King Dabshalim, «I have kept my word. Let the king order the nobles of the Indian kingdom to assemble in his chambers, and I will bring the book and read it in the king's couch». And when the messenger returned to the king and repeated the words of the wazir, Dabshalim rejoiced and immediately appointed a day when all the noble men of the Indian lands should assemble. He ordered heralds in all the neighbouring and distant parts of India to announce that the people should come to the capital, for the wise Baidaba would read his book there. And when the day came, the king ordered that a throne should be erected for the wazir beside the royal throne and that seats should be placed for the king's sons, nobles and scholars, and then he sent a messenger to fetch the wazir. When the king's messenger came to Baidaba, the latter got up, put on a dress of coarse dark wool, which he wore every day when he visited the palace, and went to King Dabshalim, instructing his disciple to carry the book «Kalila and Dimna».

As soon as the sage entered, everyone stood up, and even the king rose from his throne, full of respect and gratitude to his wazir. He approached the king and bowed to the earth, folding his hands humbly, and then stood before the king without raising his gaze. The king exclaimed: «O Baidaba, raise your head, for today is a day of joy, rejoicing and gladness!»

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<sup>2</sup> ...told his disciple to write down a condition at the beginning of the book... - There are no «conditions» in the text of the book; it is mentioned only in the preface

<sup>3</sup> Isnad (lit. «support») - a reference to a source of information, written or oral; such as: «Said Ahmad from the words of Muhammad, who heard from Mahmud...» etc. Isnad formed a crucial part of the theological medieval writings of Muslims. The rejection of isnad may have been specifically emphasised by Ibn al-Muqaffa, who was protesting, as it were, against the influence of theological literature on secular literature.

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Then he ordered the wise man to sit down, and when he seated himself on the high throne, intending to begin reading the book, King Dabshalim began to question him about its hidden and secret meaning, inquiring about the purpose of each chapter. And Baidaba narrated the thoughts contained in the book of Kalila and Dimna, and then read it. And the king, full of admiration and rejoicing in his soul, said: «O Baidaba, it is as if you have looked into my soul and guessed all my desires! Ask me for whatever you desire!»

But the wise man, wishing Dabshalam happiness and long life, said: «O lord, I have no need of silver and gold, and of all garments I am more favoured by this robe, but I will nevertheless express one wish». Dabshalim inquired, «What is this wish? Know that all your requests will be fulfilled as befits you». And Baidaba asked: «O king, order this book to be transcribed as your glorious ancestors did, and guard it as the apple of your eye, for I fear that the wisdom contained in it will spread beyond the lands of India and will be taken up by the Persians, having learnt of its power. Tell me to place this book in the place where the most valuable of the king's treasures are, and let it be kept safe, under seven locks». The king promised Baidaba to fulfil his promise exactly, and then, summoning the Wazir's disciples to him, rewarded them generously.

Many years and centuries passed, and Khosroi Anushirvan, who was obsessed with the sciences and arts, loved to read ancient books and study the history of ancient peoples, began to rule in the Persian lands. News of the book «Kalila and Dimna» reached him, and he could not find a place, wishing to penetrate into its secrets. So he sent his mendicant Burzoe to India, who used all his dexterity and cunning to rewrite the book. So it left the land of India and its wisdom became the property of Persians».