

# Kalilah and Dimnah

An English Version of Bidpai's Fables  
Based upon Ancient Arabic and Spanish Manuscripts

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## ❖ Introduction ❖

 THE COLLECTION of fables entitled *Kalilah wa-Dimnah*, or *Bidpai's Fables*\* originated chiefly in India, where the nucleus of the collection is known under the name *Panchatantra* or the "Five Books." According to the Sanskrit introduction, the stories were used for training young princes in wise conduct, although the morality is much more practical than idealistic.

The stories arose from a realm of Indian folktale which became connected, both in Brahmanism and especially in Buddhism, with the doctrine of metempsychosis, so that the animals are considered as being in various stages of transmigration and many times reflect human attributes. That explains why characters seem to be only masked humans, and this can be understood when we remember that the Indians can regard them as souls on the road to a higher life.

The tales have migrated over most of the globe, both East and West of India. The route that interests us is the one which brought the fables into Persia. Whether the stories reached the Pahlavi (i.e., Middle Persian) in a Buddhist, Brahmanic, or Jain version is not our problem. The chief point is that their thought-pattern was Indian, and that even when they reached the West in the Spanish version, traces of this outlook are still to be found.

Almost a dozen stories have been added since the original "Five Books" or chapters of the primitive *Panchatantra*; these added chapters are the present Chapter II (Dimnah's Trial), and Chapters VII

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\*The name Bidpai is merely the Arabic (via the Old Persian) transliteration of Vidyapati, which in Sanskrit means 'chief sage' or 'scholar'. Thus the second phrase of the opening sentence of this book: "Bidpai his chief philosopher" is really a redundant expression. Such sages were typically tutors of the young princes at an Indian court, and the tales are their lesson material, just as Patronio served Count Lucanor.

till the end. In other words, the *Panchatantra* only comprises Chapters I, III, IV, V, and VI of our text; hence the Arabic and Spanish versions represent a considerably enhanced stock of fables.

The traditional translator from the Pahlavi into Arabic was ʿAbdallāh ibn-al-Muqaffāʿ, a Persian convert to Islam, who rendered the tales around 750 A.D., although the *Fihrist* (an Arabic encyclopedia of literature) suggests that Ibn-al-Muqaffāʿ may not have been the only translator from the Pahlavi. Keith-Falconer quotes al-Asmāʿī for Ibn-al-Muqaffāʿ' s excellent Arabic, whereas Cheikho, the early twentieth century Lebanese Jesuit editor of what has in many ways become the Vulgate version of the Arabic, attributes some of the textual errors to the fact that Ibn-al-Muqaffāʿ was not an Arabic-speaking person by birth.

Ibn-al-Muqaffāʿ' s version attained great popularity throughout the Near East, and was translated into Late Syriac, Hebrew, modern Persian, and Turkish. Keith-Falconer gives a description and a table of these and the European translations. The Persian translation was called *Anvār-i-Suhaylī* or the "Lights of Canopus," and it was a French translation of this work that La Fontaine used in the second edition of his *Fables*, as the Persian form Pilpai for Bidpai indicates. Cheikho even reports a poetical version of the stories in Arabic. It also seems likely that Arab traders carried portions of the fables to Africa, from where the Black man brought them to America where they developed into the Br'er Rabbit stories.

When Alfonso X, "The Scholar," set up his school of translators in Toledo in the middle of the thirteenth century, this famous collection was one of those works he chose to render into Castilian. Solalinde doubts whether Alfonso himself was the translator, but since he had a school working under his direction, I prefer to include it in the cycle of works which was published under his influence. Likewise it has often been questioned whether it was translated into Latin and then into Spanish, or directly into the Romance tongue; but Alemany's contention that we should correct the reading of Alfonso's statement that the work was translated into *latyn e romançado* (i.e., translated into Latin and then put into Romance) by suppressing the *e* so as to read that it was rendered into *latyn romançado* or Romance Latin, meaning the vernacular, seems to make more sense.

This conclusion is inevitable after any comparison of the two versions, Arabic and Castilian, since they concur to such an extent as to preclude any possibility of a third language intervening. The Spanish itself appears to follow an Arabic text so closely that it is an indispensable witness to an early state of the Arabic text in many places where the latter exhibits variants in its several present-day versions.

*Calila e Digna* was the first extensive piece of prose literature in the popular language of Spain, for it was most probably translated in the year 1251, while Alfonso was still heir to the throne. It is important chiefly because it marks a point of confluence in the streams of Arabic and Spanish civilization, and therefore affords us material for study of the direct influence of the former culture upon the latter, in both the linguistic and the literary domain.

Between the years 1263 and 1278, shortly after this Spanish translation was done, John of Capua, a converted Jew, made a Latin translation of a Hebrew version that a certain Rabbi Joel had done in the early part of the thirteenth century. He called this Latin version the *Directorium Vitae Humanae*. It achieved wider popularity than the Alfonsine work, and was itself subsequently translated into most European languages, ultimately being printed in a Spanish rendering at Zaragoza in 1493. Working from an Italian version, Sir Thomas North, the translator of Plutarch's *Lives*, rendered it into English in 1569 or 1570 as the *Morall Philosophie of Doni* (after Doni, the Italian translator from the Latin). By this time we are, of course, dealing with texts which have diverged a great deal from the Arabic.

In 1315 Raymond de Béziers made another Latin translation, evidently basing it upon both the Alfonsine and the Capuan works; but this version, like the Alfonsine, failed to achieve the popularity of the *Directorium* or the Eastern *Kalilah*. A little known English version was made in 1819 from de Sacy's Arabic edition by the Rev. Wyndham Knatchbull. This translation is good, although it suffers the faults of the edition upon which it was based.

Thus this stream of tales which originated in the *Panchatantra* of India and was enriched by passing through Persian and Arabic, found its way into European literature; whether in single fables like "The Dog and his Shadow" or "The Talkative Tortoise," in



collections of fables or tales like La Fontaine's or Straparola's, or into cycles like Reynard the Fox and Br'er Rabbit.

One important point that does not seem to have been studied fully is the relation between the practical ethics of *Kalilah* and that of the picaresque novel. To be sure, Menéndez y Pelayo and González Palencia both pointed out the affinity of the Maqāmāt or Arabic baroque picaresque narrative to the pícaro literature, but no detailed study has as yet been completed in this field.



The bibliography of studies of the Alfonsine version in modern times may be said to open in 1775 with Sarmiento's description in his *Memorial para la historia de la poesía y poetas españoles* in which he describes three extant manuscripts, one of which is now lost. Gayangos first published the text in 1860 from the two Escorial manuscripts, and in 1906 Allen edited a critical text based upon MS. A, and including the many variants from MS. B; this is the edition I have used in establishing the Spanish part of the present version.

However, we possess neither the original text nor yet a faithful copy of the Old Spanish version of *Calila e Digna*, nor of the Arabic text which must have been utilized by the Toledan translators. Therefore in our comparative studies, we must endeavor to reconstruct both Arabic and Spanish originals as accurately as possible. This is the motive of this edition.

The lost Arabic text used in Toledo is here reconstructed primarily on the basis of the standard Arabic text, *La version arabe de Kalilah et Dimnah*, edited by Louis Cheikho, as has been the practice followed by other workers in the field, notably Alemany and Dietrich. Cheikho's text is based on a manuscript dated 739 A.H. (1539 A.D.).

This text has been collated with that of Khalīl al-Yāziji published in Beirut in 1888. Al-Yāziji's text is a complete one deriving from several printed models that have circulated throughout the Near East and Europe in the past century and a half and is provided with complete vowel-pointing. In general it is not as reliable as Cheikho, but there are several cases where it may be closest to the primitive form, since the Spanish supports it against the other