The second chapter of the

## **Book of the Amusing Stories**

collected by Bar-Hebræus<sup>1</sup>

Another of the sages said: The Greeks are the more skillful, but the Persians are the more intelligent.<sup>2</sup>

Here is the second chapter of the book of Bar-Hebræus – Maphrian of the east from A.D. 1264 to 1286 –, the Amusing Stories: "Profitable sayings of the Persian sages" (especially those of Vazurgmihr). All the sayings come from the Arabic and Persian sources.

 Kuruš (Cyrus) wrote to Hormezd the Sage thus: If only the kings knew their need of the sage, and the sages their need of the kings, the kings would never wonder if they were always at the doors of the sages. For the need of the kings of the sages is greater than the need of the sages of the kings.

This reminds us the saying attributed to Aristippus in the book of Diogenes Laertius, the *Lives and Opinions of Eminent Philosophers*: "Once, when Dionysius asked him why the philosophers haunt the doors of the rich, but the rich do not frequent those of the philosophers, he said: Because the first know what they want, but the second do not." <sup>34</sup>

- 2. Vazurgmihr said thus: "It is better for a man to behave humbly as he may overcome than to conquer as he may behave humbly". [i.e., we must not be deceived by the man who behaved humbly for a time, and then ruled over us tyrannically].
- 3. This same (Vazurgmihr) was asked: "What is the wealth that is not destroyed when it is cast away?"
  He replied: "Humility."
- 4. This same (Vazurgmihr) said: "How beautiful patience would be if life was not short."
- 5. They asked another sage: "Is it really true that any utterance of truth can be hated?"

He replied: "Yes, by the accuser (/ adversary)."

ה באכא גאהטא העשטא גמבע עב שאיא ליי מייט בייא הפישא בייא בייא בייא בייאא. אנעאי.

*The Laughable Stories*, E. A. Wallis Budge, London, 1897, 17-23. The translation of Wallis Budge only needs a few corrections.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>3</sup>. ἐρωτηθεὶς ὑπὸ Διονυσίου διὰ τί οἱ μὲν φιλόσοφοι ἐπὶ τὰς τῶν πλουσίων θύρας ἔρχονται, οἱ δὲ πλούσιοι ἐπὶ τὰς τῶν φιλοσόφων οὐκέτι, ἔφη, "ὅτι οἱ μὲν ἴσασιν ὧν δέονται, οἱ δ' οὐκ ἴσασιν." (Διογένης Λαέρτιος, Βίοι καὶ γνῶμαι τῶν ἐν φιλοσοφία εὐδοκιμησάντων, 69)

<sup>4.</sup> We also find these words attributed to Vazurgmihr:
قيل لبزرجمهر: العلماء أفضل أم الأغنياء؟ فقال: العلماء. فقيل له: فما بال العلماء بأبواب الأغنياء أكثر من الأغنياء بفضل العلم. (الدينوري، عيون الأخبار، ٢، بيروت،

- 6. Another sage said: "I hold every man who says he has riches to be a liar until he has established true evidence of it from what he has collected; and having established his claim, it is at the same time quite certain that he is a stupid person!"
- 7. They asked another sage about a means of livelihood, and he replied: "If it is decreed for you, do not hurry, for it will come to you; and if it is not decreed, do not go after it, for it will not come to you."
- 8. Another sage said: "He who does good to a person void of understanding is like him who dresses a pig with precious gems, and feeds a serpent with honey."
- 9. Another sage said: "He who is strong in fulfilling the laws and observing them will become strong; and he who is strong in transgressing the command and doing unlawful acts will become weak."
- 10. Another sage said: "The wise man goes about in search of a means of subsistence, but the foolish man remains in the place of his father who brought him forth."
- 11. Once upon a time, Anōšervān (Chosroes) the king commanded that no one should eat of the same kind of food as he had eaten, nor drink of the same kind of drink as he had drunk. Now a certain noble, having prepared a royal banquet, sent and invited one of the great ones (/ princes) to dine with him. And when he (the prince) had eaten and gone out, he wrote to the king, saying: "So-and-so makes use of the royal food. I have seen it myself, and I cannot hide it from you."
  - And the king wrote on the back of the letter: "We praise you for your faithfulness and for the binding agreement you have kept with us; but we blame the one who made use the (royal) food because he did not know how to keep his secret and revealed it to people like you."
- 12. They asked Husrō (Chosroes): "Which of your sons is your preferred?"

  He replied: "The one who loves discipline, fears reproach.
  - He replied: "The one who loves discipline, fears reproach, and longs for a position higher than his own."
- 13. Vazurgmihr said: "The abnormality of this world is that it never gives a man what he deserves. For either it gives him more than he deserves, or it gives him less than he deserves."
- 14. Ardašēr said: "It is convenient that the anger of kings should be manifested in showing mercy to those who provoke anger, and not in the deprivation of their needs."
- 15. Ardašēr said: "the foundation of the world (/ worldly life) is religion (מֹסְבּבּא), and the king is his protector. Every building that has not a sound foundation is quickly overthrown, and every house that has no guardian is quickly ruined."

16. It is said that in the time of King Husrō a certain man went about, crying: "Who will buy three sayings for a thousand dinars?"

When the king heard [this], he called him and said to him: "What are these [sayings]?"

And the man said the dinars of which he had spoken to be prepared. And when they were ready, he said: "This is the first saying: There is no good in any man. And the second is: Though all men are like this, nothing reasonable can be obtained from them. And the third is: It is necessary for the king to know the extent of every man's evil, and to expose him according to his evil, so that he may escape from it." When the king heard [this] he praised his words and ordered the man to take the gold; but the man would not do so. And the king said to him: "Then why did you request to take it?" The man replied: "I wanted to see if anyone would be willing to buy wisdom with gold."

- 17. Anōšervān said: "leisure awakes thoughts, and thoughts awake anxiety (/ deep meditation)."
- 18. Another king advised his son thus: "When you are king, do not increase the wealth of your soldiers, lest they will cease to serve you because they have no need of you; nor reduce them to poverty, lest they will hate you. But give to each one according to his ability, and do so that their hope in you may be increased more and more, even if your gifts to them are not multiplied."
- 19. Vazurgmihr said: "Of the auxiliaries of a king, some are like spears, which only those who keep him at a distance can use; and some are like arrows, which are shot away and do not return; and some are like swords, for which it is not fitting that they should turn away from him."
- 20. Husrō said: "Show not hatred to one whom you cannot put away from you."
- 21. They asked Vazurgmihr: "Why do friends become enemies so easily, while it is much more difficult for enemies to become friends?"
  - He replied: "Just as it is easier to pull down a house than to build it, and easier to break a vessel than to make it, and easier to spend money than to acquire it."
- 22. He also said: "[As] in the time of Tešrīn<sup>5</sup> the crops are beautiful and in Nīsān (/ spring-time)<sup>6</sup> the flowers, [so] in the maiden [there is] beauty, and in the youth acuteness of impulses (or, movements), and in the stranger (/ a man in the house of another as a guest) humility of mind."

 $<sup>^5</sup>$ .  $ightharpoonup^5$  the name of two months corresponding to October and November. Cf. Pers. Tir-māh the first month of the autumn, and also the autumn.

<sup>6 .</sup> **حص.** 

- 23. They asked Husrō: "What type of men do you wish to become wise?"He answered: "My enemies, for wise men are not easily led to do evil; but stupid people cannot by any means keep
- themselves from it."

  24. When Vazurgmihr was imprisoned by the king<sup>7</sup>, his friends asked him: "With what do you console yourself now?" He replied: "With four sayings. In the first I say to myself, everything is determined by fate, and it is impossible to escape the wrath [of Time]. In the second I say, If I cannot endure suffering patiently, what can I do? In the third, I
- 25. He also admonished a certain ruler who ruled over a capital city to act as a friend to good people, as a judge to the middle class (those who are neither good nor bad), and as a tyrant to the wicked.

could fall into a worse plight than this. And in the fourth, Though I know not, perhaps an intermission is at hand.

- 26. When the king was furious with Vazurgmihr and hanged him, his daughter heard of it and ran out among the men with her head uncovered; but when she came to her father on the gallows, she covered it. And when the king asked her what she had done, she said: "He was the only man there before whom it was proper to be ashamed [to be uncovered]."
- 27. Šābuhr said: "The five ornaments of a capital city are these: A victorious king, a just judge, a market of commerce, a skillful physician, and a running water (river)."
- 28. Husrō asked one of his wise men, if men are more numerous or devils.
  - He replied: "If you consider the Kurds and the petty folk of the market-places (/ petty traders) to be men, men are the more numerous.
- 29. Vazurgmihr said: "Whoever loves you will keep you from your lust; but whoever hates you will excite you thereto."
- 30. They asked Vazurgmihr: "Who is flawless?" And he replied: "He who is immortal."
- 31. Vazurgmihr's wife asked him some question, and he answered: "I do not know its answer."

  Immediately after that she said to him: "You receive such a great quantity of money from the king, and yet you do not know the answer to my question?"

  He replied: "I receive a payment for what I know, and it is not payment for what I do not know. If I were to receive pay for what I do not know, all the king's treasures would not be

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>7</sup>. Here, the story of Aḥiqar (a chancellor to the Assyrian Kings) is transposed into that of Vazurgmihr. See also the Dārūg ī Hunsandīh.

- enough to recompense me, for there are way too much of things I do not know."
- 32. Spendyār said: "The horse, though it be very swift, has need of the rod; and a woman, though she be chaste, has need of a man; and a man, though he be wise, has need of the advice of others."
- 33. Husrō said: "Wine washes away grief (and distress) from the heart."
- 34. When Kay-Kavād the king passed away, one of his wise men said: "Yesterday the king spoke more eloquently; but today, being silent, he admonishes more effectively."
- 35. The same wise man had said: "Hearts (/ minds) need to be nourished with wisdom, just as human bodies need food on which to grow."
- 36. Šābuhr said: "On numerous occasions things come to the stupid on the right hand and to the wise men on the left; and I recognize that the director of affairs is a being quite different from them."
- 37. Ardašēr said: "Occupy yourself with the things that are proper, so that you may be kept from the things that are improper."
- 38. Vazurgmihr said: "If you do not know which of two things is better for you, consult your wife and do the opposite of her advice, for she will only advise you to do those things which are harmful to you."
- 39. They asked Mardāvēg: "What is the difference between distress and fury?"

  And he replied: "When a man is hurt by a great thing, he is distressed; but when he is hurt by a small thing, he is furious."
- 40. One day, as Husrō was sitting down, a man of small stature approached him and began to weep and cry, saying: "Avenge me on him who has oppressed me!"
  But Husrō ignored him. And when one of his nobles asked him: "Why do you not listen to his voice?"
  He said: "The man of small stature cannot be oppressed."
  And the small man understood and cried out: "My Lord, he who has oppressed me is smaller than I."
  And when the king heard this, he laughed and avenged his cause.

**Text** 

معلی ۔ دلانے

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ו בהוש באב להוא מסוי בעוד עבומאה. אלה בין בהיש מסם מבבאה משעמים בלהוא מבבאה (ס עבומאה) מעשמים בלהוא מבבאה למו

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<sup>8.</sup> I.O. האומלה תמטקשם תמדיו תמייוטאיו תושתמש

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<sup>9 .</sup> I. O. احمد مص عد مص