

Luqmân
Wisdom and Stories

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A. The wisdom of Luqmân

The text translated here is contained in Paris ms. arabe 309 fols. 38-52 and was published, with French translation, by L. Leroy 'Vie, préceptes et testament de Lokman' *Revue de l'Orient Chrétien* 14 (1909) pp, 225-255.

Luqmân seems to be a legendary figure, a relative of Job (Ayyub). He is the object of a study by the 8th cent. Ibn Ishaq, who collected the material for a life of Muhammad, and Ibn Kathîr, a 14th cent. historian and exegete of the Qur'ân.

There is also a brief sketch of him by the 8th cent. Imam Ja'afar Sâdiq.¹

Sûra 31 of the Qur'ân is entitled Luqmân, but only part of it is devoted specifically to him:

verse 12: Luqmân receives wisdom from God

verse 13: Luqmân counsels his son

verses 14 and 15: God issues a commandment.

verses 16-19 Luqmân counsels his son

The following is my English version of the relevant parts of the Surâ.

We gave Luqmân wisdom, saying: 'Thank God. Whoever thanks God, indeed he gives thanks for his soul. Whoever refuses, God is rich and glorious (12). Luqmân said to his son, admonishing him: 'Do not share God, for polytheism is a grave sin (13).' We have instructed man in the matter of his parents - his mother bears him, he is weak and his weaning takes two years- saying: 'Be grateful to Me and to your parents. Everything comes back to Me (14). If they try to make you share what you do not know with Me, do not obey them. But be a fitting companion to them in this life. Follow the path of the one who turns to Me, for it is to Me that you will return, and I will tell you what you have done.' (15). 'My son, even something the size of a mustard seed, though it be in the heart of a rock, up in the heavens or deep in the earth, God will bring it out, for He is subtle. Beware (16). My son, establish prayer, be kind and reject iniquity and be patient with whatever happens to you. For this is a mark of resolution (17). Do not contemptuously turn your cheek to people and do not go about haughtily on the earth, for God does not love anyone who is proud and arrogant. (18) Be moderate of gait and temperate of voice. The most repellent of voices is that of the donkey (19).

¹ <https://www.al-islam.org/fr/node/38958>. I have no access to the texts of the other writers. For an in-depth study of Luqmân and proverbial utterances cf. R. A. Kassis *The Book of Proverbs and Arabic proverbial works* (1999) ch. 2, where a brief reference is made to the Luqmân-Aesop axis.

The structure of the following text is approximately:

- 38b-41a: early life as a slave, manumission and and success as a counsellor;
- 41a-46b: advice to his son;
- 46b-47b: narration of the closing part of Luqmân's life:
- 47b-end general advice.

My translation stops where the 'general advice' starts.

This is the story of Luqmân the sage and his teaching

Luqmân had a black skin and his family was from Nubia. He was born in Syria, where he was brought up, educated and he died. He was buried in city of Ramla² in the territory of Palestine. He lived in a tent there and was one of the first beduin chiefs in Syria, a contemporary of David the prophet.

According to another account Luqmân was a black slave with thick lips and flat feet. One day he was in a group conversation when someone approached him and said: "Are you not the person who herds the flocks with me in such and such a place ?" He replied: "I am." The other asked him what had brought him so low. "The sincerity of my words (**39a**) and loyalty. I do not feel humiliated by silence."

Another report is that he was black with superior gifts, had fine lips and trembling limbs. He was bought by an Israelite from the man who had enslaved him for three *mithqal*³ of gold. One day Luqmân was doing his work while his master was playing backgammon. There was a river in front of their house. His master made a bet with his opponent:⁴ the one who lost would have to drink all

2 Founded c. 705 AD, it was on the trade route between Fustât and Damascus and connected the port of Jaffa with Jerusalem.

3 A *mithqal* was about 4.5 grams.

4 See, for example, A. Westermann *Vita Aesopi* (1845) pp. 33ff. [abbreviated to *VitAes*]. For an English version cf.

the water in the river or buy himself out of the debt at a price to be fixed by the winner. The conditions were agreed and the game began. Luqmân's master lost, and the winner said: "Drink all the water in the river or pay your ransom." The other said: "Please be merciful." His partner replied: "Give me everything you have or I will tear your eyes out." The loser asked for a day's grace and this was granted to him by the winner.

He left and was walking home despondently when he met Luqmân carrying a bundle of twigs on his back. He greeted his master and put down his burden. Luqmân saw how altered his master was and was astonished at how sad he looked. He said to him: "Why do I see you looking so grim and sad?" His master refused to reply. Luqmân tried a second time with the same question but obtained no reply **(39b)**. Insistently he tried a third time, but his master said nothing." Luqmân said: "Master, how can I comfort you?" The master told him what had happened. Luqmân told him not worry: "I have a way of freeing you from the wager." The master asked him what it was and Luqmân replied: "When he asks you to drink the water in the river, tell him that you will drink what is between the banks. He will not be able to hold back the water from upstream and you will emerge safe and sound from your wager."

The master agreed to this, and the following morning the winner came to find him and insist that he fulfil his side of the bargain. Luqmân's master said: "Gladly. But am I to drink only the water between the banks or do I have to drink the water from upstream too?" His adversary said: "The water between the banks." The other said: "Then hold back the water from upstream." He had triumphed over his opponent, who left. He was obliged to Luqmân and set him free. This was the first sign of Luqmân's intelligence. He took himself off to the Council of David, the king-prophet, where he learned wisdom. One day in the course of a meeting David gave him a cuirass. Luqmân put it on without asking the king **(40a)** what it was, but the king said nothing further. He then said in Syriac: 'it is solid armour for the day of battle'. Luqmân said. "Silence is the best course, but there are few who observe it." He never praised himself and never boasted.

One day his master said to him: "Kill a sheep and bring me the best parts of it." He brought the heart. The master was surprised and said to him: "Bring me the worst part of the sheep." And again Luqmân brought the heart. By which he meant the best and the worst come from the heart.⁵

<https://www.roger-pearse.com/weblog/2018/08/14/life-of-aesop-translated-by-anthony-alcock/>

5 A lengthier variant, involving the tongue, in *VitAes* pp. 27ff

It is said that he was summoned one day by David, who appointed him judge to dispense justice. But he refused. David said: "Why ? You are wise and your judgements will be just." Luqmân said: "I wish for no honour or power or influence in this world to be punished and scorned in the next. The one who sells eternity for this world loses both." God was pleased by this and sent an angel to help him acquire knowledge, and Luqmân became the wisest man on earth. David himself praised his wisdom. He said: "We congratulate you, Luqmân, on your sound perspicacity." Luqmân refused to accept David's offer.

(40b) One day David came upon men who were chatting amongst themselves and praising the king. Luqmân remained silent. David asked him: "Luqmân, why do you not speak like these men." He said: "The only useful speech is that which recalls God. The principal benefit of silence is the opportunity to dwell on the hereafter. The master of life knows what is in the conscience of man. The humble one gives thanks to him. The one who is modest in his desires is rich. The one who is satisfied with the gifts of God has no cares. The one who has left the world is saved from evil and the one who has decided to leave the world has become free. The one who seeks solitude has put aside his troubles. The one who abstains from envy, kindness shows itself to him, and he becomes generous and merciful to all. The one who is patient and abstains from wickedness need not repent and is not afraid. The one who does not sin against people has nothing to fear from them. He leaves people in peace and feels no pain."

The king said to him: "Luqmân, you are right." He was full of admiration and Luqmân's reputation spread far and wide. When he was older, David, to give some idea of the degree of wisdom he had achieved, used to say of him: "I know nothing and have seen nothing where he was unable to give me an answer. He has always provided me with a satisfactory solution to my questions."

Luqmân was the slave of an Israelite who liberated him and gave him much property. God blessed in his wealth and increased it considerably. **(41a)** He undertook good works, dispensed alms to those who asked him without exacting from them repayment or interest. When he gave money to people, he used to say: "This is a loan from God." At New Year, he congratulated all his employees and paid them. He would lend money to people and they would pay it back. He was blessed in his property by God the great and powerful, who allowed him to prosper.

It is said that Luqman was wise and took an interest in the affairs of the world and reached the highest position in it. He became powerful and, after his family had grown up, he settled in a place

between Ramla and Jerusalem and gave up his commercial interests and devoted himself to God. This is some of the advice he gave to his son:

"My son, be patient and firm of faith and struggle against yourself. Know that constancy has honour, mercy, self-restraint and vigilance. If you persist in what God asks of you, you will become detached from the world and learn to look down on its changes. Things will happen to you only for the best. You will fear the chastisement of God and be on your guard.

Do good and keep yourself from evil, for good extinguishes evil. It is a mistake to say that evil is cancelled out only by evil. If you wish to verify the truth of thi, put one fire next to another and you will see **(41b)** if one extinguishes the other. Evil is extinguished only by good, as fire is extinguished only by water.

Command what is honest and reject what is shameful. Be patient when tested and scorn adversity. Think well before going forward. Recognize the false steps and you will not be negligent in your affairs.

Think of God as much as possible. He is mindful of those who think of him.

Let your faults be before your eyes and your good actions behind you. Search for a refuge from your sins by repenting before God and do not pride yourself on your good works.

If you see someone falling into sin, do not speak harshly to him and always remember your own sins, for God will require an account of your words and deeds.

Do not trust the world and let not your heart be occupied by affection for it. You were not created for it. There is nothing in creation less important than it. Its favours are not a reward for good, any more than its trials chastise the rebellious.

Do not rejoice over the length of life, but thank God when you are experiencing his trials, for they are the most precious of goods. Endure them patiently, and you will store up treasure for the hereafter.

Be content with little and satisfied with what you have. Do not cast your eyes on the property of

your neighbour, for this will do you no good.

(42a) My son, fast from food and you will be filled with wisdom.

Sit with the sages and enjoy their dialogues. Seek the society of the learned. It is the refuge of knowledge and engenders humility in the heart.

Be content with what you need. Do not speak of what does not concern you. Do not laugh unless there is a surprise.⁶ Do not conduct yourself like an uneducated person.

Be tractable and open to good well-thought procedures. Say little unless it is true. Weep much and rejoice little. Do not joke and avoid the company of jokers. Do not argue. If you remain silent, let it be the silence of reflection. If you speak, let it be with justice and truth.

Observe silence and you will be able to congratulate yourself on the results. Speaking may be golden but silence is more precious. You will not be sorry if you remain silent. Indeed, you may be sorry for having spoken.

The cock is not your better. When the middle of the night comes, it flaps its wings and sings the praises of God. So shake off your negligence and fear God, who shows man this example.

Do not listen to those who praise you for what you have not done and of which you have no memory and do not let yourself be seduced **(42b)** by the flattery of the ignorant who tell you that you have a pearl in your hand, while you know that it is nowhere near you.

Be happy with your God-given knowledge, for God is not ignorant. The best knowledge is that which is useful to the one who possesses it. God will require not only an account of knowledge from the scholar, but will demand to know if that person has made his deeds fit his words.

Search for knowledge, for there is no benefit to the one who neglects it. Know that people need knowledge and that the word of knowledge is like the source necessary for men and of which they make use.

⁶ ولا تكن ضاحكا من غير عجب. I suspect that this is a reference to the principle of surprise in humour, as outlined outlined by Aristotle in the *Rhetoric*. For a convenient version of the text cf. <http://classics.mit.edu/Aristotle/rhetoric.3.iii.html> (part 11)

Be humble, for the humble man is the most virtuous and best of men, whose actions are pleasing to God. Know that his heart is illuminated by the light of faith. His tongue speaks the truth for the profit of his soul and the benefit of his neighbour. The one to whom God is gracious enough to speak the truth and does not profit from it is one whose religion is only lip service. One word is enough to ruin a man, as a spark can cause great damage by igniting a great fire.

Beware of the ignorant person, for he constantly commits folly: when he acts, he does bad things; if he is rich, he becomes haughty; if becomes poor, he becomes dejected; when he rejoices, he does so foolishly; if he is sad, he becomes desperate; if he is the strongest, he looks troubled⁷: if he is beaten, he ignominiously gives up; when he asks, he is importunate; when he is asked, he becomes miserly; when he laughs, he brays; when **(43a)** he cries, he bellows; if he reprimands someone, he does it harshly; if people speak about him. he becomes angry; when he receives things, he offers no thanks; if you ask him for advice, he deceives you; if he asks you for advice, he is suspicious; if he is above, he threatens you; if he is your superior, he oppresses you; if you accompany him. he tires you; if you stay away from him, he does not call you; there is no wisdom that can make him intelligent; the judgement of others is of no use to him; he benefits neither from a rebuk nor from the one who issues it; his education is never complete; he does not fear his master, and those around him are not happy with him; he does not stop hurting them; if he is first among them, he upsets those beneath him; if he is the least among them, he tires out his superiors; he behaves badly when in command and refuses to obey those who command him; he gives no satisfaction to those who help him and does not greet those who visit him; when he speaks, he is unintelligent and when he is spoken to, he does not listen; he is impatient when being tested, does not appreciate kindness and thanks no-one; he is not above deceit and is ungrateful to those who advise him; he thinks that his wrongs are just and the evil that he does is good; he claims prodigality as magnanimity and ignorance as knowledge. He does what he pleases and all that flatters his desires. If they fit in with the truth, he praises it and prides himself on the truth; but if his passion is opposed to the truth, he rejects it. If he is with scholars, he is not deferential to them **(43b)** and does not listen to what they say. .If he is with inferiors, he is full of pride⁸ and makes fun of them. He says the truth but falsifies it with his actions. He orders what is just and does what is unjust. He orders piety and practises debauchery. He gives away what he does not want. He points to the good and recoils from it. He

7 اغمش. I have not been able to find this word, so I have translated Leroy's French version.

8 Leroy translates 'morgue'.

forbids evil and does it. He recommends activity and himself does nothing. His words are different from his deeds and his intention is not secret⁹. He says the truth only to pride himself on it. Only fools agree with him. If you are a scholar, he is arrogant and disrespectful to you. He disdains¹⁰ to be instructed. If you are ignorant, he makes fun of you, though he is uneducated. If you are strong, he is insolent to you; if you are weak, he scorns you. If you are rich, he calls you proud and if you are poor, he calls you impious and wasteful. If you seek to do good, he calls you a hypocrite. If you are generous, he calls you prodigal and irresolute. If you do good, he calls you a hypocrite and if you do bad, he tells your secret. If you give, he calls you wasteful and if you do not give, he calls you miserly. The ignorant and stupid man is like a worn-out garment: if you repair one side, it tears off from the other side.

Know that the distinctive qualities of the contented wise man are dignity, calm, piety **(44a)**, sweetness, constancy, benevolence, good works, knowledge, continence, spirit of organization, circumspection, clemency and humility. If he says nothing, he does so deliberately. If he is victorious, he spares his adversary. He forgives those who offend him. When he asks for something, he does not swear. He is not miserly to those who ask for something. He knows what he is talking about. When you speak to him, he understands. If he is introduced to a social inferior, he is kind to him. When he studies something, he does so carefully. If he can, he is good to those who have wronged him. In the company of the more knowledgeable, he listens and in the company of the less knowledgeable, he offers advice without condescension. If he gives you anything, it is without rebuke. If you give him something, he expresses his gratitude. He is modest in wealth and irreproachable in poverty. He seeks to do the will of God. He listens to advice offered. He does not quarrel with his superiors and despise his inferiors. He is constant in his affairs and listens to advice offered. He is quick **(44b)** to do good and slow to do bad, strong for constructive deeds and weak for destructive deeds. His inmost thoughts are in accordance with his intentions and his words with his deeds.

You know wisdom and all the things that distinguish it. Seek a refuge in it that it may be the goal of your efforts. Be quick to acquire it and slow to make use of it. Wisdom is of value only with mildness and order. Wisdom without order is like money with a spendthrift: it is soon gone. Or like a sheep outside the fold, which is found alone by the wolf, to the advantage of the wolf. May your tongue seal a pact with wisdom. The tongue is the door to wisdom: left open and unattended it

9 I am not sure of this: ولا سره على نيته

10 Ar. انف is metaphorically similar to English 'turn up one's nose'.

allows undesirables to enter and when closed the entire house is protected. The one who is master of his tongue speaks advisedly and the one who holds his tongue does so wisely. When he knows what he wants to say, he says it; and when not, he remains silent. If he is questioned by someone seeking religious instruction, **(45a)** he tries to reply; but if he is questioned by fools, he keeps quiet. God grants wisdom to the one who respects him: do not pass on the wisdom to the one who will ignore or scorn it and do not be parsimonious with it towards those who will treasure it.

Language is the key to what is good. Keep your mouth closed so that it speaks only for good. He who is not seduced by the world is happy: if he is, he will repent of it. Do not lose your money trying to acquire that of others. Leave it alone.

Good happens to only one of two men: the one who has inadvertently done wrong seeks to make good and does good to satisfy God for the sin he has committed; the other acquires wealth to perform good works, which he does enthusiastically.

There are two good types in the world: the one who receives riches, fame and honour from God and remains humble and grateful: the one who receives a modest fortune and remains patient and moderate, gives thanks to God and achieves a strong faith and worships God with perfection.

The one who is merciful will obtain mercy. The one who is silent will be saved. He who does God will profit from it. He who hates evil will be safe and he who does not control his tongue will repent.

(45 b) Fear the cry of distress of the oppressed, for it is this cry that will rise to heaven first and will be the first that God will hear. Be content with what God has given you, for the one who is content with his wealth can live among men, not wanting what he cannot have. Please accept criticism even if it is harsh. He who hears opinions and does not act in accordance with them is wretched, like the one who does not benefit from his knowledge. Listen to what is said to you and heed the good in it. Take care to do what is enjoined upon and not what satisfies you. Do not be too engaged with the world and ignore the last things. Be easy for people to approach, for God loves humility and simplicity. Humility is the first virtue.

The great and glorious God has give you favours, Be grateful and treat those beneath you well. Reject pride, accept excuses and do not be besotted by your deeds, however many, for you do not

know if God will accept them **(46a)**. Everything has a downside and the reverse of good action is pride. Do not act hypocritically to deceive people, for God will reveal the truth. Do not supplant others or deny them their rights. Do not be unjust or ignore the plight of the oppressed. Fix not your eyes on the agreements or achievements of this world. The cares of the world are not acceptable to omnipotent and magnificent God as an excuse.

There is nothing more excellent than intelligence, which attains perfection only when it combines ten qualities: the most important of these are loyalty and uprightness; the resolve not to acquire any more than is necessary and donate the excess; he prefers humility to power and is sympathetic to those who seek purity; he does not avoid his obligations to achieve his ends; he judges the good things done to him to be considerable and makes light of those he does himself. The tenth makes him happy and assures him renown and makes him stronger **(46b)**: to see men better than himself and believe himself to be the meanest. If he sees someone worse than himself, he considers whether that person might be saved, knowing only the outside but not the inside.

Pray to God for help against wicked women and their folly, for they hasten to evil. If God is your partner, you will achieve success without the need of things to sell. There are no riches to compare with bodily health.

Avoid the company of the mentally feeble, for you will be thought to be one of them. The company of those with active intelligence will redound to your credit. Do not feel too secure in a house where you are now living but may be dead tomorrow. Seek out wise men and kneel before them, for God animates hearts with the light of wisdom."

The chronicler reports that Luqmân chose to live in Ramla in Syria, which at that time was inhabited **(47a)**. According to Ibrahim ibn Adham, the grave of Luqmân was situated between the mosque and the place which now extends to the east of the city as well as the seventy prophets who died after Luqmân. They were driven out by the Israelites to Ramla and shut up in a walled enclosure, where they died of hunger. They are buried east of the mosque.

B The stories attributed to Luqmân

The stories attributed to Luqmân have been published, with French translation, by M. Cherbonneau *Les fables de*

Lokman (1846) in an edition that is intended for those in the early stages of learning Arabic: it has text equipped with vowels, a running literal transliteration and translation, a translation into standard French and a very selective word-parsing index of words as they occur in the text. There are 41 stories, similar to those attributed to Aesop. The meaning of the fable follows, and I have omitted the words 'The meaning is . . .'

The parables¹¹ and their meaning of Luqmân the sage

1. The lion and the two bulls.

A lion attacked two bulls.¹² They came together and struck him with their horns and made it impossible for him to come between them. But he managed to isolate one of them and deceived him by promising that he would not antagonize him if he left his companion. After they had separated, he attacked both of them.

The enemy cannot prevail against two cities that are united;
but if they are separated by disagreement, both perish.

2. The gazelle

An antelope, that is a gazelle, one day was overcome by thirst, so he went to a spring of water to drink. When he saw his image in the water, he became sad about how thin his legs were, but began to feel pride in the height of his horns and their size. All of a sudden he saw hunters coming at him and took flight from them. Once he was alone on the plain, he was out of their reach. When he went up to high ground and passed among the trees, he was caught by the hunters, who killed him. As he was dying, he said: "Woe is me. I am wretched ! That which I scorned saved me and that of which I was hopeful has ruined me."

3. The gazelle

A gazelle became ill. His fellow animals came to visit him, and they grazed on the grass and plants around him. After he had recovered, he went looking for something to eat but found nothing and died of hunger.

The larger the family, the more numerous the afflictions.

11 Ar. مثل

12 The Arabic of many of these stories writes مرة , which can be translated as 'once'. I have left it out.

4. The lion and the fox

A lion was overcome by the heat of the sun and went into a cave for shade. When he lay down, a locust came walking on his back. He jumped up alarmed and frightened and saw a fox on his right. The fox looked at him and laughed. The lion said to him: "I am not afraid of the locust, but I am angry at his contempt for me."

Contempt for the man of understanding is more unbearable to him than death.

5. The lion and the bull

A lion wanted to devour a bull, but did not attack him because of his strength. So he approached the bull to deceive him: "I have killed a fat lamb and I would like you to dine with me this evening."¹³ The bull agreed. When he arrived at the place, he looked this way and that, but saw only a pile of wood and a large pot. The bull took flight when he saw this. The lion said: "You have just come. Why are you leaving?" The bull said: "Because I realize that these preparations are for something larger than a lamb."

The intelligent person does not trust his enemy or become sociable with him.

6. The lion and the fox

A lion that had become old and feeble and was no longer able to capture prey decided to employ a stratagem for himself in providing for the necessities of life. He became ill and secluded himself in a cave. Whenever animals came along to visit him, he dismembered them in the cave and ate them. The fox came to visit, but stood at the entrance to the cave and greeted him: "How are you, lord of beasts?" The lion said: "Why do you not come in, lord of the stronghold?" The fox replied: "It was my intention to come in, sir, but the I saw the footsteps of the many animals who had gone into to visit you but not a single one of those who had come out."

It is ill-advised for anyone to attempt something without having examined it.

7. The lion and the man

A lion and a man were walking together, and their conversation about force and strength and courage became animated. The man saw a picture on a wall of a man strangling a lion. The man laughed, and the lion said: "If lions were able to paint like the sons of Adam, the man would not be strangling the lion. It would be the other way round."

¹³ The text here has the word خبز 'bread', which puts me in mind of the German expression for the evening meal: *Abendbrot*.

It is not the testimony of the people of his house that makes a man intelligent.

8. The gazelle and the lion

A gazelle frightened by hunters took refuge in a cave. A lion entered the cave and dismembered him, and the gazelle thought: "What an unfortunate wretch I am. I escape from humans, but I fall into the hands of someone more cruel than them."

Those escaping from an insubstantial fear can fall into serious danger.

9. The gazelle and the fox

A thirsty gazelle went down into a well and drank his fill. When he wanted to go back up again, he could not. A fox saw him and said to him: "My brother, this was a mistake. You did not consider how you would get out after you had gone in."

There are those who consider only their own opinion without consulting others.

10. Hares and foxes

War broke out between the eagles and the hares. The latter went to the foxes to ask for an alliance and assistance against the eagles. The foxes said: "If we did not know you and did not know who was fighting, we would do this."

It is not the way of man to fight against a more powerful enemy.

11. Hare and lioness

A hare passing by a lioness said to her: "Every year I produce many children, while you give birth to one or two in the whole course of your life." The lioness replied: "You are right. Only one. But he is a lion."

A single good child is better than many worthless ones.

12. The woman and the hen

A woman had a hen that laid a silver egg every day. She said to herself: "If I increase her food, she will lay two eggs." When the woman did this, the hen's crop burst and she died.

Many people lose their capital by trying to increase it.

13. The mosquito and the bull

A mosquito that had settled on the horns of a bull thought he was too heavy for the bull and said to him: “If I am too heavy, tell me and I will fly away.” The bull said: “Bless you ! I did not even notice that you had settled on me and will not notice your departure.”

You will find that he who asks you to take notice of him is weak and insignificant.

14. The man and death

A man was carrying a heavy bundle of wood. He became tired and weary from his burden and threw it off his shoulder and called for the peace of death, who appeared and said: “Here I am. Why did you call me ?” The man replied: “I called you to lift this burden onto my shoulders.”

Everyone dislikes weakness and infirmity but loves life.

15. The gardener¹⁴

One day a gardener was watering his vegetables. He was asked: “Why do the wild plants look so good without cultivation ? While the domesticated ones are quick to wither and die ?” The gardener replied: “The wild ones are tended by their mother, but the domesticated ones only by the stepmother.”

A mother's care is more valuable than that of a stepmother.

16. The man and the idol

A man had an idol in his house and worshipped it. He sacrificed to it every day. He spent all that he had on it. The idol came to him and said: “Do not spend what you have on me. For you will accuse me in the hereafter.”

He who spends his money on sin blames God for his poverty.¹⁵

17. The black man

A white man saw a black man bathing in the river and said: “Take care not to make the water dirty, for you will never manage to make your skin white.”

The stamp of nature cannot be changed.

18. The man and the horse

A man mounted a pregnant mare. While he was riding along, the mare gave birth to a colt, which

14 This story can also be found in the *VitAes* pp. 21ff.

15 The Arabic says literally: “He who spends his money on sin needs God to make him poor.”

followed its mother close behind and then stopped and said to the master: "See how small I am. I cannot keep pace. If you continue at this speed, you will leave me behind and I will die. But if you take me with you and keep me until I am strong, I will carry you wherever you wish.

A benefit should be given to the one worthy and deserving of it and should not be rejected.

19. The man and the pig

A man loaded a sheep, goat and pig on to a transport animal and went to town to sell them. The goat and the sheep were quiet but the pig complained continually. The man said: "Wicked animal, look at how quiet the sheep and the goat are, while you make this constant fuss." The pig replied: "Master, each does what he thinks is right. I know that the sheep is wanted for his wool and the goat for his milk. But I have no wool or milk and will be taken straight to the abattoir."

Those involved in crime know what awaits them in the afterlife.

20. The hare and the tortoise

A tortoise and a hare challenged each other to a race and chose a mountain as the finishing point. Confident of his nimbleness and the speed of his feet, the hare stopped on the way and fell asleep. The tortoise, on the other hand, knew how slow he was and kept moving without stopping. He arrived at the mountain just as the hare woke up.

Patience and endurance are better than speed and nimbleness

21. The wolf

A wolf seized a small suckling pig and, while fleeing with him, encountered a lion, who took the pig from the wolf. The wolf was surprised that something that he had violently taken could be taken away from him.

What is acquired by violence does not stay with its possessor and, even if it does, it will not be enjoyed by him.

22. The bush

The bush said to the gardener: "If I had someone to look after me and plant me in the middle of the garden, water and serve me, kings would want to see my flowers and fruits !" So he took it and planted it in the middle of the garden in the best soil and watered it twice a day. The thorns on the bush increased and became stronger and its branches spread out over all the trees around it. Its roots became deeper in the soil so that it completely filled the garden, and nobody was able to enter because of the thorns.

Those who protect bad people: the more time they spend on them, the greater the wickedness of the latter becomes and every kindness is repaid by an act of malice.

23. The black man

One day when it was snowing heavily, a black man took off his clothes and took some snow and rubbed it on his body. Someone asked him: “Why are you rubbing the snow on your body ?” He said: “Perhaps I will become white.” The sage said to him: “No! No! Do not bother ! Your black body may make the snow black, and there will simply be more black.”

The wicked man can corrupt the honest man but the honest man cannot correct the wicked man.

24. The hornet and the bee

The hornet said to the honeybee: “If you take me with you, I can make a lot of nice honey like you.” The bee agreed, but when the hornet failed to make the honey, he struck the bee with his sting, and the hornet died. While he was dying, he said: “It serves me right. I could not make pitch, so why did I imagine I could make a honeycomb ?”

There are some who try to equip themselves with what they do not have and claim to do what they cannot.

25. The boy

A boy dived into the water without knowing how to swim. As he was about to drown, he called for help to a passer-by. The man came nearer and started to scold him for going into the water. The boy said: “Rescue me first and then scold me.”

One should not scold those in danger.

26. The boy and the scorpion

A boy was hunting grasshoppers when he saw a scorpion. He thought it was large grasshopper and tried to seize it but withdrew his hand immediately. The scorpion said to him: “If you had seized me, that would have been the end of your grasshopper hunting days.”

Man can distinguish between good and bad and chooses what suits him.

27. The dove

A dove, overcome by thirst, and started to fly around looking for water. She saw a bowl of water on

a wall, flew against the picture at great speed and broke her beak. She said: “Oh dear. Because I was in such a hurry to find water I have ruined my life.”

Being slow and cautious is often better than being hasty and precipitate.

28. The cat

A cat went into a blacksmith's workshop. Finding a file on the ground, he started to lick it, and his tongue began to bleed and swallowed the blood, which he thought had come from the file. He consumed so much of it that his tongue burst and he died.

Those who spend their money needlessly fall imperceptibly into misery through not having controlled their spending.

29. The blacksmith and the dog

A blacksmith had a dog that slept the whole time his master was at work. After work, when the blacksmith sat with his companions to eat, the dog woke up and stood on his hind legs. The blacksmith said to it: “Miserable hound, how is it that the hammers that shake the ground do not wake you up, whereas the faint sound of jaws in your ears causes you to leap from your sleep ?”

There are some who listen to what cannot improve them and others who pay no attention to what can be of benefit to them.

30. Dogs and the fox

Some dogs found a lion skin and started to eat it. A fox saw them and said: “If the lion were still alive, you would feel his paws. which are harder and longer than your teeth.

There are some who insult dignitaries who have fallen into disgrace.

31. The dog and the hare

A dog was chasing a hare. He caught it and set about tearing it apart with his teeth. When the blood started to run, the dog licked it with his tongue. The hare said: “I see you tearing me apart as if I were your enemy and then kiss me as if I were your friend.”

Those whose intentions are both friendly and hostile make a display of benevolence and friendship.

32. The belly and the feet

The belly and the feet were talking about which of them made the greater contribution to the upkeep of the body. The feet said: “It is our strength that supports the body.” The belly said: “If I did not accept any more food, you would not be able to walk, let alone carry anything.”

Those who undertake something without the support of someone stronger and more powerful than themselves will fail in what they do and who they are.

33. The weasel and the chickens

The weasel discovered that the chickens were sick. He arose and clothed himself in the skin of a peacock and went to visit them. He said: "Greetings, chickens, how are you?" The chickens replied: "We will be just fine when you leave and do not come back."

There are some who are superficially friendly but in their heart hostile.

34. The sun and the wind

The cold and the heat had a disagreement about who could make a man remove his clothing. The wind caused a violent storm, but the man wrapped his outer garment tightly around himself to mitigate the effect of the storm. But the next day, when the sun rose, the heat of the sun started to burn. The man took off his outer garment and threw it over his shoulder.

He who combines modesty and gentleness in his behaviour gets what he wants from his friends.

35. The two cocks

Two cocks had a fight. The defeated one fled and hid in an unknown place. The victorious one ascended to a high roof and began to beat his wings, when he was spotted by a vulture, which swooped down and seized him.

No-one should boast of his triumphs.

36. The wolves

Wolves found cowhides soaked in running water, and there was no-one around. They agreed with each other that they would drink all the water until they could get at the hides and eat them. The large amount they drank filled them up and killed them. And they did not get at the hides.

Those with little judgement often do unnecessary work.

37. The goose and the swallow

The goose and the swallow agreed to live together in the same place. One day they saw hunters. The swallow, being light, flew off to safety. The goose was seized by the hunters and slaughtered.

To those who associate with people who do not resemble them and are of a different class.

38. The dog and the wolf

A dog, proud of his strength and speed, was pursuing a wolf, which, blocked in by the dog, rounded on him and said: “Do not think I am afraid of you. It is the hunter I am afraid of.”

People should not pride themselves on qualities natural to them but only on those they have acquired.

39. Two dogs

A dog was in the house of his masters¹⁶ (during) a party.¹⁷ He went out to the market, where he met another dog and said to him: “Listen, there is a party in my house today. Come with me and we will enjoy ourselves.” The other dog went with him and they both went into the kitchen. When the servants saw them, they seized one of them by the tail and threw him out. He became unconscious. When he awoke, he shook off the dust, and his friends saw him and said to him: “Where have you been today? Enjoying yourself? It looks to us as if you have lost your way.”

Many people arrive uninvited and make an undignified exit after shame and contempt have been levelled at them.

40. The man and the snakes

A man was looking at two snakes fighting furiously. Another snake came by and made peace between them. The man said: “You must be worse than them, otherwise you would not have intervened as a mediator.”

Wicked people seek their own kind.

41. The dog and the kite

A dog stole some meat from a butcher and went down to the river and jumped in. He saw the reflection of the meat in the water. It looked bigger than the one he had. So he let go of it. At that moment a kite swooped down and seized it. The dog wanted the meat back, but his efforts to retrieve it were futile, and he said: “No illusion was less justified than mine. I have lost what I had and have looked for what I could not have.”

Some abandon objects of little value which they have in order to look for something which they do not have.¹⁸

This is the end of the book, which contains forty-one parables.

16 This word has two meanings: 'masters' and 'friends'.

17 Arabic: كان في دار أصحابه دعوة:

18 The interpretation is couched in the prose style of Arabic known as سجع, where the two words موجوداً (found/present) and مفقوداً (lost/absent) present a rhyming contrast.

