The Story of ʿĀdel Šāh
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Introduction. The “Story of ʿĀdel Šāh” is one of the earliest attested texts in Neo-Mandaic, and one of the few witnesses to the now extinct Iraqi dialect of Neo-Mandaic. It was collected by Père Anastase-Marie of the Carmelite Mission in Baghdad sometime between 1894 and 1904 (Häberl 2010, Morgenstern 2015), when it was first published as “Histoire de Chah Adel” (de Morgan 1904, 283–286) among the texts in the fifth volume of Jacques de Morgan’s Mission scientifique en Perse. Nearly a century after de Morgan’s mission, Rudolf Macuch transcribed this text with the help of his informant Nasser Saburi of Ahvaz, Iran, and supplied a translation in his Neumandäische Chrestomathie as “Geschichte des Šāh ʿĀdel” (Macuch 1989, 186–191). With the help of my informant, the late Nasser Sobbi of Flushing, New York, USA, I have prepared a new transcription, using the system I developed for the Neo-Mandaic dialect of Khorrāmshahr as modified by Mutzafi (2014) and furnished it with a new translation, filling some of the gaps in Macuch’s earlier attempt and offering a few variant readings in the process.

The figure who furnishes the title of the tale in these western editions could hardly be the Afšārid shah of the same name (see ʿĀdel Šāh Afšār) or the dynasty of Bijapur of that name (see Bijāpur) but rather is almost certainly a folk reflex of the legendary king Kosrow I, also known as Anūširvān ʿĀdel, whom Iranians celebrate as the model of a just and enlightened philosopher king. If this is indeed the case, the Mandaean legend represents a remarkable subversion of the legends that surround this figure, which attributes to him some of the humorous anecdotes about the judge Qārāqāš (Hanauer 1907, 93–95).

Form of the Folktale. The tale unfolds in three acts, the first of which follows the Aarne-Thompson-Uther type 1534 “Series of Clever Unjust Decisions,” specifically sub-type 1534A “The Innocent Man Chosen to Fit the Stake (Noose),” as exemplified the legend of the “Judgments of Karakash” (Hanauer 1907, 93–95). It is populated with a fairly typical cast of characters: a king (Motif P10), a royal minister or vizier (P110), a thief (P475), a carpenter (P414), a blacksmith (P447), and a hunter (P414). The story unfolds when a thief loses an eye to a loose nail while robbing the house, and seeks a judgment against the homeowner. The homeowner refuses to accept responsibility for blinding the thief, blaming the carpenter who made the door; the carpenter, in turn, blames the blacksmith. The blacksmith has only one eye to offer, so he asks the king to blind the hunter in his place, as the latter hunts using a bow and therefore only has need of one eye.

The second act belongs to the general ATU tale type 1539 “Cleverness and gullibility.” The hunter proposes to teach the king the language of the birds (Motif K1068.1 “The laborer teaches his master birds’ talk”) to escape being blinded (K550 “Escape by false plea”). The ability to speak the language of the birds and other animals is familiar from numerous legends, including the story of the “The Bull, the Donkey, and the Husbandman” in the Thousand and One Nights, but in this instance it is merely used as a ruse. ʿĀdel Šāh agrees and asks the hunter to teach him the language immediately, but the hunter
counters that he requires a period of forty days, during which he will bed forty maidens (Z71.12. “Formulistic number: forty”), in order to collect his thoughts so that he can teach the vizier properly.

After the requisite period has passed, the hunter leads ʿĀdel Šāh and his vizier into the marshes, where he proposes to teach the vizier how to understand a pair of owls. Once they have separated from the king, the hunter confronts him and chastises him for his gullibility. The vizier dismisses him, and when he returns to ʿĀdel Šāh, he claims that the owls were talking about his foolishness (B131.0.1 “Truth-telling owl”) and he rebukes his absurd decision (J1530 “One absurdity rebukes another,” very much in the vein of Kalīla wa-Dīmna’s iron-eating mice, J1531.2). ʿĀdel Šāh learns from this experience and thereby becomes a better ruler (J1116 “Foolish person becomes clever”).

In the third act, ʿĀdel Šāh surrounds his kingdom with a chain, in which a pest (Persian āfat) is caught. The pest turns out to be a giant serpent (B91 “Mythical serpent”); ʿĀdel Šāh asks them to bring it to him, and then asks them to take it away. The only one who is willing to do so is a carpenter, who brings the serpent to the marshes. There, the serpent attempts to swallow a deer (Dezfūlī gāmūr, the Persian deer or Dama dama mesopotamica) but its horns get caught in its mouth. The carpenter saws the horns off the deer, freeing the serpent’s mouth (B375.9 “Serpent released: grateful”). In gratitude, the serpent rewards the carpenter, giving him a packet of seeds (Q51 “Kindness to animals rewarded”). ʿĀdel Šāh asks his people to plant these seeds, but no one would eat the fruit, save for a donkey, who eats it and becomes fat, thus signaling that the fruit is safe to eat. They consequently name this plant xarmīza ‘donkey-table,’ presumably a folk etymology for Persian ḵarbīza ‘melon’ (A2781 “Origin of plant names”).

Language. Although it presumably reflects the now extinct dialect of Baghdad, the language of the “Story of ʿĀdel Šāh” is recognizable as Neo-Mandaic and easily comprehensible to speakers of the surviving varieties (see Neo-Mandaic). Although much of its core vocabulary is recognizable from other Mandaic texts, it is remarkable for the large number of Persian loan words contained within it, such as joft ‘pair,’ koš ‘good,’ nešān ‘sign,’ zanjīl ‘chain,’ and even numbers such as do ‘two,’ se ‘three,’ and čel (from Persian do, se, and čehel, respectively). Some words, such as gāmūr and xarmīza evidently derive from Iranian languages other than standard Persian. A few words, such as saḡmāni, which is consistently used for the hunter, and nurdɔ, which appears twice for the serpent, are of unknown origin, although the latter resembles Persian nārad ‘tick.’ Macuch (1989, 238) proposes that it is a form of Persian nar ‘male.’ The preposition bardok ‘in place of’ appears to be unique to this folktale; Macuch (1989, 204) parses this word as bar ‘son of’ dok ‘place.’ Similarly he identifies suž ‘fault’ as a “vulgar Arabic” term (1989, 241).

The Text:

\[
\begin{array}{cccc}
  y_a & y_e_k_i & gənɔw-i & hɔwɔ-∅ \\
  1 & 1 & \text{thief-INDF} & \text{be.PFV-3SG.M} \\
\end{array}
\]

\[
\begin{array}{cccc}
  s_\text{b} & hɔk_\text{k}ɔm & s_\text{əd}_\text{el} \\
  \text{in = rule} & \text{PN} \\
\end{array}
\]

There once was a thief during the reign of Adel [the Just].
He went down into a house.

He came into a room.

He broke its lock, but a doornail put out his eye.

It became blind.

The thief went to Adel

He told him, "I went to rob an open house.

I went down into the courtyard,

went into the room,

broke the lock, entered stealing,

the doornail put out my eye!
How does it suit your sense of justice [that] my eye go blind?

The vizier said, “What do you say?

The eye of the thief is put out.

What is the judgment upon the homeowner?”

The vizier told him, “Your pleasure, Adel!”

Adel said, “Let’s put out the eye of the homeowner in place of his eye!”

They sent for the homeowner.

They brought him before Adel.

He said to him, “Why did you pound a nail into the door?

The thief came wanting to rob you, his eye is put out.
I must put out your eye in exchange for the thief."

The homeowner said, ”It’s not my fault.

It is the fault of the carpenter who made the door.”

He said, “Send for the carpenter!”

He came, he said, “Why did you make a door

in which you didn’t pound the nail?”

It put out the eye of the thief.

He said, “It’s not my fault that you put out the eye,

It is the fault of a blacksmith from whom it was given.”
He sent for the blacksmith.

He came, he said to him, “Why was a nail given by you that put out the eye of the thief? I must put out your eye!”

The blacksmith said, “I have one single eye.

If you put out my eye, I will become blind.

Who will give my children meat?”

Put out the eye of a hunter in exchange for the eye of the thief,

since he has no need of his eye.

Every time he aims,
he has no need of another eye.

Put it out in place of the thief's eye!"

Adel said, “The blacksmith has had a good idea.”

He sent some people into the marsh.

They saw someone hitting birds, whom they took.

He said to him, “Adel wants you.”

He came with them to Adel.

He said to him, “Are you a hunter?”

He said to him, “Yes.”
He said to him, “How do you aim, both of your eyes or the one eye?”

He said to him, “The one eye.”

He said to him, “I must put out one of your two eyes in exchange for the eye of the thief, since you have no need of your eye.”

I will teach you the language of the birds.”

He said, “Teach it now!”

He said, “It cannot be now.

You should give me a period of 40 days, cycle through 40 maidens,
so that every day I would marry one of them.

We would go horse-riding,

and the vizier would follow after me,

we would go to the bathhouse every day,

I would put on new clothes,

I would eat from your food three times every day,

after 40 days, I would teach you the language of the birds.”

He said to him, “It is good.

Vizier, take him a new house girl every day,

every day a horse,
three times from your food,

every day draw him a bath,

give him new clothes

follow after him.”

He said to him, “By your command, I will act

from now for the next 40 days.”

Adel said to the hunter, “Go,

the vizier will serve you.”

The vizier got up in the morning.

He said, “Come, hunter,
Whose daughter do you want me to bring to you?"

He said to him, I want your daughter.

First, go, bring before me,

I will marry her,

go draw her a bath,

let them scrub her with the washcloth.

He dressed with new clothes,

and rode on horseback.

The vizier followed after him.

When he arrived, he got down off his horse,
yǝhem-∅ to bench-AUG pleasure IND = do.PTC-3SG.M
sat on a bench, and enjoyed himself.

mex-l-∅ eating-AUG good bring.PFV-3PL before-3SG.M
They brought good food to him.

axal-∅ qelyon-i ḫl-∅ ṣmal = l-∅ el = wazir
eat.PFV-3SG.M water.pipe-INDF pull.PFV-3SG.M say.PFV-3SG.M = OBJ-3SG.M REF = vizier
He ate, smoked a water pipe, said to the vizier,

čel ruz ekk-∅ q = abi-n∅ xčter
40 day thus IND = want.PTC-1SG memory
“Forty days I want to recall this way.

ano malef-n-ax lešn-∅ ad = ṣopr-∅
1SG teach.PTC-1SG-2SG.M tongue-AUG gen = bird-AUG
[Then] I’ll teach you the language of the birds.

ɔt alf-∅-∅ el = ʃ̝adel
2SG teach.IMP-2SG.M-3SG.M REF = PN
You’ll teach Adel.

əmar-∅ lešn-∅ ad = ṣopr-∅ geš qə = yod-ax = ye
say.PFV-3SG.M tongue-AUG gen = bird-AUG all IND = know.PTC-2SG.M = COP-3SG.M
He said, “Do you know the entire language of the birds?”

əmal-∅ = l-i i yə wazir geš qə = yod-ey = ye,
say.PFV-3SG.M = OBJ-3SG.M yes voc vizier all IND = know.PTC-1SG = COP-3SG.M
He said, “Yes, vizier, I know it all.”

əmal-∅ = l-i lešn-∅ ad = belbel ham qə = yod-ax = ye
say.PFV-3SG.M = OBJ-3SG.M tongue-AUG gen = nightingale also IND = know.PTC-2SG.M = COP-3SG.M
He said to him, “You also know the language of the nightingale?”

əmal-∅ = l-i geš lešn-ɔn-∅ ano qə = yod-ey = non
say.PFV-3SG.M = OBJ-3SG.M all tongue-PL-AUG 1SG IND = know.PTC-1SG = COP-3PL
He said to him, “I know all the languages.
If you serve me well,

then my recollections will come to my mind.

I’ll teach you well, you’ll teach Adel.

Every day the hunter took a maiden

Every day they brought him a new horse,

He rode it, went to the bathhouse,

the vizier followed after him.

The vizier did just like this for forty days
After forty days, he took him and went to Adel.

He said to him, “Teach the vizier some of the languages of the birds.”

He said to him “Yes.”

He said to him, “Teach me it!”

He said to him, “It won’t be here.

We need to go to the marsh to see what the birds are saying.”

I will tell the vizier, the vizier will teach you.

“Good.”

They went as they came, on horseback.

Adel, the hunter, and the vizier went.
Adel saw two owls resting on the hills.

He said to the hunter, “What are those owls saying?”

He said, “If the vizier comes with me,

then I will tell him, and he will tell you.”

They went to the owls.

The vizier and the hunter shouted.

He said to the vizier, “How many daughters did I take?”

He said to him, “40.”

He said to him, “How many horses did I ride?”

He said to him, “40.”
“Has anyone else ever done this?”

He said to him, “Now, go cut off a leg,

give it to Adel.

Go get another leg,

cut the head off and stick it up your ass!

You have followed me (literally, you took after me)

Do whatever you want with it.”

He said to him, “I know the language of the feathered birds!”

The vizier said to him, “Go,

I’ve learned the language of the birds.”
He came to Adel.

The vizier told him what those owls are saying.

He said to him, “One had a son, the other had a daughter.

The mother of the son says to the mother of the daughter,

Will you give your daughter to my son?

She said to her, “If you have forty ruins, let’s go, I’ll give her to you.”

She says to him, “If it were Adel’s judgment, instead of forty ruins

I’d give you however many ruins you want!

He said to him, “As for me, your judgment does not fit.”
He said to him, “It doesn’t fit, your eye will be put out!”

The thief robs a man,

you don’t put out his eye,

you are caught in a mistake.

so you want to put out the eye of the homeowner.

The homeowner tells you the carpenter,

so you want want to put out the blacksmith’s eye.
The blacksmith tells you, 'Put out the eye of the hunter.'

The hunter tells you, 'I will teach you the language of the birds.'

Does anyone know the language of the birds?

This is your judgment!

He waited a moment, sweating.

He became wise, his judgment became good.

He put a chain around the country.

The head of the chain was with him.

King Adel came, some pest caught itself in the midst of the chain.
He said, “Bring them!”

They went [and] they saw a large snake.

They said, “There’s a snake!”

He said, “Tell her, come!”

They went.

They shouted at her.

She came, she went into the middle of his castle.

He looked at her.

He said, “Bring however many workers,

take her away from me.”
They all came one by one, and passed by.

A carpenter seized [her].

He told him “Go away with her.”

He went away with her [to] the marsh.

He saw a deer. The nörđö swallowed the deer,

[but] its horns did not go inside its mouth.

The carpenter started to cut them off, it swallowed it.

The nörđö and its prey went into the middle of a cave, and she brought out a packet of seeds.

He gave it to people.

King Adel went, they gave it to him.
He said to him, “Who gave you these?”

He said to him, “The pest”

He said, “Plant them.”

They sprouted, but no one would eat any of them.

A donkey came, and started to eat them.

It became fat and did not die.

King Adel said, “Bring [it], I’ll eat some of it.”

He ate some of it.

They made its name “melon.”
Bibliography:


