1. Performing Deference in Ahiqar: The significance of a Politics of Resistance in the Narrative and Proverbs of Ahiqar.

1.1 Ahiqar and "Narrative Wisdom".

This article highlights the sophisticated treatment of the theme of power in Ahiqar.[1] Ahiqar is one of the most international folktales of antiquity, and became legendary among Judean, Egyptian, Greek, and Babylonian audiences. The wise courtier's fame is attested through numerous translations.[2] Likewise, there is much in common between Ahiqar and ancient Near Eastern material (the Sumerian Instructions of Shurppak, and Ludlul bēl nēmeqi, and tales of the righteous sufferer),[3] and particularly with Egyptian instructional compositions wherein instructional speech is framed by narrative.[4] Material related to the Biblical corpus contains thematic and stylistic resemblances to Ahiqar.[5] Tobit directly references Ahiqar (Tob 1:21;

[1] We will focus on Aramaic version of Ahiqar, found at Elephantine using the TAD critical edition (Bezalel Porten and Ada Yardeni, *Textbook of Aramaic Documents from Ancient Egypt, Vol 1-4*, vol. 3. (Winona Lake, IN: Distributed by Eisenbrauns, 1986), 24—53). We should acknowledge that Porten and Yardeni's reconstruction is not without drawbacks. There are limitations to this edition. Indeed, a case could be made for the publication of a new, stand-alone, critical edition of Ahiqar based on new digital photographs of the plates. Likewise, the order the columns should proceed in is disputed. The Elephantine narrative section is incomplete and abruptly stops at a moment of high tension in the plot. The papyrus itself is a palimpsest (with customs accounts underneath). The plates contain a complete deluxe copy of Ahiqar on the recto and a partial copy of it on the verso.

[2] Ahikar is mentioned on a tablet from Uruk (Jonas C. Greenfield, "The Wisdom of Ahiqar," in *Wisdom in Ancient Israel: Essays in Honour of J. A. Emerton*, eds John Day, Robert P. Gordon and Hugh G. M. Williamson, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995) 43—52: 44). Translations exist in Slavonic, Armenian, Old Turkish, Syriac, Ethiopic, and Arabic versions and Ahiqar is also found in sections of the Life of Aesop (F. C. Conybeare, J. R. Harris, and Agnes Smith Lewis, *The Story of Aḥiḳar: From the Syriac, Arabic, Armenian, Ethiopic, Greek and Slavonic Versions* (London: C.J. Clay, 1898).

[3] Wilfred G. Lambert, *Babylonian Wisdom Literature* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1960) 90—103; Michael Weigl, *Die Aramäischen Achikar-Sprüche Aus Elephantine Und Die Alttestamentliche Weisheitsliteratur* (Berlin; New York: Walter de Gruyter, 2010), 96—101.

[4] These demotic instructions include Ptahhotep, the Teachings of Khasheshonqy - usually but wrongly referred to as "Onksheshonqy" for example (Miriam Lichtheim, *Late Egyptian Wisdom Literature in the International Context: A Study of Demotic Instructions*. (Freiburg, Schweiz: Göttingen: Universitätsverlag; Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1983),13—21; Joachim Friedrich Quack, "The Interaction of Egyptian and Aramaic Literature," in *Judah and the Judeans in the Achaemenid Period: Negotiating Identity in an International Context*, eds Oded Lipschitz, Gary N. Knoppers and Manfred Oeming, (Winona Lake, Ind: Eisenbrauns, 2011) 375—402: 380). The latter depicts a priest who became chief physician of the Pharaoh whose lack of warning to the Pharaoh of mortal danger left him in a prison fortress writing teachings on ostraca. In the former, Ptahhotep requests permission from the king to pass his instructions on to his son.

[5] Similarities exist between Ahiqar and Proverbs or Ben Sira (Michael V. Fox, *Proverbs 10-31: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (New Haven, Conn.; London: Yale University Press, 2009), 761; James M. Lindenberger, *The Aramaic Proverbs of Ahiqar* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1983). Bledsoe suggests there are parallels between Ahiqar in Job, owing to structure and since "they are both foreigners" (Seth A. Bledsoe, "Ahiqar and Other Legendary Sages," in *Wiley Blackwell Companion to Wisdom Literature*, eds. Samuel L. Adams and Matthew J. Goff (Chichester: John Wiley & Sons, 2020) 289—309: 307). Weitzman connects Deuteronomy and Ahikar (Steven Weitzman, "Lessons from the Dying: The Role of

2:10; 11:17—18; 14:10,15).[6] These connections previously lead some to consider a more generalised "wisdom" tradition. Concerning court tales, for example, von Rad suggested the Joseph story was a manifestation of early wisdom.[7] Similar "court tales" or "court conflict tales" with characters acting as manifestations of "narrative wisdom" include Esther, Nehemiah, Daniel, and 4QTales of the Persian Court (Neh 2:2—8; Dan 2:48; 6:14—15).[8] However, the category "wisdom literature" is problematic.[9] As Weeks argues,

> If "wisdom literature" refers to an ill-defined corpus, the members of which adopt different views and different styles, and if it is clearly unhelpful for most purposes either to lump the wisdom books together or to distil from them some "wisdom" worldview with which none would wholly concur, then perhaps it is time that we stopped using such terms altogether. After all, if we still cannot agree on a precise meaning for them … then their value, even as a sort of shorthand, is clearly limited….[10]

This argument is persuasive: imposing the rigid definition "wisdom" only adds an unwarranted scholarly classification to primary evidence which skews its interpretation. Perhaps the only way we can move forward with "wisdom" is to understand it loosely as a heuristic exercise rather than a rigid imposition of form and meaning? After all, genre should not be treated as a

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Deuteronomy 32 in its Narrative Setting," *The Harvard Theological Review* 87/4 (1994) 377—393). Ahiqar's characterisation as a "wise and skilful scribe" (ספר חכים ומהיר) has similarities with Ezra (TAD C. Col. 1:1; Ezra 7:6; 1Chr. 27:32).

[6] Deborah Dimant, "The Family of Tobit," in *With Wisdom as a Robe: Qumran and Other Jewish Studies in Honour of Ida Fröhlich*, eds. Károly Dobos, Miklós Kőszeghy and Pázmány Péter Katolikus Egyetem (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2009) 157—162; Jonas C. Greenfield, "Aḥiqar in the Book of Tobit," in *De La Tôrah Au Messie. Biblical Exegesis and Hermeneutic Studies Offered to Henri CAZELLES for His 25 Years of Teaching at the Catholic Institute of Paris (October 1979)*, eds. Maurice Carrez, Joseph Doré and Pierre Grelot (Paris: Desclée, 1981) 329—336; Ingo Kottsieper, "'Look, Son, what Nadab did to Ahikaros...': The Aramaic Ahiqar Tradition and its Relationship to the Book of Tobit," in *The Dynamics of Language and Exegesis at Qumran, Forschungen Zum Alten Testament. 2*, eds. Devorah Dimant and Reinhard G. Kratz, (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2009) 145—167.

[7] Gerhard von Rad, *Gesammelte Studien Zum Alten Testament* (München: C. Kaiser, 1958), 272—280.

[8] Shemarayahu Talmon, "'Wisdom' in the Book of Esther," *Vetus Testamentum* 13/1 (1963) 419—455; Susan Niditch and Robert Doran, "The Success Story of the Wise Courtier: A Formal Approach," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 96/2 (1977) 179—193; Michael Wechsler, "Two Para-Biblical Novellae from Qumran Cave 4: A Reevaluation of 4q550," *Dead Sea Discoveries* 7/2 (2000) 130—172. Hans Strauß, "Weisheitliche Lehrerzählungen Im Und Um Das Alte Testament," *Zeitschrift Fur Die Alttestamentliche Wissenschaft* 116/3 (2004) 379—395.

[9] Will Kynes, *An Obituary for "Wisdom Literature": The Birth, Death, and Intertextual Reintegration of a Biblical Corpus* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019); Mark R. Sneed, *Was there a Wisdom Tradition?: New Prospects in Israelite Wisdom Studies* (Atlanta: SBL Press, 2015).

[10] Stuart Weeks, "Is 'Wisdom Literature' a Useful Category?" in *Tracing Sapiential Traditions in Ancient Judaism*, eds., Hindy Najman, Jean-Sébastien Rey and Eibert J. C. Tigchelaar, (Leiden, Boston: Brill, 2016) 3—23: 22.

static phenomenon, but as something that can be participated in and that evolves.[11] Effectively, there is a vitality to the concept of genre as a result of its tendency towards fluidity and continual renewal. However, for Ahiqar, the idea of "narrative wisdom" has long been problematized on account of limiting form-critical assumptions, too often linking genre with wisdom schools and scribal practices.[12] Therefore, although we can observe some similarities between Ahiqar and a proportion of the Biblical material, it is ill-advised to make assumptions about Ahiqar's participation in a broader "wisdom" tradition. Bledsoe's argument for thinking in terms of "literary awareness" rather than genre, is helpful here, that is awareness "not necessarily dependent on any extant text in particular, but instead on a basic set of parameters or expectations with which an ancient scribe began when undertaking his compositional endeavour."[13] Therefore, rather than comparing Ahiqar with Biblical "narrative wisdom" this article focuses Ahiqar its Elephantine context, aiming to make connections between the historical context and the reception of the text by early audiences.

1.1 Ahiqar as an Embodiment of Instruction?

Given that this article encompasses Ahiqar's narrative and the proverbs it is important that we address the relationship between the two. The narrative is written in Eastern Literary Aramaic, while the gnomic section is composed in Western Aramaic, suggesting to some a composite

[11] Zahn suggests that texts should be conceived of as "participating in genres: dipping into them, employing their elements in modified fashion, combining them…. texts can participate in multiple genres simultaneously" (Molly Zahn, "Genre and Rewritten Scripture: A Reassessment," *JBL* 131 (2012), 271—88: 277). Similarly, Newsom argues "[t]exts do not 'belong' to genres, so much as participate in them, invoke them, gesture to them … and in doing so continually change them" (Carol Newsom, *The Book of Job: A Contest of Moral Imaginations* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 12).

[12] Stuart Weeks, "Wisdom, Form and Genre," in *Was there a Wisdom Tradition? New Prospects in Israelite Wisdom Studies*, ed. Mark R. Sneed (Atlanta: SBL Press, 2015) 161-177; Weeks, Stuart *Early Israelite Wisdom* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1994), 132—156; Mark R. Sneed, "Is the 'Wisdom Tradition' a Tradition?" *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 73/1 (2011) 50—71.

[13] Seth A. Bledsoe, "Conflicting Loyalties: King and Context in the Aramaic Book of Ahiqar," in *Political Memory in and After the Persian Empire*, eds. Jason M. Silverman and Caroline Waerzeggers (Atlanta: SBL Press, 2015) 289—268: 218.

work whose wisdom sections have been integrated at a later date.[14] This leads Lindenberger to dismiss the social background of Ahiqar and to reject the idea that the narrative and sayings might be intended as a type of hermeneutical circle and to suppose instead that his study "strongly confirmed" that "the original collection of proverbs was independent of the narrative."[15] In contrast, however, Weigl made a compelling case for a more literary treatment of Ahiqar, arguing that "Die Forschung blieb über weite Strecken bei der Diskussion von philologischen, lexikalischen und paläographischen Problemen stehen und drang von dort nur selten und ansatzweise zu übergreifenderen literarischen Fragestellungen vor."[16] Similarly, Kottsieper noted the peculiar absence in scholarship of any attempt to take seriously the social background of Ahiqar and suggested that the proverbs were highly organised and interdependent.[17] More recently, Bledsoe made a sustained and compelling case for interpreting the narrative and proverbial sections working symbiotically, arguing:

> An interpretation of both the narrative and sayings is only complete when we read them together and allow for a reciprocal relationship. In other words, when reading the sayings we should recall the events and lessons from the narrative, allowing them to have some influence on the interpretation of the sayings, and vice versa.[18]

Bledsoe's argument here is convincing. This is because it while it is possible, with Lindenberger, to see areas where there is little overlap between the narrative and the proverbs, is also actually quite difficult to ignore the several sayings where there is explicit overlap. Note, for example, the instructions on obedience to the King (TAD C. col 6:84—88); sayings on ingratitude (TAD C. col 7:105—106; 8:111-125); on disciplining the son (TAD C. col 12:175—177); or on the treachery of family (TAD C. col 9:139—140). Some of the sayings unambiguously reference the narrative, such as "[my son] was a criminal witness (עד חמס)

[14] Lindenberger, *Aramaic Proverbs*, 47.
[15] Ibid., 16.
[16] Weigl, Michael, *Die Aramäischen Achikar-Sprüche*, 32.
[17] Kottsieper, "Look, Son": 145—167.
[18] Seth A. Bledsoe, *Wisdom in Distress: A Literary and Socio-Historical Approach to the Aramaic Book of Ahiqar*, ed. Matthew Goff, Nicole Kelley, David Levenson and Svetla Slaveva-Griffin (ProQuest Dissertations Publishing, 2015:142—154, 94.

against me, so who then will judge me to be righteous (הצדיקני)" (TAD C. col 9:140).[19] A further consideration in favour of Bledsoe's approach is the comparison between Ahiqar and material such as Qoheleth (presented as a first-person memoir) and Tobit (which moves from first-person memoir to third-person narrative, but includes prayers, admonitions, and two last testaments). Weeks persuasively suggests here that "rather than try to explain all such examples in terms of diverse sources or problems in transmission, it seems easier to accept that ancient audiences tolerated, and probably even enjoyed, such variations and shifts of tone."[20] Therefore stylistic differences alone do not make a convincing case for interpreting the narrative and proverbs in isolation from each other. Indeed, the evidence may have been intentionally put together to be mutually interpreted. Perhaps, therefore the character Ahiqar, like Khasheshonqy, is cast as a type of authoritative literary embodiment of the instruction that accompanies his story. He is the wise hero who bestows upon his "son" a legacy of superlative wisdom (though, as we shall observe, there is significant irony in this presentation).

1.2 Justice and Power at Elephantine.

Bledsoe makes a powerful case for reading and interpreting Ahiqar, not only with the narrative and proverbs together, but also by taking seriously the material context at Elephantine when imagining ancient audiences' interpretation processes. A lot is known about the community at Elephantine. As worshipers of the god Yahu (יהו)[21] they are in touch with the Jerusalem temple (TAD A. 4.7 // A4.8)[22] but "do not show a religion or religious identity that equals Yahwism

[19] The final term here (הצדיקני) is awkward to translate. Porten and Yardeni suggest "judge me innocent" (יזכני TAD C. col 9:55). This word (זכי) connects with the idea of exonerating somebody from charges. Both translations directly allude to Nadin's treachery by inventing (ברא) a story to Esarhaddon about Ahiqar (TAD C. col 2:23—31).

[20] Stuart Weeks, *Ecclesiastes 1-5: A Critical and Exegetical Commentary*, International Critical Commentary (London, New York, Oxford, New Dehli, Sydney: T & T Clark, 2020), 13.

[21] This is probably a contracted form of the tetragrammaton.

[22] We can only speculate about the fact that "not one letter" was sent in response (אגרת אחת לא שלחו אלינו). Perhaps the reason for the lack of response is to do with the fact that the Yahwists at Elephantine are not monotheistic? The Yehudites at Elephantine seem to have lived together with the Egyptians and the Aramaeans and assimilated and intermarried without the tensions that these practices produced among the Judeans (TAD B.

as we know it from the Hebrew Bible."[23] One striking aspect of the Elephantine evidence is the theme of kingship and power that emerges not only in Ahiqar, but also in the Behistun inscription (TAD C. col 2.1), which Becking suggests was commissioned by Persian authorities to promote supporting Persian ideologies in scribal education. As Becking argues the Yehudites "had integrated this ideology within their own identity, as can be proven by the fact that the Yehudites never revolted against the Persian power."[24] Bledsoe also argues that the narrative and sayings in Ahiqar demonstrate "an ethic of obedience, even admiration, toward the king" and "when weighed against the political backdrop of Achaemenid-controlled Egypt in the fifth century b.c.e., this presentation of the king suggests a state-sanctioned document".[25] This possibility certainly adds an interesting political dimension to any interpretation of Ahiqar, especially in light of some of its major themes such as interaction with the King, of retributive justice, reciprocity, and of carefully guarding what one says and when.

However, although these themes emerge in Ahiqar, the way they are presented leaves room for ambiguity in interpretation. This is because the narrative framing of the wisdom sayings in Ahiqar betrays merely the *performances* of submissiveness and the *enactment* of respect for power and justice. At the same time the subtle politics of defiance in the face of power and a preference for a type of justice that is quite set apart from power can be detected. Bledsoe notices this Janus-faced quality in Ahiqar that is created by reading the wisdom sayings in light of the narrative, arguing that it:

> vacillates between, on the one hand, a practical exhortation of righteous, wise behaviour founded upon principles of caution and reciprocity and, on the other hand, a persistent attention to injustice and suffering….[26]

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col 2 6:3; cf. Ezra 9—10; Neh 13:23—27; cf. Bob Becking, "Yehudite Identity in Elephantine," in *Judah and the Judeans in the Achaemenid Period: Negotiating Identity in an International Context*, ed. Oded Lipschitz, Gary N. Knoppers and Manfred Oeming (Winona Lake, Ind.: Eisenbrauns, 2011) 403—419: 412; cf. Karel van der Toorn, "Anat-Yahu, some Other Deities, and the Jews of Elephantine," *Numen* 39/1 (1992) 80—101).

[23] Becking, "Yehudite Identity": 415.

[24] Becking, "Yehudite Identity": 414. Interestingly, the Aramaic "letters" in Ezra (whatever one makes of their so-called "authenticity") seem to suggest the possibility of insurgence against the Persians through not paying taxes and through being "rebellious" (מרר Ezra 4:12,15).

[25] Bledsoe, "Conflicting Loyalties": 241.

[26] Bledsoe, "Ahiqar": 296.

This vacillation between power and reality, caution and injustice means that a central tension is created within and throughout Ahiqar between the narrative and the proverbs. For example, in the sayings that promote obedience to the king, the audience is cautioned about the king's power as "sharper and mightier than a [double-]edged knife" (TAD C. col 6:84), and are advised that if the king commands something "it is a burning fire (אש יוקדת) … hurry, do it!" (TAD C. col 6:87). Here the command is clear, as evidenced by the word יקד which points towards something urgent and dangerous.[27] Yet, in the narrative it is clearly demonstrated to audiences that this is not quite how the world works. Instead, the command that Nabusumiskun is given by Esarhaddon is simply cast aside when he meets Ahiqar who reminds him of his own debt of reciprocal compassion: "I am Ahiqar who formerly recused you from an innocent killing (מהרג נקי) …. Now, you, just as I did for you, so, then, do for me" (TAD C. col 3:45—4:52).[28] Here, the king's power and justice are adhered to at a *surface* level: Nabusumiskun obeys the command and goes in search of Ahiqar. But this order is quickly cast aside in favour of a more informal agreement about justice and power as soon as the king is no longer part of the interaction. More ironically, the reason Ahiqar gives for disobeying the king is that "at last, he will remember me and my counsel he will seek. Then, you will present me to him and he will let me live" (TAD C. col 4:53). Unfortunately, the text breaks off before it the narrative is complete, so we do not know the outcome. Nevertheless, from the evidence available Nabusumuskun and Ahiqar display all the semblance of obedience and acquiescence while in the king's presence. However, in his absence they assume that they know best. Technically, this is insubordination. Indeed, far from Esarhaddon's command being treated urgently, ironically the expectation seems to be that the king will forget his own command and "rejoice abundantly" when he realises that Ahiqar is still alive (TAD C. col 5:65).

[27] Perhaps with an analogy to the way Jeremiah describes Yahweh's word as a "like burning fire" (כאש בערת) shut up in his bones (Jer 20:9).
[28] Compare Tob 4:15; Matt 7:12 for similar maxims of conditional ethics.

1.3 Performed Deference and the Politics of Resistance.

One way of approaching the ironic tension between what is said in the proverbs and what is done in the narrative is to suggest that the irony is political. In the case of Ahiqar, the king is the victim of the irony since the drama happens in a private situation that even his power does not extend into. This a typical tactic of political resistance to domination. It is a type of "hidden transcript" or an "offstage" that represents a critique of power. As Scott describes it, the hidden transcript of discourse among subordinate groups involves a

> politics of disguise and anonymity that takes place in public view but is designed to have a double meaning or to shield the identity of the actors. Rumour, gossip, folktales, jokes, songs, rituals, codes, and euphemisms - a good part of the folk culture of subordinate groups - fit this description.[29]

This argument is really interesting in light of Ahiqar. If, as Scott's monograph suggests, the practice of domination creates hidden transcripts among subordinate groups then we begin to see more clearly in the narrative of Ahiqar the contrast between Ahiqar's and Nabusumiskun's public verses their hidden transcripts. Effectively, by disobeying the king they are resisting his power and dominance. But they do so in such a way that betrays clearly the underground understanding between them of what counts as justice. Publically, there is all the semblance of sycophantic loyalty to the king, but privately, from the moment that Ahiqar and Nabusumiskun talk, a very different, yet mutually acknowledged, code of conduct reigns. To add a meta-critical dimension to this, if the narrative and proverbs of Ahiqar are part of an effort from the Persians to instil an ideology of loyalty towards them, then the tension between the proverbs and the narrative may also form a hidden transcript for audiences at Elephantine who are subordinate to their Persian overlords.[30] In a deliciously ironic twist by listening to Ahiqar (or

[29] James C. Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts* (New Haven, CT; London: Yale University Press, 1990), 18—19.
[30] Note also the similarities between Ahiqar's and Qoheleth's "advice to the general populace on their attitude and behaviour toward the political authorities" as provided in Jones's detailed summary of the points of contact between the two (Scott C. Jones, "Qohelet's courtly wisdom: Ecclesiastes 8:1-9," *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 68/2 (2006) 211-28: 220; Qoh 8:1—9).

perhaps even seeing it performed) these audiences are participating in the public transcript by acknowledging Persian power. However, at the same time they are also participating in a hidden transcript towards the Persians. This is a transcript that suggests one must *display* loyalty, but that only the display of it, rather than the reality behind the mask, is important. For the characters subservient to Esarhaddon (and perhaps also for the community at Elephantine) their shows of obedience do not equate to loyalty and their acts of compliance should not be confused with sincerity.

This may be the reason that the language in Ahiqar "occasionally slips into the legally tinged language of accusation and self-vindication"?[31] Rather than institutional wisdom being something to be admired and revered, instead it is satirised in Ahiqar as a consequence of the contrast between what is advised and the tactics used merely to survive. This can account for the fact that the politics of the court emerge so regularly in scholarship that discusses Ahiqar. For example, Wills, who describes Ahiqar as an "anti-court legend" suggests that the story undermines institutional wisdom because:

> l) Nadan is not improved by Ahikar's proverbs, but on the contrary turns on him and plots his downfall; 2) Ahikar inadvertently cooperates in the plot against himself in a hopelessly innocent manner; 3) Ahikar is speechless and helpless in the court of the king; and 4) Ahikar at the end loses his sage-like composure and blasts Nadan[32] … The satire in Ahikar seems to be aimed at demolishing one ideal of wisdom, the pompous court sage, and replacing it with another, the cunning hero.[33]

[31] Weitzman, "Lessons from the Dying": 380.

[32] We should note here that the ending of the narrative is not there in the Elephantine version. In other versions Nadin, suffering from what Greenfield understands as "an overdose of moral instruction," swells up and dies (Greenfield "The Wisdom": 46). For example, compare the Slavonic, Armenian, Syriac, Arabic (Conybeare et al *Aḥiḳar*, 23, 127, 161). The Arabic version is especially unflattering here, describing Nadin as "a blown-out bladder". Here the two-dimensional character Nadin is an example of a type of simplistic, almost slapstick version of retribution. Metaphorically speaking, he "digs a pit" and "falls into it" (Prov 26:27). This, however, is precisely the type of "straightforward sense of retribution" that is satirised here, a type of naivety about how the world works so often betrayed in so-called "wisdom literature" and a nativity about retribution that the character Tobit also embodies but that the book satirises (Micah D. Kiel, *The 'Whole Truth': Rethinking Retribution in the Book of Tobit* (London; New York: T&T Clark, 2012), 152).

[33] Lawrence M. Wills, *The Jew in the Court of a Foreign King: Ancient Jewish Court Legends* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1990), 68.

In light of this observation, we can understand the contrast between the narrative and the proverbs in Ahiqar as so pronounced that it ironically undermines the connections between wisdom and power. If, as in some court narratives, the main protagonist functions as a "dramatization of proverbial wisdom" then Ahiqar's dramatization fails dramatically.[34] Far from being a "foreign personification of wisdom" as Fox designates him, or as a didactic example, the contrast between what is said in the proverbs and what is done in the narrative makes Ahiqar an ironic version of wisdom's personification.[35] Perhaps, therefore Gnuse's designation of Ahiqar as "literature of resistance" is helpful.[36] However, this resistance to the power of a foreign king is cast ironically in order to veil and protect scribes and audiences from the deadly perils of open denunciation of those in power. As Bledsoe argues, given the political context at Elephantine, having had their temple destroyed and being employed by a foreign king, living in a foreign land, "is it a surprise then to find … competing impulses within this seemingly unified treatise on royal power?" or to discover "the harshest critique of royal prerogative is to be found in the most coded language, i.e. the animal fable?"[37] Rather than open criticism, the sayings repeatedly call for restraint in speech and for avoidance. For

[34] Niditch and Doran, "Success Story": 185. Niditch and Doran cite Esther as an example of such a dramatization wherein 'proverbs are lived out by the narrative's cast of characters who do provide that wisdom is the key to success' (Niditch and Doran, "Success Story": 185). However, it is not always the case that so-called "exemplars" of personified wisdom adhere to the authoritative claims expressed, especially if we include Ruth, an example of the foreign woman, so hated by the Proverbs, as an exemplar of wisdom teachings (Laura Quick, 2020, "The Book of Ruth and the Limits of Proverbial Wisdom," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 139/1 (2020) 47—66: 47; Nancy Tan, *The 'Foreignness' of the Foreign Woman in Proverbs 1-9: A Study of the Origin and Development of a Biblical Motif* (Berlin; New York: Walter De Gruyter, 2008); cf. Prov 1—9).

[35] Fox, *Proverbs*, 332.

[36] Robert Gnuse, "From Prison to Prestige: The Hero Who Helps a King in Jewish and Greek Literature," *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 72/1 (2010) 31—45: 44. Scott's observation about subordinate groups and the idea of "trickster" motif in legends (wherein the underdog outwits those in power) is also relevant here in the context of the idea of a foreign king outwitted by his own courtier or cupbearer. As Scott argues,

> Nothing illustrates the veiled cultural resistance of subordinate groups better than what have been termed trickster tales. It would be difficult, I think, to find a peasant, slave, or serf society without a legendary trickster figure, whether in animal or human form. Typically, the trickster makes his successful way through a treacherous environment of enemies out to defeat him … not by his strength but by his wit and cunning (Scott, *Domination*, 162).

What is particularly revealing in Scott's argument here is the idea of the trickster being unable to win in direct confrontation. In the case of Ahiqar, direct confrontation with Esarhaddon would be fatal. Instead, Ahiqar must secure his life using more subtle survival tactics.

[37] Bledsoe, *Wisdom in Distress*, 171.

example, audiences are told "more than all watchfulness watch your mouth" (TAD C. col 6:82). Likewise, a "good vessel" keeps a word in its "heart" and not "outside" (TAD C. col 6:93). "Secrets" are not to be revealed before friends for fear of losing respect (TAD C. Col 9:141).[38] This type of subtle defiance in the face of power is a common response by subordinate groups. It aligns well with Scott's theory of the politics of resistance, wherein he suggests that the "theatrical imperatives that normally prevail in situations of domination produce a public transcript in close conformity with how the dominant group would wish to have things appear" but the dominant "never control the stage absolutely."[39] The term "theatrical" here is fitting given that a key theme that holds together the cautions against speaking too freely and the depiction of Ahiqar's and Nabusumiskun's treatment of Esarhaddon is the idea of performing deference. In this performed, underground resistance to power results in the creation of social spaces that embody the hidden transcript, both in the narrative, and perhaps as a social reality for audiences at Elephantine. As Scott observes, it is "one of the ironies of power relations that the performances required of subordinates can become, in the hands of subordinates, a nearly solid wall making the autonomous life of the powerless opaque to elites."[40] Just as the king is not aware of Nabusumiskun's and Ahiqar's dismissive response to his orders, so too perhaps the Persians were not aware of the way wisdom and power are parodied in Ahiqar amongst audiences at Elephantine.

If we entertain this as a possible way of interpreting the tension created between narrative and proverbs in Ahiqar, what are we to make of the fact that Ahiqar is also one who falls for the "performance" of deference by Nadin? This supposedly wise and skilful scribe whose council, we are repeatedly reminded with the formula, "all Assyria" relied upon has failed to identify what was right in front of him: Nadin's betrayal (TAD C. col 1:12; 2:20,27;

[38] קלל literally means "to be light", rather than "respect". However, here it refers to the idea of being a person of no substance who lacks honor. This word sometimes has a similar sense in Hebrew (Job 40:4; Nah 1:14).
[39] Scott, *Domination*, 4.
[40] Scott, *Domination*, 132.

3:11,15,43; 4:60—61). How is Nadin the villain of the piece, when he is disloyal, yet, Ahiqar and Nabusumiskun – who are also disloyal – are narrated in a favourable manner?

To answer this question a closer examination of the evidence is needed. One interesting aspect of the way that Nadin is portrayed is the through the repeated motif, in various forms, of the refrain "my son who is not my son" (TAD C. col 1:12; 2:22,30). Instead of the usual technique of placing wisdom upon the lips of the "father" for "my son", as occurs commonly in instructional speech, here a bumbling and confused refrain "my son who is not my son" emerges as a stark and ironic contrast with the puffed-up idea of the "wise [scribe]" on whose "counsel and words had all Assyria (relied)" (TAD C. col 2:28). This leads Vayntrub to suggest that through Nadin's "failure to internalize and transmit his uncle's wisdom" Ahiqar points towards a failure of wisdom.[41] This is an interesting argument, and one which aligns well with the possibility that Nadin's characterisation is not only a failure of instructional wisdom, but also a parody of it. Parody is a helpful way of framing the characterisation here, especially in light of the calls for restraint in speech and the idea that one performs deference because, unlike satire or irony, parody allows measurable continuity. Therefore, the proverbs about ingratitude, and disciplining the son, when taken at face value *seem* to form a good commentary on the narrative: "my eyes which I lifted up to you and my heart which I face to you in wisdom … you [m]ake my name into foulness" (TAD C. col 7:105—106; cf. TAD C. col 8:111—125; 12:175—177). However, beyond the mask of sincerity, there is a double-edge and hidden transcript in the presentation of Nadin in Ahiqar. He is not merely a disloyal "son" rather, through his two-dimensional characterisation and complete failure to adhere to the traditional role of the "son" as a passive recipient of instructional wisdom, he symbolises the uselessness of said instructions. Nadin's disloyalty does not matter in the way that the disloyalty toward

[41] Jacqueline Vayntrub, 2016. "The Book of Proverbs and the Idea of Ancient Israelite Education," *Zeitschrift Fur Die Alttestamentliche Wissenschaft* 128/1 (2016) 96—114: 109.

the king on the part of Ahiqar and Nabusumiskun matters because his characterisation is a parody. In contrast, Ahiqar's and Nabusumiskun's disloyalty is about the skill of subtlety needed for survival among subordinates in complex circumstances.

The repetition of formulaic elements, as noted previously, in Ahiqar may serve to bolster this idea concerning survival and the politics of resisting authoritative forms of instruction. This is partially as a consequence of the ways in which oral traditions can function among subordinate groups. As Scott argues,

> Oral traditions, due simply to their means of transmission, offer a kind of seclusion, control, and even anonymity that make them ideal vehicles for cultural resistance…. there is no orthodoxy or center to folk culture since there is no primary text to serve as the measure of heresy. The practical result is that folk culture achieves the anonymity of collective property, constantly being adjusted, revised, abbreviated….[42]

This means that for the diverse array of "authors" behind any oral tradition form a veil, or refuge, through which audiences and performers are protected from accusations. The idea of imagining Ahiqar as something that might be performed at Elephantine is attractive because it might have functioned not merely for entertainment but as a means of strengthening in-group solidarity in the midst of Persian domination.[43] Given the wide range of versions and the internationally popular nature of Ahiqar, any hidden transcripts about the resistance to authoritative wisdom and to power are indeed hidden. Any performance is double-edged. Therefore, having the text itself at Elephantine cannot be treated as defiant: because it is not, or at least not openly. It is merely there as a script for the performance of a well-known story and a (heavily ironic) "nod" to more authoritative traditions.

[42] Scott, *Domination*, 160—161.

[43] Niditch and Doran also examined Ahiqar through the lens of folkloristics alongside Daniel 2 and Genesis 41 (Niditch and Doran, "Success Story": 179—193). It is worth noting here the increasing importance of the theme of orality and performance in Biblical Studies (cf. Vayntrub, "Proverbs": 96—114). Weeks describes Qohleleth as helpful to think of the material as dramatic or performative, arguing that while "Qohelet is not a comedian" … nevertheless "his monologue resembles many modern stand-up routines, moving as they do through different topics with a mixture of anecdotes, one-liners, and maybe even poems" (Weeks, *Ecclesiastes*, 13). Although the comparison with the Biblical material is inexact, the possibility that Ahiqar was performed should not be dismissed without consideration.

In conclusion, this article has argued that power relations are all-important as a means of interpreting the connections between the narrative and the poetic sections of Ahiqar. Through putting the two together and interpreting them as mutually interdependent a charged dialectic of interpretation is created. At the heart of this tension is the politics of deference, but ultimately of resistance to power. This resistance, however, was hidden in Ahiqar, embedded in ironic twists on traditionally expected roles, in the delicacy of the framing of Ahiqar's and Nabusumiskun's disloyalty with regard to the command to kill Ahiqar, and in the display of obedience, deference, and loyalty that is performed in the face of the king's power, a power perhaps analogous to that of the Persians at the time of writing and performance. This performed deference ought not to prompt the interpretation that the display is heartfelt and sincere. Nevertheless, without an option openly to speak truth to power, audiences at Elephantine must use subtlety and restraint to navigate the complexities of life as subordinates: for "a bird is a word and he who sends it forth is a person of no intelligence (לב)" (TAD C col 6:82).