



Islamic Folklore
The Life of Ibrahim ben Adham
(718-782)
Sufi Saint from Balkh Afghanistan
Bilingual Version

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ISLAMIC FOLKLORE THE LIFE OF IBRAHIM BEN ADHAM (718-782) SUFI SAINT FROM BALKH AFGHANISTAN BILINGUAL VERSION

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The Life of Ibrahim ben Adham

English Version

Chapter 1

Ibrahim Ben Adham was originally Prince of the city of Balkh, and had control of the riches of many provinces. One night when he was in bed he heard a sound of footsteps on the roof of his palace. "Who are you on the roof?" he cried out. An answer came, "I have lost a camel, and I am looking for it on this roof." "Well," he said, "you must be a fool for your pains, to look for a camel on a roof." "And thou, witless man," returned the voice, "is it while seated on a throne of gold that thou expectest to find the Most High? That is far madder than to seek a camel on a roof." At these words, fear seized the heart of Ibrahim, who spent the rest of the night in prayer, till the early dawn. The next morning he took his seat upon his throne, round which were ranged all the grandees of his kingdom and his guards, according to their rank, in the usual manner.

All of a sudden Ibrahim perceived in the midst of the crowd a majestic figure, who advanced towards him unseen by the rest. When he had come near, Ibrahim asked him, "Who art thou, and what hast thou come to seek here?" "I am a stranger," he answered, "and I wish to stay at this inn." "But this is not an inn," answered Ibrahim, "it is my own house." "To whom did it belong before thee?" inquired the stranger. "To my father." "And before thy father, to whom did it belong?" "To my grandfather." "And where are thy ancestors now?" "They are dead." "Well then, is this house anything but an hotel, where the coming guest succeeds to the departing one?" So saying, the stranger began to withdraw. Ibrahim rose, ran toward him, and said, "I adjure thee to

stop, in the name of the Most High." The stranger paused. "Who art thou," cried Ibrahim, "who hast lit this fire in my soul?" "I am Khizr, O Ibrahim. It is time for thee to awake." So saying, he disappeared. Ibrahim, pierced with sorrow, awoke from his trance, and felt a keen disdain for all earthly grandeur.

The next morning, being mounted and going to the chase, he heard a voice which said, "O Ibrahim, thou wast not created for this." He looked round him on all sides, but could see no one, and went on again. Presently again the voice was heard, proceeding, as it were, from his saddle, "O Ibrahim, thou wast not created for this." Struck to the heart, Ibrahim exclaimed, "It is the Lord who commands; His servant will obey." He thereupon dismounted, exchanged clothes with a shepherd whom he discovered close by, and began to lead the life of a wandering dervish, and became famous for his devoutness and austerity.

Chapter 2

After some years, he undertook the pilgrimage to Mecca, and joined a caravan which was bound thither. The news of his coming having reached the chief men of the city, they all came out to meet him. Some of their servants, going on, met Ibrahim (whom, of course, they did not know), and asked him if Ibrahim ben Adham was approaching. "Why do you ask me?" he said. "Because the chief men of the city are come out to meet him." "And why make so much ado about that man," he said, "who is a sinner and an infidel?" "What right hast thou to speak thus of him?" they cried; and, seizing him, handled him roughly. After having beaten him they went on their way. Ibrahim said to himself, "Thou hast had thy deserts." When he was recognised afterwards, an ample apology was made to him, and he was conducted to Mecca, where he remained several years, supporting himself by money earned by his daily toil.

When Ibrahim left Balkh, he had a son who was then a child. When the latter became a young man, he asked, "Where is my father?" Whereupon his mother told him all that had occurred to his father. "Well," said the youth, "where is he to be found now?" "At Mecca," his mother answered. "Very well, I will go to Mecca," he replied, "and find my father." He set out, and when he arrived there, he found in the sacred precinct surrounding the Kaaba many fakirs clothed with rags. "Do you know Ibrahim ben Adham?" he asked them. "He is one of ourselves," one of them answered; "he has gone to gather and sell wood wherewith to buy bread and bring it us." The younger Ibrahim immediately went out of the city to seek his father. Presently he found an old man carrying a bundle of wood on his head, whom he recognised as his father. At this sight he was near weeping, but controlled himself, and walked behind him unobserved.

As for Ibrahim ben Adham, he carried his wood to the bazaar, sold it, and bought bread, which he took to his fellow-fakirs, and then performed his devotions. On the other hand, his son did not disclose himself, for he feared that to do so suddenly would cause his father to fly.

The next morning one of Ibrahim ben Adham's fellow-fakirs rose and went to his son's tent. He found the young man reading the Koran and weeping. The fakir advanced and saluted him, asking, "Who art thou? Whence comest thou? Whose son art thou?" "I am the son of Ibrahim ben Adham," replied the young man, "and I was never able to see my father until now; but I fear that if I make myself known to him, he will repulse me brusquely and flee away." "Come," said the fakir, "I will myself lead you to him."

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