

# PTAH-HOTEP, THE WISDOM OF EGYPT

*Michiel Schillborn van Veen, FRC  
Grand Master of the Dutch Language Jurisdiction*

Liberty, equality, and fraternity are the foundation stones of modern France. And these three ethical principles are the basis of what we today consider universal human rights and civilization.

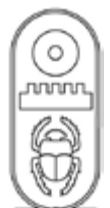
The French philosophers of the eighteenth century saw the inequality of a “noble” or “base” birth as an evil thing. They also condemned slavery and servitude. Revolutionary France was the first country to abolish slavery. Under the belief that all men and women are descended from Adam and Eve, every human being is family. We are all brothers and sisters. These ideas were of course not new. In fact, they are of all times. As far as we can ascertain, hunter-gatherers have always lived as groups of free and equal people. Merit was based on age, wisdom, and personal achievement. There were frequent clashes between groups, and also

ties of love and friendship. Living in bigger groups, settling in villages and cities, led to more clashes. Learning how to coexist peacefully became more and more urgent. The traditional pieces of advice given by the elders to the young became rules. Rules became laws. There lies the basis of civilization and also of politics.

The ancient Egyptians were among the first people to write down the advice of their elders. When we think of Egypt, we see pyramids, we see temples, we see a people deeply interested in life after death. But ancient Egypt was much more than that. It was a vibrant, lively society with a complex structure. It was a society that was in many ways far ahead of its time. Almost every student of the esoteric sciences knows of the Egyptian *Book of the Dead*. But let us today turn to the Egyptian books for living people.



*The weighing of the heart from the Book of the Dead of Ani, ca. 1250 BCE.*



Ethics are ultimately the only base upon which we can form a society. Not many people know that the very first books on ethics were actually written in Egypt. They called these books of wisdom *sebayt*, which could be translated as “teachings.” These ancient Egyptian books were texts that were not only studied by scholars. They were used by schoolchildren to practice writing hieroglyphs. In this way, the masters made sure that these ethical tractates were known by everyone who could read and write, which included priests, clerks, officers, and administrative workers – both men and women – and even some farmers could read and write, and they knew these texts by heart. In these books of wisdom it is explained what the ideal relations should be between people. Here it is described how people can live together and be a society. These were among the very first rules of ethics that were written down anywhere in the world. And it is surprising how relevant these books still are. Even we, born many thousands of years later, in a world completely different from ancient Egypt, can learn from these simple rules, that are still relevant.



*Ptah-Hotep*

One of the oldest surviving books is called *Instruction of Ptah-Hotep*. Ptah-Hotep was the mayor of a town or village and he became grand vizier (prime minister) under Pharaoh Isesi in the Fifth Dynasty. Ptah-Hotep lived ca. 2375 BCE. Many Egyptians believed that the book itself was much older and they called it *The First Book*.

Some call the Americas “The New World” and Europe “The Old World.” However, 4,400 years ago there existed only four or five cities in the whole of Europe, mainly in Greece and Bulgaria. In England, Stonehenge was not yet built. The Netherlands were still inhabited by hunter-gatherers. People in my country used stone axes and bone ice-skates and built wooden roads through the moors.

But the Egyptians, they were already making their perfect pyramids, a feat that was only possible in a land with a strong government and a cohesive social structure. It is believed by many that these pyramids were not built by slaves, but by farmers in their free time. On some stones in the Great Pyramid archaeologists have found writing in red ink. One stone says: “We the team from the left bank village arrived with this stone two days before the team of the right bank village! We won this year.”

Now, let us return to that time with an exercise. Please relax. Close your eyes. Imagine yourself to be twelve or thirteen years old. You are in school, not a modern

school, of course. You are sitting under an awning, cross legged. You have a brush, a small well of black ink, and a large piece of a broken pot to write on: papyrus is way too expensive for children's practice. Your teacher, an old friendly priest, starts dictating slowly:

“Be not proud because you are learned; but discourse with the ignorant person, as with the sage. For no limit can be set to skill, neither is there any craftsperson that possesses full advantages. Fair speech is more rare than the emerald that is found by a maiden on the pebbles.

“If you find yourself in an argument with one who is well disposed and wiser than you, let your arms fall, bend your back, be not angry with them if they agree not with you. Refrain from speaking angrily; oppose them not at any time when they speak. If they address you as one ignorant of the matter, your humbleness shall bear away their contentions.

“If you find yourself in an argument with one who is equal in knowledge, keep not silence when they say anything that is evil; so shall you be wiser than them.

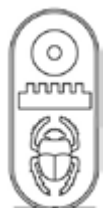
Great will be the applause on the part of the listeners, and your name shall be good.

“If you find yourself in an argument with a poor person, that is to say: not your equal, be not scornful of them because they are ignorant. Let them alone; then shall they confound themselves. Question them not to tease them, neither pour out your anger upon them that oppose you. It is shameful to confuse a small mind. If you be about to do that, overcome it as a thing unworthy of princes.

“If you are among people, make love the beginning and the end of your heart. One that knows not their course shall say in themselves seeing you: ‘They conduct themselves orderly and become the owner of wealth; I shall copy their conduct.’ Your name shall be good, though you speak not; your body shall be fed; your face shall be seen among your neighbors; you shall be provided with what you lack. As to the person whose heart obeys their belly, they cause disgust in place of love. Their heart is uneasy, their body is gross, they are insolent toward those endowed of the Divine. They that obey their belly has an enemy.



*From the collection of the Rosicrucian Egyptian Museum. The Mesbet Coffin, dated ca. 2000 BCE.*







*The mystical Spell 17, from the Book of the Dead of Ani.*

“Cause not fear among people; for this the Divine punishes likewise. There is a person that says: ‘Power is to be obtained by causing people to fear me,’ and they say: ‘I seize for myself that which I see.’ Thus a person speaks, and they are smitten down. There is another person that gives to those that have not; they cause people no dread. For it happens that what the Divine has commanded, that thing comes to pass. Live therefore in the house of kindness and people shall come and give gifts of themselves.

“Let not a person be envious who has no children; let them be neither downcast nor quarrelsome on account of it. For a father, though great, may be grieved; as to the mother of children, she has less peace than any other. Verily, each person is created to their destiny by the Divine, who is the Chief of a tribe; be trustful in following It.

“If you be of low upbringing, serve a wise person, that all your actions may be good before the Divine. If you be high born and know a person of low account that has been advanced in rank, be not haughty toward them; but honor those who have

been advanced, according to that which they have become. Behold, riches come not of themselves; it is their rule for those who desire them: if they stir them and collect them themselves, the Divine shall make them prosperous; but It shall make them poor, if they be slothful.

“Follow your heart during your lifetime; do not do more than is commanded. Diminish not the time of following the heart; it is abhorred by the soul that its time of relaxation be taken away. Shorten not the daytime more than is needful to maintain your house. When riches are gained, follow your heart; for riches are of no avail if one is weary.

“Someone who reckons accounts all day passes not one happy moment. One that gladdens their heart all day provides not for their house. The bowman hits the mark, as the steersman reaches land, by diversity of aim. One that obeys their heart shall command.”

And now, please return to the present day.

This was just an introduction. We have heard only a few of the forty-three sayings

of Ptah-Hotep. I made a small selection from the wisdom book. But this will, I hope, have given you an insight in how practical these pieces of advice are. Most of these sayings are still applicable to the days that we live in.

Some people like to talk about “the timeless wisdom of Egypt” and pretend that they are profound thinkers. Some people even say this to imply that they know secret techniques of black magic, and try to cause fear with their powers. But these people actually know nothing of what they speak. The true wisdom of Egypt states: “Cause not fear among people; for this the Divine punishes likewise.” If you cause fear then people will hate you, so that you yourself will have to live in fear. But if you give to those who have less than you, you will be loved.

The books of wisdom of the ancient Egyptians were not about magic or gaining power. They are filled with practical advice about how to live together in harmony, how

to organize your household and your leisure time, how to deal with the relationships between people of different backgrounds, how to deal with the disappointment of not having children, even how to become rich and be happy at the same time. And from these texts we can see that these people from 4,400 years ago were not so very different from us. They had similar problems, the same questions to cope with, the same temptations as we are confronted with today. While our modern temptations can be different, the principle, “One that obeys their belly has an enemy,” applies to all addictions. And so it is with so many of these lessons. The circumstances have changed, but the people are still the same and the underlying rules of conduct still apply.

And one sentence is the most important advice. It is repeated over and over. This is the true timeless wisdom of ancient Egypt: “Obey your heart.”



*A coffin fragment in the Rosicrucian Egyptian Museum.*

