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Ancient Egypt

The Instruction of Ptah-hotep

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Ptah-hotep, vizier of the Fifth Dynasty (attributed)

Battiscombe Gunn (1906)

Credits

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About:

The Instruction of Ptah-hotep is one of the oldest wisdom texts in the world. Ascribed to Ptah-hotep, vizier of King Djedkare Isesi of the Fifth Dynasty (around 2400 BCE), it has come down to us mainly in the Prisse Papyrus, copied about 1800 BCE and now in the National Library of France.

Old and weary, the vizier asks the king for leave to instruct his son, who will succeed him, and leaves him thirty-seven maxims.

The counsels deal with humility ("Be not proud because thou art learned; but discourse with the ignorant man, as with the sage"), justice, restraint in speech, conduct at the table of the great, respect for one's wife, obedience to one's father, and truth, which "is great and its effect endureth".

The same papyrus preserves the end of another instruction, that of Ke'gemni, which is included here. The English version is Battiscombe Gunn's, published in 1906.

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THE INSTRUCTION OF PTAH-HOTEP

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The Instruction of the Governor of his City, the Vizier, Ptah-hotep, in the Reign of King of Upper and Lower Egypt, Isosi, living forever, to the end of Time.

A. The Governor of his City, the Vizier, Ptah-hotep, he said: "O Prince my Lord, the end of life is at hand; old age descendeth—upon me—; feebleness cometh, and childishness is renewed. He—that is old—lieth down in misery every day. The eyes are small; the ears are deaf. Energy is diminished, the heart hath no rest.

The mouth is silent, and he speaketh no word; the heart stoppeth, and he remembereth not yesterday. The bones are painful throughout the body; good turneth into evil. All taste departeth. These things doeth old age for mankind, being evil in all things. The nose is stopped, and he breatheth not for weakness (?), whether standing or sitting.

"Command thy servant, therefore, to make over my, princely authority—to my son—. Let me speak unto him the words of them that hearken to the counsel of the men of old time; those that once hearkened unto the gods. I pray thee, let this thing be done, that sin may be banished from among persons of understanding, that thou may enlighten the lands."

Said the Majesty of this God: "Instruct him, then, in the words of old time; may he be a wonder unto the children of princes, that they may enter and hearken with him. Make straight all their hearts; and discourse

with him, without causing weariness."

B. Here begin the proverbs of fair speech, spoken by the Hereditary Chief, the Holy Father, Beloved of the God, the Eldest Son of the King, of his body, the Governor of his City, the Vizier, Ptah-hotep, when instructing the ignorant in the knowledge of exactness in fair speaking; the glory of him that obeyeth, the shame of him that transgresseth them. He said unto his son:

1. Be not proud because thou art learned; but discourse with the ignorant man, as with the sage. For no limit can be set to skill, neither is there any craftsman that possesseth full advantages. Fair speech is more rare than the emerald that is found by slave-maidens on the pebbles.

2. If thou find an arguer talking, one that is well disposed and wiser than thou, let thine arms fall, bend thy back, be not angry with him if he agree (?) not with thee. Refrain from speaking evilly; oppose him not at any time when he speaketh. If he address thee as one ignorant of the matter, thine humbleness shall bear away his contentions.

3. If thou find an arguer talking, thy fellow, one that is within thy reach, keep not silence when he saith aught that is evil; so shalt thou be wiser than he. Great will be the applause on the part of the listeners, and thy name shall be good in the knowledge of princes.

4. If thou find an arguer talking, a poor man, that is to say not thine equal, be not scornful toward him because he is lowly. Let him alone; then shall he confound himself. Question him not to please thine heart, neither pour

out thy wrath upon him that is before thee; it is shameful to confuse a mean mind. If thou be about to do that which is in thine heart, overcome it as a thing rejected of princes.

5. If thou be a leader, as one directing the conduct of the multitude, endeavor always to be gracious, that thine own conduct be without defect. Great is Truth, appointing a straight path; never hath it been overthrown since the reign of Osiris. One that oversteppeth the laws shall be punished. Overstepping is by the covetous man; but degradations (?) bear off his riches.

Never hath evil-doing, brought its venture safe to port. For he saith, "I will obtain by myself for myself," and saith not, "I will obtain because I am allowed." But the limits of justice are steadfast; it is that which a man repeateth from his father.

6. Cause not fear among men; for—this—the God punisheth likewise. For there is a man that saith, "Therein is life"; and he is bereft of the bread of his mouth. There is a man that saith, "Power—is therein"; and he saith, "I seize for myself that which I perceive." Thus a man speaketh, and he is smitten down. It is another that attaineth by giving unto him that hath not.

Never hath that which men have prepared for come to pass; for what the God hath commanded, even that thing cometh to pass. Live, therefore, in the house of kindliness, and men shall come and give gifts of themselves.

7. If thou be among the guests of a man that is greater than thou, accept that which he giveth thee, putting it to thy lips. If thou look at him that is before thee—thine host—pierce him not with many glances. It is abhorred

of the soul to stare at him. Speak not until he address thee; one knoweth not what may be evil in his opinion.

Speak when he questioneth thee; so shall thy speech be good in his opinion. The noble who sitteth before food divideth it as his soul moveth him; he giveth unto him that he would favour—it is the custom of the evening meal. It is his soul that guideth his hand. It is the noble that bestoweth, not the underling that attaineth.

Thus the eating of bread is under the providence of the God; he is an ignorant man that disputeth it.

8. If thou be an emissary sent from one noble to another, be exact after the manner of him that sent thee, give his message even as he hath said it. Beware of making enmity by thy words, setting one noble against the other by perverting truth. Overstep it not, neither repeat that which any man, be he prince or peasant, saith in opening the heart; it is abhorrent to the soul.

9. If thou have ploughed, gather thine harvest in the field, and the God shall make it great under thine hand. Fill not thy mouth at any neighbor's table . . . If a crafty man be the possessor of wealth, he stealeth like a crocodile from the priests.

Let not a man be envious that hath no children; let him be neither downcast nor quarrelsome on account of it. For a father, though great, may be grieved; as to the mother of children, she hath less peace than another. Verily, each man is created— to his destiny—by the God, who is the chief of a tribe, trustful in following him.

10. If thou be lowly, serve a wise man, that all thine actions may be good before the God. If thou have known a man of none account that hath been advanced in rank, be not haughty toward him on account of that which thou knowest concerning him; but honour him that hath been advanced, according to that which he hath become.

Behold, riches come not of themselves; it is their rule for him that desireth them. If he bestir him and collect them himself, the God shall make him prosperous; but He shall punish him, if he be slothful.

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

12. If thou wouldest be a wise man, beget a son for the pleasing of the God. If he make straight his course after thine example, if he arrange thine affairs in due order, do unto him all that is good, for thy son is he, begotten of thine own soul. Sunder not thine heart from him, or thine own begotten shall curse—thee—.

If he be heedless and trespass thy rules of conduct, and is violent; if every speech that cometh from his mouth be a vile word; then beat thou him, that his talk may be fitting. Keep him from those that make light of that which is commanded, for it is they that make him rebellious.

And they that are guided go not astray, but they that lose their bearings cannot find a straight course.

13. If thou be in the chamber of council, act always according to the steps enjoined on thee at the beginning of the day. Be not absent, or thou shalt be expelled; but be ready in entering and making report. Wide is the seat of one that hath made address. The council chamber acteth by strict rule; and all its plans are in accordance with method. It is the God that advanceth one to a seat therein; the like is not done for elbowers.

14. If thou be among people, make for thyself love, the beginning and end of the heart. One that knoweth not his course shall say in himself—seeing thee—, "He that ordereth himself duly becometh the owner of wealth; I shall copy his conduct."

Thy name shall be good, though thou speak not; thy body shall be fed; thy face shall be—seen—among thy neighbors; thou shalt be provided with what thou lackest. As to the man whose heart obeyeth his belly, he causeth disgust in place of love. His heart is wretched (?), his body is gross (?), he is insolent toward those endowed of the God. He that obeyeth his belly hath an enemy.

15. Report thine actions without concealment; discover thy conduct when in council with thine overlord. It is not evil for the envoy that his report be not answered. "Yea, I know it," by the prince; for that which he knoweth includeth not—this. If he—the prince—think that he will oppose him on account of it,—he thinketh—"He will be silent because I have spoken."

16. If thou be a leader, cause that the rules that thou hast enjoined be carried out; and do all things as one that remembereth the days coming after, when speech availeth not. Be not lavish of favours; it leadeth to servility (?), producing slackness.

17. If thou be a leader, be gracious when thou hearkenest unto the speech of a suppliant. Let him not hesitate to deliver himself of that which he hath thought to tell thee; but be desirous of removing his injury. Let him speak freely, that the thing for which he hath come to thee may be done. If he hesitate to open his heart, it is said, "Is it because he—the judge—doeth the wrong that no entreaties are made to him concerning it by those to whom it happeneth?" But a well taught heart hearkeneth readily.

18. If thou desire to continue friendship in any abode wherein thou interest, be it as master, as brother, or as friend; wheresoever thou goest, beware of consorting with women. No place prospereth wherein that is done. Nor is it prudent to take part in it; a thousand men have been ruined for the pleasure of a little time short as a dream.

Even death is reached thereby; it is a wretched thing. As for the evil liver, one leaveth him for what he doeth, he is avoided. If his desires be not gratified, he regardeth (?) no laws.

19. If thou desire that thine actions may be good, save thyself from all malice, and beware of the quality of covetousness, which is a grievous inner (?) Malady. Let it not chance that thou fall thereinto. It setteth at variance fathers-in-law and the kinsmen of the daughter-in-law; it sundereth the wife and the husband.

It gathereth unto itself all evils; it is the girdle of all wickedness. But the man that is just flourisheth; truth goes in his footsteps, and he maketh habitations therein, not in the dwelling of covetousness.

20. Be not covetous as touching shares, in seizing that which is not thine own property. Be not covetous toward thy neighbors; for with a gentleman praise availeth more than might. He—that is covetous—cometh empty

from among his neighbours, being void of the persuasion of speech. One hath remorse for even a little covetousness when his belly cooleth.

21. If thou wouldest be wise, provide for thine house, and love thy wife that is in thine arms. Fill her stomach, clothe her back; oil is the remedy of her limbs. Gladden her heart during thy lifetime, for she is an estate profitable unto its lord. Be not harsh, for gentleness mastereth her more than strength. Give (?) to her that for which she sigheth and that toward which her eye looketh; so shall thou keep her in thy house. . . .

22. Satisfy thine hired servants out of such things as thou hast; it is the duty of one that hath been favoured of the God. In sooth, it is hard to satisfy hired servants. For one saith, 'He is a lavish person; one knoweth not that which may come—from him." But on the morrow he thinketh, 'We is a person of exactitude—parsimony—content therein." And when favours have been shown unto servants, they say, "We go." Peace dwelleth not in that town wherein dwell servants that are wretched.

23. Repeat not extravagant speech, neither listen thereto; for it is the utterance of a body heated by wrath. When such speech is repeated to thee, hearken not thereto, look to the ground. Speak not regarding it, that he that is before thee may know wisdom. If thou be commanded to do a theft, bring it to pass that the command be taken off thee, for it is a thing hateful according to law. That which destroyeth a vision is the veil over it.

24. If thou wouldest be a wise man, and one sitting in council with his overlord, apply thine heart unto perfection. Silence is more profitable unto thee than abundance of speech. Consider how thou may be opposed

by an expert that speaketh in council. It is a foolish thing to speak on every kind of work, for he that disputeth thy words shall put them unto proof.

25. If thou be powerful, make thyself to be honoured for knowledge and for gentleness. Speak with authority, that is, not as if following injunctions, for he that is humble—when highly placed—falleth into errors. Exalt not thine heart, that it be not brought low. Be not silent, but beware of interruption and of answering words with heat. Put it far from thee; control thyself. The wrathful heart speaketh fiery words; it darteth out at the man of peace that approacheth, stopping his path.

One that reckoneth accounts all the day passeth not an happy moment. One that gladdeneth his heart all the day provideth not for his house. The bowman hitteth the mark, as the steersman reacheth land, by diversity of aim. He that obeyeth his heart shall command.

26. Let not a prince be hindered when he is occupied; neither oppress the heart of him that is already laden. For he shall be hostile toward one that delayeth him, but shall bare his soul unto one that loveth him. The disposal of souls is with the God, and that which He loveth is His creation. Set out, therefore, after a violent quarrel; be at peace with him that is hostile unto—thee—his opponent. It is such souls that make love to grow.

27. Instruct a noble in such things as be profitable unto him; cause that he be received among men. Let his satisfaction fall on his master, for thy provision dependeth upon his will. By reason of it thy belly shall be satisfied; thy back will be clothed thereby. Let him receive thine heart, that thine house may flourish and thine honour—if thou wish it to flourish—thereby.

He shall extend thee a kindly hand. Further, he shall implant the love of thee in the bodies of thy friends. Forsooth, it is a soul loving to hearken.

28. If thou be the son of a man of the priesthood, and an envoy to conciliate the multitude. . . . speak thou without favouring one side. Let it not be said: "His conduct is that of the nobles, favouring one side in his speech." Turn thine aim toward exact judgments.

29. If thou have been gracious at a former time, having forgiven a man to guide him aright, shun him, remind him not after the first day that he hath been silent to thee—concerning it.

30. If thou be great, after being of none account, and hast gotten riches after squalour, being foremost in these in the city, and hast knowledge concerning useful matters, so that promotion is come unto thee; then swathe not thine heart in thine hoard, for thou art become the steward of the endowments of the God. Thou art not the last; another shall be thine equal, and to him shall come the like-fortune and station.

31. Bend thy back unto thy chief, thine overseer in the King's palace, for thine house dependeth upon his wealth, and thy wages in their season. How foolish is one that quarrelleth with his chief, for one liveth only while he is gracious. . . .

Plunder not the houses of tenants; neither steal the things of a friend, lest he accuse thee in thine bearing, which thrusteth back the heart. If he know of it, he will do thee an injury. Quarrelling in place of friendship is a foolish thing.

32. —Concerning unnatural sin.

33. If thou wouldest seek out the nature of a friend, ask it not of any companion of his; but pass a time with him alone, that thou injure not his affairs. Debate with him after a season; test his heart in an occasion of speech. When he hath told thee his past life, he hath made an opportunity that thou may either be ashamed for him or be familiar with him.

Be not reserved with him when he openeth speech, neither answer him after a scornful manner. Withdraw not thyself from him, neither interrupt (?) him whose matter is not yet ended, whom it is possible to benefit.

34. Let thy face be bright what time thou livest. That which goeth into the storehouse must come out therefrom; and bread is to be shared. He that is grasping in entertainment shall himself have an empty belly; he that causeth strife cometh himself to sorrow. Take not such an one for thy companion. It is a man's kindly acts that are remembered of him in the years after his life.

35. Know well thy merchants; for when thine affairs are in evil case, thy good repute among thy friends is a channel (?) which is filled. It is more important than the dignities of a man; and the wealth of one passeth to another. The good repute of a man's son is a glory unto him; and a good character is for remembrance.

36. Correct chiefly; instruct conformably—therewith. Vice must be drawn out that virtue may remain. Nor is this a matter of misfortune, for one that is a gainsayer becometh a strifemaker.

37. If thou make a woman to be ashamed, wanton of heart, not known by her townfolk, to be falsely placed, be kind unto her for a space, send her not away, give her to eat. The wantonness of her heart shall esteem thy

guidance.

C. If thou obey these things that I have said unto thee, all thy demeanour shall be of the best; for verily, the quality of truth is among their excellences. Set the memory of them in the mouths of the people; for their proverbs are good.

Nor shall any word that hath here been set down cease out of this land for ever, but shall be made a pattern whereby princes shall speak well. They—my words—shall instruct a man how he shall speak, after he hath heard them; yea, he shall become as one skillful in obeying, excellent in speaking, after he hath heard them.

Good fortune shall befall him, for he shall be of the highest rank. He shall be gracious to the end of his life; he shall be contented always. His knowledge shall be his guide (?) into a place of security, wherein he shall prosper while on earth. The scholar shall be content in his knowledge.

As to the prince, in his turn, forsooth, his heart shall be happy, his tongue made straight. And—in these proverbs—his lips shall speak, his eyes shall see, and his ears shall hear, that which is profitable for his son, so that he deal justly, void of deceit.

38. A splendid thing is the obedience of an obedient son; he cometh in and listeneth obediently.

Excellent in hearing, excellent in speaking, is every man that obeyeth what is noble, and the obedience of an obeyer is a noble thing.

Obedience is better than all things that are; it maketh good-will.

How good it is that a son should take that from his father by which he hath reached old age—obedience.

That which is desired by the God is obedience; disobedience is abhorred of the God.

Verily, it is the heart that maketh its master to obey or to disobey; for the safe and sound life of a man are his heart.

It is the obedient man that obeyeth what is said; he that loveth to obey, the same shall carry out commands.

He that obeyeth becometh one obeyed.

It is good indeed when a son obeyeth his father; and he-his father-that hath spoken hath great joy of it. Such a son shall be mild as a master, and he that heareth him shall obey him that hath spoken. He shall be comely in body and honoured by his father. His memory shall be in the mouths of the living, those upon earth, as long as they exist.

39. Let a son receive the word of his father, not being heedless of any rule of his. Instruct thy son—thus;—for the obedient man is one that is perfect in the opinion of princes. If he direct his mouth by what hath been enjoined him. watchful and obedient, thy son shall be wise, and his going seemly. Heedlessness leadeth into disobedience on the morrow; but understanding shall establish him. As for the fool, he shall be crushed.

40. As for the fool, devoid of obedience, he doeth nothing. Knowledge he regardeth as ignorance. profitable things are hurtful things. He doeth all kinds of errors, so that he is rebuked therefor every day. He liveth in death therewith; it is his food. At chattering speech he marvelleth, as at the wisdom of princes, living in death every day. He is shunned because of his misfortunes, by reason of the multitude of afflictions that cometh upon]him every day.

41. A son that hearkeneth is as a Follower of Horus. He is good after he hearkeneth; he groweth old, he reacheth honour and reverence. He repeated in like manner to his sons and daughters, so renewing the instruction of his father. Each man instructeth as did his begetter, repeating it unto his children.

Let them—in turn—speak with their sons and daughters, that they may be famous in their deeds. Let that which thou speaketh implant true things and just in the life of thy children. Then the highest authority shall arrive, and sins depart—from them.

And such men as see these things shall say, "Surely that man hath spoken to good purpose," and they shall do likewise; or, "But surely that man was experienced." And all people shall declare, "It is they that shall direct the multitude; dignities are not complete without them."

Take not my word away, neither add one; set not one in the place of another. Beware of opening . . . in thyself.

Be wary of speech when a learned man hearkeneth unto thee; desire to be established for good in the mouth of those that hear thee speaking. If thou have entered as an expert, speak with exact (?) lips, that thy conduct may be seemly.

42. Be thine heart overflowing; but refrain thy mouth. Let thy conduct be exact while amongst nobles, and seemly before thy lord, doing that which he hath commanded. Such a son shall speak unto them that hearken to him; moreover, his begetter shall be favoured. Apply thine heart, what time thou speakest, to saying things such that the nobles who listen declare, "How excellent is that which cometh out of his mouth!"

43. Carry out the behest of thy lord to thee. How good is the teaching of a man's father, for he hath come from him, who hath spoken of his son while he was yet unborn; and that which is done for him—the son—is more than that which is commanded him. Forsooth, a good son is of the gift of the God; he doeth more than is enjoined on him, he doeth right, and putteth his heart into all his goings.

D. If now thou attain thy position, the body shall flourish, the King shall be content in all that thou doest, and thou shalt gather years of life not fewer than I have passed upon earth. I have gathered even fivescore and ten years of life, for the King hath bestowed upon me favours more than upon my forefathers; this because I wrought truth and justice for the King unto mine old age.

It Is Finished
From Its Beginning To Its End
Even As Found In Writing.

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THE INSTRUCTION OF KE'GEMNI

✦

1. The cautious man flourisheth, the exact one is praised; the innermost chamber openeth unto the man of silence. Wide is the seat of the man gentle of speech; but knives are prepared against one that forceth a path, that he advance not, save in due season.

2. If thou sit with a company of people, desire not the bread that thou likest; short is the time of restraining the heart, and gluttony is an abomination; therein is the quality of a beast. A handful of water quencheth the thirst, and a mouthful of melon supporteth the heart. A good thing standeth for goodness, but some small thing standeth for plenty. A base man is he that is governed by his belly; he departeth only when he is no longer able to fill full his belly in men's houses.

3. If thou sit with a glutton, eat with him, then depart (?).

If thou drink with a drunkard, accept—drink—and his heart shall be satisfied.

Refuse not meat when with a greedy man. Take that which he giveth thee; set it not on one side, thinking that it will be a courteous thing.

4. If a man be lacking in good fellowship, no speech hath any influence over him. He is sour of face toward the glad-hearted that are kindly to him; he is a grief unto his mother and his friends; and all men—cry—, "Let thy name be known; thou art silent in thy mouth when thou art addressed!"

5. Be not haughty because of thy might in the midst of thy young soldiers. Beware of making strife, for one knoweth not the things that the God will do when He punisheth.

The Vizier caused his sons and daughters to be summoned, when he had finished the rules of the conduct of men. And they marvelled when they came to him. Then he said unto them, "Hearken unto everything that is in writing in this book, even as I have said it in adding unto profitable sayings." And they cast themselves on their bellies, and they read it, even as it was in writing. And it was better in their opinion than anything in this land unto its limits.

Now they were living when His Majesty, the King of upper and lower Egypt, Heuni, departed, and His Majesty, the King of upper and lower Egypt, Senforu, was enthroned as a gracious king over the whole of this land.

Then was Ke'gemni made Governor of his city and Vizier.

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