

Elders' Advice to Their Successors

(2250, 2450 BCE)

1955. *Ancient Near Eastern Texts Relating to the Old Testament*. Edited by James B. Pritchard and Translated by Albrecht Goetze. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

1976. *Readings in Ancient History: From Gilgamesh to Diocletian*. Edited by Nels Bailkey. Lexington, MA: D.C. Heath and Company.

One form of text that survives is the "instruction." This was a document of advice written by an elder to his son or successor, by priests to future priests, by government officials to lesser administrators, and by pharaohs to their heirs. The first document was written during Egypt's First Intermediate Period, a period of chaos lasting from around 2250 B.C.E. until 2052 B.C.E. The author is supposedly Wahkare, pharaoh and father of Merikare, who became the next ruler. The second document was written about 2450 B.C.E. and found in a tomb from the period known as the Old Kingdom. The author is the vizier (chief advisor) Ptah-hotep, who is writing to his son. Both sources help us understand the prevalent values and attitudes in different periods of Egyptian history.

The Instruction for King Merikare

If thou findest a man . . . whose adherents are many in total, and he is gracious in the sight of his partisans, and he is excitable, a talker -- remove him, kill him, wipe out his memory, destroy his faction, banish the memory of him and of his adherents who love him. The contentious man is a disturbance to citizens: he produces two factions among the youth. If thou findest that the citizens adhere to him, denounce him in the presence of the court, and remove him. He is also a traitor. A talker is an exciter of a city. Divert the multitude and suppress its heat.

Be a craftsman in speech, so that thou mayest be strong, for the tongue is a sword to a man, and speech is more valorous than any fighting. No one can circumvent the skillful of heart. They who know his wisdom do not attack him, and no misfortune occurs where he is. Truth comes to him fully brewed, in accordance with the sayings of the ancestors.

Copy thy fathers and thy ancestors. Behold, their words remain in writing. Open, that thou mayest read and copy their wisdom. Thus the skilled man becomes learned. Be not evil: patience is good. Make thy memorial to last through the love of thee. God will be praised as thy reward, praises because of thy goodness and prayers for thy health.

Respect the noble and make thy people to prosper. Establish thy boundaries and thy frontier-patrol. It is good to act for the future. Advance thy great men, so that they may carry out thy laws. He who is rich does not show partiality in his own house. He is a possessor of property who has no wants. But the poor man does not speak according to what is right for him. It is of no avail to say: "Would that I had!" Great is a great man when his great men are great. Valiant is the king possessed of courtiers; august is he who is rich in his nobles.

Mayest thou speak justice in thy own house, that the great ones who are on earth may fear thee. Uprightness of heart is fitting for the lord. It is the forepart of the house that inspires respect in the back. Do justice whilst thou endurest upon earth. Be on thy guard against punishing wrongfully. Do not slaughter: it is not of advantage to thee. But thou shouldst punish with beatings and with arrests. Do not kill a man when thou knowest his good qualities, one with whom thou once didst sing the writings.

Foster thy younger generation, that the residence city may love thee, and increase thy adherents with recruits. Behold, thy citizenry is full of new growing boys. It is twenty years that the younger generation is happy flowing its heart, and then recruits come forth anew. Make thy officials great,

advance thy soldiers, increase thy younger generation of thy following, provided with property, endowed with fields, and rewarded with cattle.

Do not distinguish the son of a man [of birth and position] from a poor man, but take to thyself a man because of the work of his hands. Protect thy frontier and build thy fortresses, for troops are of advantage to their lord.

Make the offering-table flourish, increase the loaves, and add to the daily offerings. It is an advantage to him who does it. The god is aware of him who works for him. Let thy statues be transported into a distant country. It is a goodly office, the kingship. It has no son and no brother, made to endure on its monuments. But it is one king who promotes another. A man works for him who was before him, through a desire that what he has done may be maintained by someone else coming after him. Act for the god, that he may act similarly for thee, with oblations which make the offering-table flourish and with a carved inscription — that is what bears witness to thy name. The god is aware of him who acts for him.

Behold, I have spoken to thee the profitable matters of my very belly. Mayest thou act on what is established before thy face.

The Instruction of Ptah-hotep

PREFACE: ROYAL APPROVAL

The mayor and **vizier** Ptah-hotep said: "O king, my lord, years come on, old age is here, decrepitude arrives, weakness is renewed. . . . Let it be commanded of your servant to make a staff of old age: let my son be set in my place. Let me tell him the sayings of those who obeyed, the conduct of them of old, of them who listened to the gods.

Said the majesty of this god [the king]: "Instruct him in the sayings of the past. . . . Speak to him, for no one is born wise."

TITLE AND AIM

Beginning of the maxims of good words spoken by the . . . mayor and vizier, Ptah-hotep, teaching the ignorant to know according to the standard of good words, expounding the profit to him who shall listen to it, and the injury to him who shall transgress it. He said to his son:

INTELLECTUAL SNOBBERY

Be not arrogant because of your knowledge, and be not puffed up because you are a learned man. Take counsel with the ignorant as with the learned, for the limits of art cannot be reached, and no artist is perfect in his skills. Good speech is more hidden than the precious greenstone, and yet it is found among slave girls at the millstones.

LEADERSHIP AND "MAAT"

If you are a leader, commanding the conduct of many, seek out every good aim, so that your policy may be without error. A great thing is truth [*maat*], enduring and surviving; it has not been upset since the time of Osiris. He who departs from its laws is punished.

CONDUCT AS A GUEST AT THE TABLE

If you are a guest at the table of one who is greater than you, take what he offers as it is set before you. Fix your gaze upon what is before you, and pierce not your host with many glances, for it is an abomination to force your attention upon him. Speak not to him until he calls, for no one knows what may be offensive; speak when he addresses you, for then your words will give satisfaction. Laugh when he laughs; that will please him, and then whatever you do will please him. . . .

PATIENCE WITH SUPPLIANTS (SUBORDINATES)

If you are a leader be kind in hearing the speech of a suppliant. Treat him not roughly until he has unburdened himself of what he was minded to tell you.

RELATIONS WITH WOMEN

If you wish to prolong friendship in a house into which you enter as master, brother or friend, or any place that you enter, beware of approaching the women. No place in which that is done prospers. There is no wisdom in it. A thousand men are turned aside from their own good because of a little moment, like a dream, by tasting which death is reached. . . . He who fails because of lusting after women, no plan of his will succeed.

GREED

If you want your conduct to be good, free from every evil, then beware of greed. It is an evil and incurable sickness. No man can live with it; it causes divisions between fathers and mothers, and between brothers of the same mother; it parts wife and husband; it is a gathering of every evil, a bag of everything hateful.

MARRIAGE

If you are prosperous you should establish a household and love your wife as is fitting. Fill her belly and clothe her back. Oil is the tonic for her body. Make her heart glad as long as you live. She is a profitable field for her lord. . . .

OBEDIENCE TO A SUPERIOR

Bend your back to him who is over you, your superior in the administration; then your house will endure by reason of its property, and your reward will come in due season. Wretched is he who opposes his superior, for one lives only so long as he is gracious.

EXHORTATION TO LISTEN

If you listen to my sayings, then all your affairs will go forward. They are precious; their memory goes on in the speech of men because of their excellence. If each saying is carried on, they will never perish in this land.

If the son of a man accepts what his father says, no plan of his will fail. Failure follows him who does not listen. He who hears is established; he who is a fool is crushed.

A son who hears is a follower of Horus: there is good for him who listens. When he reaches old age and attains honor, he tells the like to his children, renewing the teaching of his father. Every man teaches as he has acted. He speaks to his children so that they may speak to their children.

CONCLUSION

May you succeed me, may your body be sound, may the king be well pleased with all that is done, and may you spend many years of life! It is no small thing that I have done on earth; I have spent one hundred and ten years of life, which the king gave me, and with rewards greater than those of the ancestors, by doing right for the king until death.

Analysis Questions

1. What, if any, are the similarities in advice between the two documents?
2. Is there any military advice given by Merikare? What is it? How would it benefit the nation?
3. What advice does Ptah-hotep give regarding dealing with one's superiors? What is the purpose of this advice?
4. According to Ptah-hotep, what are the qualities of a good leader? Pick two of these qualities and explain why they would be so important to a good leader.

	Culture	Political Organization	Social Structure
Mesopotamia	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Cuneiform writing -Extensive trade with Egypt and Indus -Early use of bronze tools -Advanced astronomy -Pessimistic view of world (House of Dust)- everyone goes to the same underworld (regardless of status and actions = immorality) -Polytheism – gods cruel -Kings powerful, but not divine 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -City-states and warrior kings in almost constant conflict with one another -Less need for a bureaucracy (no real large empire) -Large empires in later times -Hammurabi’s code of laws -Competition among city-states as well as frequent invasions led to less political stability than Egypt 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Job specialization (farmers, metallurgist, craftsmen, merchants, priests) -Use of slaves (could purchase freedom) -Lower class women had more rights (due to more work)
Egypt	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Shipbuilding, some medical knowledge -Less advanced in math and astronomy -Less extensive trade - Optimistic view of life (morality and the afterlife) - Hieroglyphics (pictorial form of writing) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Divine kingship – the pharaoh -Centralized, authoritarian government -Generally stable -Extensive bureaucracy (pharaoh’s power channeled through regional governors) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Smaller nobility class, lower status for merchants -Priests have high status (only ones that can read hieroglyphics) -Women higher in status (priestess, leaders)