***An Egyptian Father’s Advice to his Son:***

***THE BOOK OF PTAH-HOTEP***

*Ptah-Hotep was a feudal lord and a noted Egyptian sage from around 2600 BCE. A collection of wise sayings is ascribed to him, although scholars believe the work may be of a later date. The sayings take the form of advice that an aristocratic father gives to his son.*

***Arrogance and Anger.****The opening passages of the Book of Ptah-Hotep warn against displaying arrogance and anger.*

This is the beginning of the arrangement of the good sayings, spoken by the noble lord, the divine father, beloved of God, the son of the king, the firstborn of his race, the prefect and feudal lord Ptah-Hotep. It serves to instruct the ignorant in the knowledge of the arguments of the good sayings. It is profitable for those who hear them, it is a loss to those who violate them.

He says to his son: Do not be arrogant because of that which you know; deal with the ignorant as with the learned. For, the barriers of art are not closed, since no artist possesses the perfection to which he should aspire. But good words are more difficult to find than the emerald, for it is by slaves that that is discovered among the rocks of pegmatite. . . .

If you find a disputant while he is hot, and if he is superior to you in ability, lower your hands, bend your back, and do not get into a passion with him. As he will not let you destroy his words, it is utterly wrong to interrupt him; this announces that you are incapable of keeping yourself calm when you are contradicted.

If you are involved with a disputant while he is hot, imitate one who does not stir. You have the advantage over him if you keep silence when he is uttering evil words. "The better of the two is he who is emotionless," say the bystanders, and you are right in the opinion of the great.

*(1) How are we advised to deal with confrontations with angry people?*

***Being a Leader and Dealing with Leaders.****Most of the Book of Ptah-Hotep consists of advice in being a leader and interacting with leaders. The good leader is kind but just, and the good follower is obedient and respectful.*

As a leader, if you have to decide on the conduct of a great number of people, seek the most perfect manner of doing this so that your own conduct may be without reproach. Justice is great, invariable, and assured; it has not been disturbed since the age of Osiris. To throw obstacles in the way of the laws is to open the way before violence. If the unjust does not attain to the place of justice, then that which is below will not gain the upper hand. This is so even for those who says, "I take this for myself of my own free will," but does not say, "I take this by virtue of my authority." The limitations of justice are invariable; such is the instruction that every person receives from his father.

Do not motivate people with fear, otherwise God will fight against you in the same manner. If anyone asserts that he lives by such means, God will take away the bread from his mouth. If anyone asserts that he enriches himself thereby, God says, "I may take these riches for myself." If anyone asserts that he beats others, God will end by reducing him to impotence. Let no one inspire men with fear; this is the will of God. Let one provide sustenance for them in the lap of peace; it will then be that they will freely give what has been torn from them by terror.

*(2) What are some of the consequences of instilling fear in others?*

If you are among the people seated at dinner in the house of a greater person than yourself, take that which he gives you, bowing to the ground. Regard that which is placed before you, but do not point at it. Do not regard it frequently. He is a blameworthy person who departs from this rule. Do not speak to the great man more than he requires, for one does not know what may be displeasing to him. Speak when he invites you and your word will be pleasing.

If you are one of those who bring the messages of one great man to another, conform yourself exactly to the job with which he has charged you; perform for him the task as he has appointed you. Beware of altering in speaking the offensive words which one great person addresses to another; he who perverts the truthfulness of his way, in order to repeat only what produces pleasure in the words of every person, great or small, is a detestable person.

If you are an agriculturist, gather the crops in the field that the great God has given you, do not fill your mouth in the house of your neighbors; it is better to make oneself dreaded by the possessor. As for him who (master of his own way of acting and being all-powerful) seizes the goods of others like a crocodile in the midst even of watchmen, his children will be an object of malediction, of scorn, and of hatred on account of it. The father will be grievously distressed, and the mother who has borne him be unhappy. But a man becomes a god when he is the leader of a tribe that has confidence in following him.

Be active during the time of your existence, doing more than is commanded. Do not spoil the time of your activity and be as a blameworthy person who makes a bad use of his moments. Do not lose the daily opportunity of increasing that which your house possesses. Activity produces riches, and riches do not endure when it slackens.

If you are a wise man, bring up a son who will be pleasing to God. If he conforms his conduct to your way and occupies himself with your affairs as is right, do to him all the good you can; he is your son, a person attached to you whom your own self has begotten. Do not separate your heart from him. . . . But if he conducts himself ill and transgresses your wish, if he rejects all counsel, if his mouth goes according to the evil word, strike him on the mouth in return. Give orders without hesitation to those who do wrong, and to him whose temper is turbulent; and he will not deviate from the straight path, and there will be no obstacle to interrupt the way.

*(3) How should we deal with disobedient sons"*

If you are a leader, setting forward your plans according to that which you decide, perform perfect actions which posterity may remember, without letting the words prevail with you which multiply flattery, which excite pride and produce vanity.

If you are a leader of peace, listen to the discourse of the petitioner. Do not be abrupt with him; that would trouble him. Do not say to him, "You have already told me this." Indulgence will encourage him to accomplish the object of his coming. . . . The way to accomplish things is to be like a helmsman: once you are seated, other people work and obey your orders.

Do not disturb a great person; do not weaken the attention of him who is occupied. His care is to embrace his task, and he strips his person through the love that he puts into it. That transports men to God, even the love for the work that they accomplish. Compose your face, even when you are troubled, so that peace may be with you.

Teach others to give honor to a great man. If you gather crops for him among people, make it return fully to its owner, at whose hands is your subsistence. But the gift of affection is worth more than the provisions with which clothe your back. For that which the great man receives from you will enable your house to live, without speaking of the maintenance you enjoy, which you desire to preserve. It is by this means that he extends a beneficent hand, and that in your home good things are added to good things. Let your love pass into the heart of those who love you; cause those about you to be loving and obedient.

*(4) How should we treat great people and people in positions of leadership over us?*

If you are annoyed at something, if you are tormented by someone who is acting within his rights, get out of his sight, and remember him no more when he has ceased to address you.

If you have become great after having been little, if you have become rich after having been poor, when you are at the head of the city, know how not to take advantage of the fact that you have reached the first rank. Do not harden your heart because of your elevation; you have become only the steward of the good things of God. Do not put behind you the neighbor who is considerate to you; be his companion.

*(5) How should we behave if we eventually become leaders?*

***Manners.****The text continues describing the importance of knowing how to engage in pleasant conversation, being cheerful, and making one's wife content.*

If you aim at refined manners, do not call him who you greet. Converse with him especially in such a way as not to annoy him. Enter on a discussion with him only after having left him time to saturate his mind with the subject of the conversation. If he lets his ignorance display itself, and if he gives you an opportunity to disgrace him, treat him with courtesy. Do not proceed to drive him into a corner; do not crush him; do not worry him. Avoid these things so that in his turn he will not return to the subject, but leave having profited from your conversation.

Let your expression be cheerful during the time of your existence. Suppose that you see someone leaving from the storehouse who has entered to deposit his share of provision. If his face is contracted, it shows that his stomach is empty and that authority is offensive to him. Do not let that happen to you.

If you take a wife . . . let her be more contented than any of her fellow-citizens. She will be attached to you doubly, if her chain is pleasant. Do not repel her; grant that which pleases her; it is to her contentment that she appreciates your direction.

*(6) What are some things we should do in proper conversationss with others?*

***Listening to Advice.****The text closes explaining the importance of listening to the advice of those with more experience, especially one's father.*

If you hear those things that I have said to you, your wisdom will be fully advanced. After having listened to them the pupil will become a master, even he who will have properly listened to the sayings because he will have heard them. Let him win success by placing himself in the first rank; that is for him a position perfect and durable, and he has nothing further to desire forever. By knowledge his path is assured, and he is made happy by it on the earth. The wise man is satiated by knowledge; he is a great man through his own merits. His tongue is in accord with his mind; just are his lips when he speaks, his eyes when he gazes, his ears when he hears. The advantage of his son is to do that which is just without deceiving himself.

When a son receives the instruction of his father, there is no error in all his plans. Train your son to be a teachable man whose wisdom is agreeable to the great. Let him direct his mouth according to that which has been said to him; we discover a son's wisdom in his docility. His conduct is perfect, while error carries away the unteachable. Tomorrow knowledge will support him, while the ignorant will be destroyed.

As for the man without experience who does not listen, he effects nothing whatsoever. He sees knowledge in ignorance, profit in loss; he commits all kinds of error, always accordingly choosing the contrary of what is praiseworthy. He lives on that which is mortal, in this fashion. His food is evil words, whereat he is filled with astonishment. That which the great know to be mortal he lives upon every day, flying from that which would be profitable to him, because of the multitude of errors which present themselves before him every day.

*(7) What are the results of the son who listens, as opposed to the person who does not listen?*

A son who attends is like a follower of Horus; he is happy after having attended. He becomes great, he arrives at dignity, he gives the same lesson to his children. Let none innovate upon the precepts of his father; let the same precepts form his lessons to his children. "Truly," will his children say to him, "to accomplish what you say works marvels."

Cause therefore that to flourish which is just, in order to nourish your children with it. If the teachers allow themselves to be led toward evil principles, truly the people who do not understand them will speak accordingly. Then all the world considers them as masters and they inspire confidence in the public; but their glory endures not so long as would please them. Do not, then, take away a word from the ancient teaching, and do not add one; do not put one thing in place of another; beware of uncovering the rebellious ideas which arise in you; but teach according to the words of the wise.

Let your thoughts be abundant, but let your mouth be under restraint, and you will argue with the great. Put yourself in unison with the ways of your master; cause him to say: "He is my son," so that those who will hear it will say: "Praise be to her who has borne him to him!" Apply yourself while you speak; speak only of perfect things; and let the great who will hear you say: "Twice good is that which issues from his mouth!"

Do that which your master bids you. Twice good is the precept of our father, from whom we have issued, from his flesh. What he tells us, let it be fixed in our heart; to satisfy him greatly let us do for him more than he has prescribed. Truly a good son is one of the gifts of God, a son who does even better than he has been told to do. For his master he does what is satisfactory, putting himself with all his heart on the part of right.

So I will bring it about that your body will be healthy, that the King will be satisfied with you in all circumstances, and that you will obtain years of life without error.

It has caused me on earth to obtain one hundred and ten years of life, along with the gift of the favor of the King among the first of those whom their works have ennobled, satisfying the King in a place of dignity.

It is finished, from its beginning to its end, according to that which is found in writing.

*(8) What are some things that a good son should do?*