

## Wisdom Texts and Philosophy

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The last essay of this issue concerns to a more “technical” subject: in many ancient cultures, literary monuments are mainly “wisdom literature”. In these early works, Philosophy and Literature are more closely related than in many contemporary approaches. The author here tries to sketch the relationships between the ancient wisdom literatures of Egypt, Greece and Israel, and to show how this literary genre precedes “philosophy”.

What are the origins of classical Hellenic philosophy? Did it pop into existence in Hellenic Ionia at the end of the sixth century BCE, like Athena popping out of the head of Zeus, or was there a process of development out of earlier thought? If the latter, was the background of classical Hellenic philosophy the earlier poetic tradition —Homer, Hesiod, Solon, Sappho— or did the earliest Hellenic philosophers owe their inspiration to non-Hellenic sources?

Those who argue for non-Hellenic sources for classical Hellenic philosophy offer, most frequently, one or more of three types of evidence: 1) Classical philosophers and their biographers and historians in antiquity often assert dependence of their philosophy on Egyptian or other non-Hellenic sources. We hear stories of Solon, Thales, Pythagoras and several members of his school, Democritus, Plato and Eudoxus visiting Egypt and perhaps sitting at the feet of Egyptian priests who are presumed to have passed along some of their ancient wisdom to their visitors. The philosophy of Pythagoras certainly seemed exotic to his contemporaries, and Plato occasionally salts his dialogues with references to things Egyptian; Isocrates even says in his *Busiris* that the Greeks got all their philosophy from the

Egyptians. All of these references, and the others like them in starting from the Hellenic end, share certain common difficulties: a) we may wonder about the motivation of their authors, whether they are attempting to lend a certain cachet of exotic authority to the ideas proposed by referring their source to an ancient and honored civilization; b) if we look only at the Hellenic end, we cannot begin to disentangle just which aspects and ideas of the people thought to have visited Egypt or some other Afroasiatic region may have been borrowed from Afroasiatic sources and which may have been original in the Hellenic context.

2) A second sort of evidence is that generated by the central thesis of Bernal in **Black Athena**: that classical Hellenic civilization owed much of its development to a supposed Egyptian colonization in the pre-classical period<sup>1</sup>. The philosophical import of the Bernal hypothesis includes the idea that classical mythology, from which many scholars have thought Hellenic philosophy to have developed, was itself derived from Egyptian religious and philosophical thought in the pre-Trojan War period. If Bernal's historical hypothesis were to prove correct, evidence that Hellenic philosophy grew out of Hellenic myth and poetry would turn out to be evidence for an ultimately Egyptian origin of Hellenic philosophy. Although I do not plan to discuss the Bernal hypothesis directly in the present paper, some of my comments might turn out to be relevant for such a discussion, since I will discuss texts that might contain ideas resembling those of Egyptians who would have carried on intellectual contact with early Hellenes in the second millennium BCE.

c) The third sort of evidence would be texts from Egypt or other possible source civilizations that anticipate philosophical developments in Hellenic civilization. Anyone who wants to defend seriously the hypothesis that classical Hellenic philosophy has significant debts to non-Hellenic sources needs to point to something in the hypothesized source civilization that the Hellenes might actually have borrowed to use in constructing their philosophies. Assertions

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<sup>1</sup> Martin BERNAL: **Black Athena**.— **The Afroasiatic Roots of Classical Civilization**, Rutgers UP: New Brunswick 1987, 1991.

that the texts that classical philosophers might have seen, and the oral teaching that may have gone on unrecorded in temples or elsewhere, have long since disappeared, will take you only so far. It is all too easy to ridicule the claim of a George James that Aristotle cribbed his *Corpus* from an improbable body of Egyptian texts which Aristotle could not have read. But there *are* some texts that we may find highly interesting philosophically and otherwise; some of these texts have gotten the generic name "Wisdom Literature" —in the Egyptian context, "books of wise instruction"<sup>2</sup>.

In the ancient Egyptian genre called "Books of Wise Instruction"<sup>3</sup> the authors are, or are represented to be, fathers, teachers, advisors or

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<sup>2</sup> Let me say at the outset that my knowledge of the original languages of Egyptian and Hebrew wisdom literature is extremely limited; I am relying on translations of those languages for the current exploration. My Greek is sufficient to have read all the texts cited from that language in the original.

I should add that "Wisdom Literature" is applied to works from a much wider range of cultures than those discussed here. See, for example, Leo G. PERDUE: **Wisdom and Cult: A Critical Analysis of the Views of Cult in the Wisdom Literatures of Israel and the Ancient Near East**, Scholars Press: Missoula, Montana 1977, ch. 3, for Mesopotamian wisdom literature with clear connections both to Egyptian and to Hebrew texts.

<sup>3</sup> The term "Wisdom Literature" was developed in the context of Biblical studies, and is there applied to Proverbs, Job and "Qoholeth" or Ecclesiastes. There are also a number of "wisdom" Psalms. The relationship of Proverbs, especially to Egyptian "books of wise instruction", is in places very close. In the Apocrypha, wisdom literature includes Ben Sira, the Wisdom of Solomon, Tobit, I Edras, and Baruch. These works reflect the Hellenistic context in which they were written. See Shupak, p. 12ff.

Nili Shupak 1993 p.p. 21-30 has an excellent list of Egyptian texts relevant to the study of Wisdom Literature, together with bibliography of the publication of text and translation. See also the collection by Maulana KARENGA: **Selections from the Husia.— Sacred Wisdom of Ancient Egypt**, Kawaida: Los Angeles 1984. We mention especially, roughly in chronological order:

The Book of Ptah-Hotep (6th Dynasty, 2350-2180 BC; see Z. ZÁBA: **Les Maximes de Ptahhotep**, Prague 1956).

The Book to/of Kagemni (6th Dynasty, 2350-2180 BC; see A. H. GARDINER: "The Instruction Addressed to Kagemni and His Brethren," *JEA* 32 (1946) 71-74).

The Instruction to Merikare (Karenga calls it "Book of Kheti") (c 2200 BC, see e.g. W. HELCK: **Die Lehrefür König Merikare**, Wiesbaden 1977).

others in authority, and the audience is represented as a son, student, or promising young bureaucrat. Statements are often phrased in the imperative, relieved by conditionals like: "if you want to live well, then you should do X," or "if you have position A, then do X," or "proverbs" like "It is better to have a snake in the house than a fool who comes often." We find in these texts the moral characteristics prized by their authors, and to some extent a systematic relationship between those virtues. Ptah-Hotep, for example, puts "Maat," the principle of Justice and Truth that may be compared with *dikaosune* as presented in Plato's *Republic*, in primary focus. The texts repeatedly encourage moderation and self-control, a spirit of fairness, respect for one's elders, for women, and for learning, and a pious relationship with the gods. Their authors, in effect, lay claim to "wisdom," and they propose to pass along that wisdom to their sons or students. The closest Biblical parallel to the Books of Wise Instruction is the book of Proverbs, which is actually a collection of

The Instruction of Amenemhet 1 (1970-1930 BC), see H. GOEDICKE: *Studies in "The Instruction of King Amenemhet I for his Son,"* 2 vols. San Antonio 1988 (not in KARENGA).

The Book of Ani (I 18th Dynasty, 1580-1400), see E. SUYS: *La Sagesse dani*, Rome 1935, and A. VOLTEN: *Studien zum Weisheitsbuch des Anii*, Copenhagen 1937-38.

The Book of Amenomope (opinion divided on dating; the papyrus is dated to 10th century BC) (see I. GRUMACH: *Untersuchungen zur Lebenslehre des Amenope* (Münchener ägyptologische Studien 23), Berlin 1972).

The Book of Phebhor, known as Papyrus Insinger (Ptolemaic period, Miriam LICHTHEIM: *Ancient Egyptian Literature*, 3 vols., Berkeley 1973-1980, LEWL 107-234)

The Book of Ankhsheshonqi (Ptolemaic period; LICHTHEIM, LEWL 13-92)

We should note that a far wider application of the name "Wisdom Literature" is possible, so that it would include pretty much the entire Bible, and would include many theological writings. From that point of view we could mention the reconstruction by Karl W. LUCKERT: *Egyptian Light and Hebrew Fire.—Theological and Philosophical Roots of Christendom in Evolutionary Perspective*, SUNY Press: Albany NY 1991, of "Heliopolitan" theology from early inscriptions, Memphite theology from the Shabaka stone, and Theban theology from the Amun Hymn. How those texts might be related to classical Hellenic philosophy is an entirely separate story from the one I am telling today.

Hebrew books often closely related to the Egyptian wisdom books<sup>4</sup>. I note in this connection that there is possible a much wider sense of the phrase "wisdom literature" that would make it include many texts that I am not discussine here, notably (from a philosophical point of view) the theological texts of early Egypt<sup>5</sup>.

What is the relationship between the Egyptian "Books of Wise Instruction" and the Biblical Proverbs, on the one hand, and "Philosophy" on the other? Certainly one might well want to argue that these "Wisdom Texts" are examples of "moral philosophy." If "philosophy" means "love of wisdom," and includes, as one of its parts, a "system for the conduct of life," as the OED puts it, then these books richly deserve the title of philosophical books: "Happy is the man who finds wisdom, and the man who gets understanding" (Proverbs 3.13); "Be not arrogant because of your knowledge. Take counsel with the ignorant as well as with the wise, for the limits of knowledge in any field have never been set, and no one has ever reached them. Wisdom is rarer than emeralds, and yet it is found among the women who gather at the grindstones" (Ptah Hotep I)<sup>6</sup>.

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<sup>4</sup> Qoholeth / Ecclesiastes and Job, classified as Wisdom Literature by Biblical scholars, are each a little different in their own ways, from Proverbs and from the Books of Wise instruction. Much as i might enjoy talking about Qoholeth or Job, they are not at issue in my comments today.

<sup>5</sup> We may mention in this connection the Pyarnid Texts, the Book of the Dead, the Bremner Rhind Papyrus, the Shabak inscription (the Memphite Theology), the Great Hymn to Aton, and Coffin Texts. LUCKERT: **Egyptian Light and Hebrew Fire**, pp. 41 ff., constructs a "Heliopolitan Theology," a "Theology of Memphis," and a "Theology of Thebes." The intellectual content of each of these theologies may be compared to various aspects of Hellenic cosmogonical and cosmological speculation, as well as to the various ontological and nature-philosophical theories developed in the Hellenic period. To my taste the comparison yields more differences than similarities, but others may interpret the Egyptian texts as clear anticipations of Ionian speculation about being and nature.

<sup>6</sup> There is a wide-spread belief that the task of philosophy is "wise instruction;" or at least there is an expectation that courses in ethics might serve to help students live more ethical lives. Thus we have courses in Medical Ethics for future nurses and physicians, courses in Legal Ethics for future attomeys, and courses in Business Ethics for future tycoons. I'm not sure that those of us who teach those courses actually fulfill the expectation that we will make our students better- some

Perhaps we should rephrase the question: what kinds of relationships can we find between Egyptian Wise Instructions (and the Biblical Proverbs) on the one hand, and classical Hellenic philosophy on the other? What could we *expect* to find? What should we look for?

a) We might find, or fail to find, Books of Wise Instruction-treatises represented as written by a wise father, teacher, mentor, to a son or student or protégé —written in Greek. b) We might find similarities and differences in the values taught in the Wisdom Texts on the one hand, and in classical Hellenic texts on the other.

c) We might find similarities and differences in the intellectual methodologies deployed in Wisdom Texts and Hellenic texts.

It's possible to make these comparisons rather hastily. For example, Theophile Obenga<sup>7</sup> distinguishes the Hellenic virtues of *phronesis*, justice, courage, and *sophrosyne*, and then says (my translation from his French):

These ethical ideas, exactly the same, with the vital problems that they raise and deal with in psychology and philosophy were *taught* in Pharaonic Egypt thousands of years before the birth of philosophical reflection in Greece.

Precisely, in Greece, at the center of the moral problematic, there is this urgent question: "Is or is not virtue, *arete*, teachable, *didakton*?" For Socrates, for example —and this is unambiguous— virtue is the object of an intelligible science: virtue is teachable. This teaching is part of a philosophical education.

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of us may teach in a Solomonic manner, others more like Qoholeth, and others in other ways.

<sup>7</sup> Theophile OBENGA: *La Philosophie Africaine de la Période Pharaonique*, Paris 1990, p. 165.

But the "Wise Instructions" of ancient Egypt are precisely "Teachings" of a master to a student, a sage or philosopher to a young man, an informed man (mayor, vizier) to a person beginning his politic and administrative career. The "Wise Instructions" of ancient Egypt are thus themselves an entire *philosophical pedagogy*. Virtue is taught. This science is conscience, a conscience not separated from Political tasks. from the government of the state.

A few comments: Obenga misses the fact that the most typical instructions are from father, especially a father with an authoritative position, to son. He also does not realize that teaching cannot be problematized until teaching has occurred, so *of course people* believed themselves to be teaching virtue before Socrates called that practice into question. Much as one might like to find Egyptians anticipating the Socrates of Plato's dialogues, that is not where we would find the greatest similarities. Socrates, at least the Socrates in Plato's dialogues (whatever one might say about Xenophon's Socrates) does little instruction in the Wisdom Literature sense.

But does the Wise Instruction genre exist in Hellenic Greece? There are some possibly comparable texts, although not immediately recognizable as the "same" thing: we notice the "wise instructions" of Homer's Mentor; Hesiod's *Works and Days* has aspects of "Wise Instruction"; and the collections of sayings or Proverbs ascribed to the Seven Sages<sup>8</sup> have the same sort of peremptoriness that characterizes Egyptian and Hebrew proverbial wisdom. Of canonical Hellenic

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<sup>8</sup> The *collections* of sayings of the Seven Sages are of course relatively late-Demetrius of Phaleron appears to be the collector or editor of these sayings- but many of them have a long history in Greek literature, whether or not they are ultimately to be ascribed to one or another of these somewhat legendary characters. To the extent that there are somewhat close resemblances of individual sayings of the Seven Sages to bits in Egyptian Wisdom Literature I suppose that is *possible* that later authors are reading back into Hellenic predecessors bits of "wisdom" picked up from elsewhere. I don't actually want to claim that Bion or Pittakos was personally acquainted with some Egyptian wisdom text; proverbs like these seem to travel from culture to culture in rather mysterious ways.

philosophical texts we note that Empedocles' Poem,<sup>9</sup> addressed to Pausanias, instructs a wisdom far more complex and probably less worldly-wise than the wisdom included in the Egyptian-Hebrew wisdom texts; but the form, that of a "wise instruction," has a certain similarity. We may even notice that the Poem of Parmenides is a literary trope of the "wise instruction" format; Parmenides is the student, and the instructor is a female deity. Of course if we allow instructions by deities directed at mortals, or instructions of deities to other deities, we may note in the Hebrew tradition the "instructive" format of the Decalogue, in which God instructs Moses and the people of Israel, and indeed many large passages from the end of Exodus through the remainder of the Pentateuch are really collections of instructive proverbs, backed up by the authority of Yahweh. We may also note in later Egyptian tradition the "instructions" of Tat by Hermes Trismegistos —and the general tenor of most of the Hermetic texts, for that matter.

In the Hellenic tradition, the "Seven Sages" —who occupy the whole of Book I of Diogenes Laertius— are credited with a good many didactic proverbs, not a few resembling Egyptian Wisdom Literature not only conceptually but even in phraseology at times (see the attached passages).<sup>10</sup> Going beyond the Seven Sages to the "canonical" philosophers, but still looking for collections of proverbs, we find the Pythagorean *akousmata* (cfr. DL VIII. I), some of the fragments of Heraclitus, but especially the major portion of the extant fragments ascribed to Democritus. I personally find the similarities between the "ethical" fragments of Democritus and the Egyptian wisdom texts more than striking. From the time of Democritus

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<sup>9</sup> I am become convinced that all the fragments are part of one long poem. Nothing turns on that judgment here.

<sup>10</sup> The collections of the sayings of the Seven Sages are problematic because as collections they appear later than the high point of Hellenic philosophy, at a time when the collections could have been influenced directly by non-Hellenic sources—after the establishment of Greek hegemony over the middle east. And of course there is no special reason to believe in the actual authorship of any of the proverbs by the persons to whom they are ascribed. A point of my argument is that any proverb worth repeating probably came from someone else—possibly a non-Greek. The question we are discussing is roughly this: when and whence did some of these ideas appear in the Greek world?



onward there is a philosophical / literary tradition in Hellas of didactic moralizing that sprouts and blossoms in many directions; to get a good overview of the ethical-didactic strain in Hellenic philosophy, we need only look at the Anthology of John of Stobi, assembled by him with precisely the same motivation ascribed to the authorship of the Egyptian wisdom texts three thousand years earlier—to pass along to his son the Wisdom of the Ages.

When we look at the *narrow* definition of the genre of “Wise Instruction”, the evidence for its existence in earlier Hellenic society is somewhat mixed. We have instructions, we have proverbs, we have emphasis on wisdom, but in the earlier literature I find relatively little of the format of “one-on-one” instruction, especially of father to son, so typical of the Hebrew and Egyptian texts.

What about the *values* conveyed in the Hebrew and Egyptian Wisdom Literature, on the one hand, and Hellenic philosophical texts, on the other? Are they, as Obenga says, “exactly the same,” or not? I expect that a full investigation of that question would turn out to be a very long story indeed. In the first place, the Egyptian and *Hebrew* values are not always the same: there is a strain in the Egyptian texts that might be said to anticipate Machiavelli's *The Prince*: “Do not hurl a lance if you cannot aim correctly.” (Ankhsheshonqi) “A small snake has poison. A small river has its dangers. A small fire should be feared...” (Phebhor) And in Proverbs, there is the often-repeated refrain, not so dominant in the Egyptian texts, and far from the consciousness of the Hellenic writers: “The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge.” (Prov. 1.7, c.f. 3.7, 14.2, 14.26-27, 15.16, et al.). If we just look at specific proverbs, we will find anticipations of some Hellenic proverbs in the Egyptian texts; we will find Egyptian or Hebrew proverbs that do not find an echo in earlier Hellenic texts, and we will find Hellenic proverbs that we cannot easily compare to anything in the Egyptian texts.

One of the most frequently repeated adages in the early Hellenic world, often thought of as a typical refrain, is “Nothing too much,” ΜΗΔΕΝ ΑΓΑΝ. Nor does Egyptian Wisdom Literature tire of praising moderation, but there is a difference: the Egyptian ideal

emphasizes “quietness, calmness, coolness” as Shupak (pp. 150 ff.) points out. These characteristics belong to one Hellenic conception of *sophrosune*, but it is hard to imagine the Greeks rating “silence” very high as a virtue of a man. “A woman would be thought a chatterbox if she were as modest (*kosmia*) as a good man.” (Aristotle *Pol.* III. 4, 1277b23). Still, one of the maxims of Periander of Corinth is “*hesuchia kalon*,” “quiet is noble.” More like the Hellenic notion of *sophrosyne* and “nothing too much” in content, though not at all in expression, is Proverbs 25.16: “If you have found honey, eat only enough for you, lest you be sated with it and vomit it.” Or we may notice Amenomope, “The self-mastered person sets himself apart, like a tree grown in fertile ground,” or Ani, “Seek self-mastery and your self-mastery will subdue those who are angry.”

Another typically Hellenic, and often regarded as distinctly philosophical, adage is “know yourself,” ΓΝΟΘΕ ΣΕΑΥΤΟΝ. I find the Egyptian texts rather ambiguous on the subject of self-knowledge. If we take the Hellenic saying to mean, know your own limits, then we do find texts like the beginning of the book of **Ptah Hotep** (text attached) Don't be arrogant about your knowledge, because the limits of knowledge in any field have never been reached. On the other hand, the intense introspection of a Heraclitus who says “I searched out myself,” ἐδιζήσάμεν ἑμῶντον, DK 101, would have to be compared with some of the Psalms or Job, though there is the “Dialogue with the Soul” that begins, “I spoke to my soul...”

We have already mentioned that the Egyptian concept of Maat has certain resemblances to the Hellenic, even the Platonic, concept of Justice; or sometimes the Aristotelian proportionality: “If you are a judge... do not lean to one side or the other. Take care that no one complains that you are unfair.” (**Ptah Hotep**) According to the **Ptah Hotep** text, and several others, Maat “is the constitutive order of creation established by the primeval creator deity to direct the harmonious regularity of the cosmos for all eternity”<sup>11</sup>. At the same time, Maat is the constitutive order of society, and that of the

<sup>11</sup> PERDUE: *Wisdom and Cult...*, p. 19. Perdue appeals also to the Merikare text in support of this interpretation, and indirectly to several other Egyptian texts as well.

individual wise person who lives according to the dictates of Maat. Given this Egyptian centrality of Maat, I find it striking that when we turn to the earliest Hellenic philosophers we find ΔΙΚΗ in a comparable position: in the fragment of Anaximander, things that come into being from the indefinite “pay for their injustice according to the ordinance of time.” Heraclitus tells us that “the sun will not step out of measures, for if he does, the Furies, assistants of Dike, will find him out.” (DK frag 94). In the introduction to Parmenides' poem, “much-punishing Dike” holds the keys to the gates of wisdom. I don't actually think that the earlier Greek philosophers had a completely firm hold on the Egyptian concept of Maat —otherwise, they might have anticipated the argumentation of Plato's *Republic* much more than they do. But I would like to suggest that Dike and Maat are probably a lot closer than many of us generally think.

Looking at a virtue often thought to be typically Hellenic, “liberality” (*eleutheriotes*), we do find also some maxims in the Egyptian wisdom literature praising actions that would come under that heading: “Share with your friends that which you have.” (Ptah Hotep) “Those who give food generously when they have money are the ones to whom fate gives fortune.” (Phebhor) And when we are on that topic, we note the maxim cited by Plato, *koina ta tón philón*, could be directly quoted from Ptah Hotep —“What belongs to one friend belongs to the other.” Similarly the supposedly typically Hellenic virtue of *megalopsychia* can be traced in the saying of Ptah Hotep, “Do great things that will be remembered long after you are gone.” We could go on with comparisons like this —but the two moral universes are not, after all, identical.

For example, there are several Egyptian texts that emphasize the importance of respect for one's mother, one's wife, and for women generally; see the attached texts. Texts like that are hard to find in the context of classical Hellenic civilization. If they are there, I'd like to learn about them.

At the same time, there may be some characteristically Hellenic ideas that will not be easy to find in Egyptian texts. My own examination of the wisdom texts —to be sure, not as extensive as I

would like— seems to indicate that if we take the Hellenic cardinal virtues to be *sophrosune*, courage, justice, and wisdom, three of the four are readily found in Egyptian texts; but the fourth, courage, seems not to **appear**, or anyway not to be the same thing. The Wise Instructions seem not at all directed at warriors. There are warlike passages in Egyptian texts of course —“I come forth triumphantly against my enemies. I split the heavens and open up the horizon. I travel across the earth on the heels of my enemies. I cause the Glorious and Great Ones to come to me, for I am equipped with words of power.” (**Book of Coming Forth By Day**)— but that is like the standard Hebrew martial literature, that I have power because God is working through me.

Of course it is in the area that we may call “methodology” that the greatest differences between Egyptian Wisdom Texts and Hellenic philosophical texts seem to arise. We tend to reject the claim of the “Seven Sages” to be philosophers, at least on the basis of their reported opinions, just because their maxims are simply asserted, rarely if ever defended with any argument whatever. Similarly most contemporary philosophers would say that the Wisdom Texts are “not philosophically interesting” simply because they offer hardly any arguments for the positions they take. Where there are arguments, they tend to be religious in nature: do so and so because God will like it<sup>12</sup>, or don't do so and so because God won't like it<sup>13</sup>. Or there is a mildly Kantian deontology lurking, of the sort that says, do so and so because it is possible to follow that policy as a consistent policy. “The heart of the wise is in harmony with their tongue.” (**Ptah Hotep**) But the Egyptian Wisdom Texts seem to avoid extended argument in defense of ethical positions<sup>14</sup>. And so do the earlier Greek philosophers; ethical argumentation seems a consequence of the tradition of political argumentation that grew up in the context of increasing participation in government of more and more people. The Egyptian Wisdom Texts are generally directed by a person in

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<sup>12</sup> “God loves those who respect the poor more than those who revere the wealthy” (**Amenemope**).

<sup>13</sup> “Do not terrorize people for if you do, God will punish you accordingly” (**Ptah Hotep**).

<sup>14</sup> Job is quite different in that respect, of course.

authority, even a Pharaoh, to a son or someone who will also be in authority, instructing them how to use that authority. Debate seems somewhat beside the point in that context. How different the world of Socrates and the Sophists!

#### Conclusion:

This has been a brief exploration of some of the possible similarities and differences between Egyptian wisdom literature, and the cousin of that genre, Hebrew wisdom literature, on the one hand, and Hellenic "wisdom" in the earlier period, on the other. Did the Greeks get their fundamental moral intuitions from the Egyptians? I would think probably not; Greeks like everyone else in the world had a moral universe that in many ways reflected and defined the character of their ethnic identity. But were their fundamental moral intuitions shaped and changed by contact with Egyptian civilization? I would think it hasty to reject that idea out of hand. There is no doubt that the many stories of Hellenes who are said to have traveled to Egypt to learn from that ancient civilization —Solon, Thales, Pythagoras, Democritus, Plato, and many others— tended to lend a borrowed air of authority to the opinions of these philosophers. But why only the air of authority? Why not also some actual conceptual structure?

The Egyptians had an intensely religious, but also intensely practical, account of the relationship between individual and society and between human and divine. To the extent that Hellenes understood what the Egyptians had developed (not necessarily a very great extent) they had every motivation to borrow what they could to make the Hellenic society more nearly resemble the great and ancient civilization of the Nile valley.

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**“Wisdom Texts” From Egypt & Greece: a few representative selections**

**from The Instruction of Ptah-Hotep.**

Be not arrogant because of your knowledge. Take counsel with the ignorant as well as with the wise. For the limits of knowledge in any field have never been set and no one has ever reached them. Wisdom is rarer than emeralds, and yet it is found among the women who gather at the grindstones.

If you are a leader and command many, strive for excellence in all you do so that no fault can be found in your character. For Maat is great; its value is lasting and it has remained unequaled and unchanged since the time of its creator. It lies as a plain path before even the ignorant, and those who violate its laws are punished. Although wickedness may gain wealth, wrong-doing has never brought its wares to a safe port. In the end, it is Maat that endures and enables the upright to say “it is the legacy of my father and mother.”

Do not terrorize people for if you do, God will punish you accordingly....

**from The Book of Ani.**

Do not go in and out of the court of justice so that your name may not be soiled. Do not contend in a quarrel. Keep silent and it will serve you well. Go not in the presence of a drunkard even if it promises to bring you honor....

Do not frequent taverns lest evil words fall from your mouth and you know not what you are saying....

Guard against words and deeds of deception and against words that are untrue. Destroy the desire to do and speak evil within you, for the evil man has no rest....

Double the gifts your mother gave you and care for her as she cared for you. She bore a heavy burden in you and did not abandon you. When she brought you forth after your months, she was still bound closely to you. For her breasts were still in your mouth for three years. While you grew, she cleaned your filth without disgust in her heart and without saying "O, what can I do?" She placed you in school to be educated and came there daily on your behalf with bread and beer for your teacher. Thus, when you become a young man and marry a wife and establish your house, lose not sight of your own childhood. Raise your children as your mother did you. Do not let her find fault with you, lest she raise her hands to God against you and God hear her complaints and punish you. .

Do not order your wife around in her house when you know she keeps it in excellent order...

from Amenomope:

... The unrestrained person is like a tree grown in infertile ground. Its leaves wither quickly and its unripe fruit falls down but the self-mastered person sets himself apart like a tree grown in fertile ground. It grows green and doubles its yield of fruit Do not expose a widow if you catch her in the field, nor fail to be understanding of her reply

Some Sample Sayings of the Seven Sages (selected from John of Stobi III. L, 172ff, quoting Demetrios of Phaleron, and from Diogenes Laertius Book 1)

— Kleoboulos: Measure is best. One ought to honor one's parents. Keep body and soul well. Be good at listening and don't talk too much. Know many things or be ignorant. Keep your tongue on good words. Friend of virtue, stranger to vice. Hate injustice, guard piety. Counsel best things to the citizens. Conquer pleasure. Do nothing by force. Educate children. Pray to luck. Dissolve hatred. Consider war hateful to the city. Do not fight with a woman nor think too much about your neighbor's women; the one is ignorant, the other can make you crazy...



— Solon: Nothing too much. Do not sit in judgment; if you do, you will be hated by the one who comes out worst. Flee pleasure, which gives birth to pain. Speech is the mirror of action. Learn to obey before you command....

— Chilon: Know yourself. Control your tongue, especially at a banquet. Do not threaten anyone, because that is womanish. Be more ready to visit friends in adversity than in prosperity. Do not make an extravagant marriage. Do not speak ill of the dead. Honor old age. Do not laugh at another's misfortune. When strong, be merciful, if you would have the respect not fear of your neighbors....

— Pittakos: Cherish truth, faith, experience, dexterity, comradeship, care.

— Bias: Most people are bad. Do not be hasty of speech, for that is a sign of madness. Love phronesis. Say of the gods that they exist.

— Periander: Care for the universe. Quiet is beautiful. Democracy is better than tyranny. Pleasures are mortal, virtues immortal.

#### Democritus, The Golden Maxims (a few selected examples)

If anyone pay intelligent attention to these my maxims, many matters worthy of a good man shall he engage in, and many ignoble matters shall he escape.

It is good to prevent the wrongdoer, but at least not to join with him.

One ought to be good, or pretend to be.

Neither bodies nor wealth make people happy, but justice and contemplation.

Repentance for shameful deeds is the salvation of life.

Speak true, not much.

*Logos* is often more persuasive than gold.

Immoderate desire marks the child, not the adult.

Untimely pleasures beget disgust.

It is better for the foolish to be ruled than to rule.

Glory and wealth without wisdom are not safe possessions.

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