

PROFESSING FAITH

‘The Teachings of Ptahhotep’ is a book of philosophy

“The Teachings of Ptahhotep” is a book of philosophy, largely unknown in our own age, which is unfortunate. Scholars believe it is the oldest book in the world, predating the Bible, the Quran, Confucius and the Buddha by centuries or even thousands of years.

Writing as a means of communication probably first developed around 3200 BC in Sumeria, in modern Iraq. But its early uses were for record keeping and taxation, and not literature as we know it today. This begins to change with Ptahhotep because he wished to share wisdom and not mere numbers.

Ptahhotep was a real person, who lived in the 25th century BC. He was the Vizier of King Djedkare Isesi, who ruled in the Fifth Dynasty. In this period, the Vizier, or in Egyptian the “Djat,” was the King’s prime minister who supervised all legal matters in the name of the king. He was responsible for organizing the agriculture of the land, all military units, the construction of the burial chambers and monuments of the king, all civic projects and record keeping. After the king, he was the highest judge in the land and he controlled the work and worship of the priests and temples. The Vizier had to be a literate and well-educated man, and Ptahhotep was one of the most famous.

The Fifth Dynasty was



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in a time period called the Egyptian Old Kingdom, or the Pyramid age when the colossal burial chambers were built. It was a time when writing was well established in Egypt, and with it a scribal class of trained administrators and record keepers had developed. The Fifth dynasty is known to historians as a time when the absolute power of the monarchy was being slowly eroded by the priesthoods, scribes and nobility, the same people the kings used to administer the civilization of the Nile.

Ptahhotep was probably an older man at the end of his career when the text was first composed. Apparently the King had approved the Vizier’s son, Ke’gemni, to succeed his father, and so the old man wrote down things he believed a wise ruler should know but normally could be gained only by experience. In so doing, Ptahhotep created a new kind of literature, imitated across the Middle East for centuries, called Sebait. It’s known to scholars today as Wisdom literature. The Book of Proverbs in the Bible is a later Hebrew collection of maxims in the same literary tradition.

At the very beginning of his discourse, Ptahhotep speaks on the importance of humility for the ruler. He says, “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.” Let us put this in modern words, and say that one must listen to and respect the CEO of a company in the same way one regards the custodian, because both have a story to share profitably.

The man who rules in the public life of the community must first strive to live with justice and love with the people in the family. This is most important in terms of caring for one’s spouse, for who can be loved by the people, who is not first loved by their spouse? We read, “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 shalt thou keep her in thine house...” In another maxim, Ptahhotep reminds his heirs that while in power to beware of getting involved with other women because those who do so never prosper. Your present author has seen the tragic consequences of this failure many times.

Ptahhotep places a high value on the principle of obedience. For him, obedience is not

simply doing the will of one who is powerful, but rather it is a matter of knowing one’s place. Governing is not easy, but the one who gives orders must also be one who can obey orders from legitimate authority. He tells us, “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 obeyers is a noble thing. Obedience is better than all things that are; it maketh good-will.” Further on he notes that one who obeys is one who is himself obeyed.

In Ptahhotep’s world, this obedience is a religious duty. Since the King of Egypt was considered a god, the living manifestation of Horus,

this much is obvious. Yet beyond this, the Egyptians believed in a divine principle they called Ma’at, which might be translated as meaning both justice and order. The task of both gods and mortals was to establish and preserve good order and harmony in the world. The opposite of Ma’at was not merely evil, but chaos itself, a situation they found repulsive.

When we read such words with a kind and patient heart there is a beauty which is offered. The Egyptians of the Pyramid Age were in so many ways vastly different than ourselves. Their language is alien to us, their religion could be very weird, their laws and customs are far from our own. Their government was a theocracy and improving one’s lot

in life was almost impossible. Yet across the thousands of years that separate us from Ptahhotep we see in the distance a people who admired and sought things we also value, such as humility, respect for all people, the value of learning, concern for family and respect for the sacred. Ptahhotep reminds us that Ma’at bids us to remember what we have in common with all men and women rather than focus on our differences.

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