

FROM The Instruction of Ptah-Hotep

In contrast to ancient Mesopotamian laws, no ancient Egyptian law code has survived, although various texts suggest that laws did indeed exist. This document, however, provides an excellent description of proper behavior in personal relations and, implicitly, a sense of Egyptian social values, at least among the elite. Dating perhaps as early as the late Old Kingdom, this text is presented as the instructions of the vizier (the most important royal official under the king himself), Ptah-hotep, to his son.

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Instruction of the Mayor of the city, the Vizier Ptahhotep, under the Majesty of King Isesi, who lives for all eternity. The mayor of the city, the vizier Ptahhotep, said:

O king, my lord!
 Age is here, old age arrived,
 Feebleness came, weakness grows,
 Childlike one sleeps all day.
 Eyes are dim, ears deaf,
 Strength is waning through weariness,
 The mouth, silenced, speaks not,
 The heart, void, recalls not the past,
 The bones ache throughout.
 Good has become evil, all taste is gone,
 What age does to people is evil in everything.
 The nose, clogged, breathes not,
 Painful are standing and sitting.

May this servant be ordered to make a staff of old age,
 So as to tell him the words of those who heard,
 The ways of the ancestors,
 Who have listened to the gods.
 May such be done for you,
 So that strife may be banned from the people,
 And the Two Shores may serve you!
 Said the majesty of this god:
 Instruct him then in the sayings of the past,
 May he become a model for the children of the great,

May obedience enter him,
 And the devotion of him who speaks to him,
 No one is born wise.

Beginning of the formulations of excellent discourse spoken by the Prince, Count, God's Father, God's beloved, Eldest Son of the King, of his body, Mayor of the city and Vizier, Ptahhotep, in instructing the ignorant in knowledge and in the standard of excellent discourse, as profit for him who will hear, as woe to him who would neglect them. He spoke to his son:

1. Don't be proud of your knowledge,
 Consult the ignorant and the wise;
 The limits of art are not reached,
 No artist's skills are perfect;
 Good speech is more hidden than greenstone,
 Yet may be found among maids at the grindstones.
2. If you meet a disputant in action,
 A powerful man, superior to you,
 Fold your arms, bend your back,
 To flout him will not make him agree with you.
 Make little of the evil speech
 By not opposing him while he's in action;
 He will be called an ignoramus,
 Your self-control will match his pile of words.

3. If you meet a disputant in action
Who is your equal, on your level,
You will make your worth exceed his by
 silence,
While he is speaking evilly,
There will be much talk by the hearers,
Your name will be good in the mind of the
 magistrates.
4. If you meet a disputant in action,
A poor man, not your equal,
Do not attack him because he is weak,
Let him alone, he will confute himself.
Do not answer him to relieve your heart,
Do not vent yourself against your opponent,
Wretched is he who injures a poor man,
One will wish to do what you desire,
You will beat him through the magistrates'
 reproof.
5. If you are a man who leads,
Who controls the affairs of the many,
Seek out every beneficent deed,
That your conduct may be blameless.
Great is justice, lasting in effect,
Unchallenged since the time of Osiris.
One punishes the transgressor of laws,
Though the greedy overlooks this;
Baseness may seize riches,
Yet crime never lands its wares;
In the end it is justice that lasts,
Man says: "It is my father's ground."
6. Do not scheme against people,
God punishes accordingly:
If a man says: "I shall live by it,"
He will lack bread for his mouth.
If a man says: "I shall be rich,"
He will have to say: "My cleverness has
 snared me."
If he says: "I will snare for myself,"
He will be unable to say: "I snared for my
 profit."
If a man says: "I will rob someone,"
He will end being given to a stranger.
People's schemes do not prevail,

God's command is what prevails;
Live then in the midst of peace,
What they give comes by itself.

7. If you are one among guests
At the table of one greater than you,
Take what he gives as it is set before you;
Look at what is before you,
Don't shoot many glances at him,
Molesting him offends the *ka*.¹
Don't speak to him until he summons,
One does not know what may displease;
Speak when he has addressed you,
Then your words will please the heart.
The nobleman, when he is behind food,
Behaves as his *ka* commands him;
He will give to him whom he favors,
It is the custom when night has come.
It is the *ka* that makes his hands reach out,
The great man gives to the chosen man;
Thus eating is under the counsel of god,
A fool is who complains of it.
8. If you are a man of trust,
Sent by one great man to another,
Adhere to the nature of him who sent you,
Give his message as he said it.
Guard against reviling speech,
Which embroils one great with another;
Keep to the truth, don't exceed it,
But an outburst should not be repeated.
Do not malign anyone,
Great or small, the *ka* abhors it.
9. If you plow and there's growth in the field,
And god lets it prosper in your hand,
Do not boast at your neighbors' side,
One has great respect for the silent man:
Man of character is man of wealth.
If he robs he is like a crocodile in court.
Don't impose on one who is childless,
Neither decry nor boast of it;
There is many a father who has grief,

¹ The term *ka* represents a complex concept linked to an individual's life force.

And a mother of children less content than
another;
It is the lonely whom god fosters,
While the family man prays for a follower.

10. If you are poor, serve a man of worth,
That all your conduct may be well with the
god.
Do not recall if he once was poor,
Don't be arrogant toward him
For knowing his former state;
Respect him for what has accrued to him,
For wealth does not come by itself.
It is their law for him whom they love,
His gain, he gathered it himself;
It is the god who makes him worthy
And protects him while he sleeps.
11. Follow your heart as long as you live,
Do no more than is required,
Do not shorten the time of "follow-the-heart,"
Trimming its moment offends the *ka*.
Don't waste time on daily cares
Beyond providing for your household;
When wealth has come, follow your heart,
Wealth does no good if one is glum!
12. If you are a man of worth
And produce a son by the grace of god,
If he is straight, takes after you,
Takes good care of your possessions,
Do for him all that is good,
He is your son, your *ka* begot him,
Don't withdraw your heart from him.
But an offspring can make trouble:
If he strays, neglects your counsel,
Disobeys all that is said,
His mouth spouting evil speech,
Punish him for all his talk!
They hate him who crosses you,
His guilt was fated in the womb;
He whom they guide can not go wrong,
Whom they make boatless can not cross.
13. If you are in the antechamber,
Stand and sit as fits your rank,

Which was assigned you the first day.
Do not trespass—you will be turned back,
Keen is the face to him who enters announced,
Spacious the seat of him who has been called.
The antechamber has a rule,
All behavior is by measure;
It is the god who gives advancement,
He who uses elbows is not helped.

14. If you are among the people,
Gain supporters through being trusted;
The trusted man who does not vent his
belly's speech,
He will himself become a leader.
A man of means—what is he like?
Your name is good, you are not maligned,
Your body is sleek, your face benign,
One praises you without your knowing.
He whose heart obeys his belly
Puts contempt of himself in place of love,
His heart is bald, his body unanointed;
The great-hearted is god-given,
He who obeys his belly belongs to the enemy.
15. Report your commission without faltering,
Give your advice in your master's council.
If he is fluent in his speech,
It will not be hard for the envoy to report,
Nor will he be answered, "Who is he to
know it?"
As to the master, his affairs will fail
If he plans to punish him for it,
He should be silent upon hearing: "I have
told."
16. If you are a man who leads,
Whose authority reaches wide,
You should do outstanding things,
Remember the day that comes after.
No strife will occur in the midst of honors,
But where the crocodile enters hatred arises.
17. If you are a man who leads,
Listen calmly to the speech of one who
pleads;
Don't stop him from purging his body
Of that which he planned to tell.

- A man in distress wants to pour out his heart
More than that his case be won.
About him who stops a plea
One says: "Why does he reject it?"
Not all one pleads for can be granted,
But a good hearing soothes the heart.
18. If you want friendship to endure
In the house you enter
As master, brother, or friend,
In whatever place you enter,
Beware of approaching the women!
Unhappy is the place where it is done,
Unwelcome is he who intrudes on them.
A thousand men are turned away from their
good:
A short moment like a dream,
Then death comes for having known them.
Poor advice is "shoot the opponent,"
When one goes to do it the heart rejects it.
He who fails through lust of them,
No affair of his can prosper.
19. If you want a perfect conduct,
To be free from every evil,
Guard against the vice of greed:
A grievous sickness without cure,
There is no treatment for it.
It embroils fathers, mothers,
And the brothers of the mother,
It parts wife from husband;
It is a compound of all evils,
A bundle of all hateful things.
That man endures whose rule is rightness,
Who walks a straight line;
He will make a will by it,
The greedy has no tomb.
20. Do not be greedy in the division,
Do not covet more than your share;
Do not be greedy toward your kin,
The mild has a greater claim than the harsh.
Poor is he who shuns his kin,
He is deprived of interchange.
Even a little of what is craved
Turns a quarreler into an amiable man.
21. When you prosper and found your house,
And love your wife with ardor,
Fill her belly, clothe her back,
Ointment soothes her body.
Gladden her heart as long as you live,
She is a fertile field for her lord.
Do not contend with her in court,
Keep her from power, restrain her—
Her eye is her storm when she gazes—
Thus will you make her stay in your
house.
22. Sustain your friends with what you have,
You have it by the grace of god;
Of him who fails to sustain his friends
One says, "a selfish *ka*."
One plans the morrow but knows not what
will be,
The right *ka* is the *ka* by which one is
sustained.
If praiseworthy deeds are done,
Friends will say, "welcome!"
One does not bring supplies to town,
One brings friends when there is need.
23. Do not repeat calumny,
Nor should you listen to it,
It is the spouting of the hot-bellied.
Report a thing observed, not heard,
If it is negligible, don't say anything,
He who is before you recognizes worth.
If a seizure is ordered and carried out,
Hatred will arise against him who seizes;
Calumny is like a dream against which one
covers the face.
24. If you are a man of worth
Who sits in his master's council,
Concentrate on excellence,
Your silence is better than chatter.
Speak when you know you have a
solution,
It is the skilled who should speak in
council;
Speaking is harder than all other work,
He who understands it makes it serve.