

# THE TEACHINGS OF PTAH-HOTEP

an epigrammatic approach

by

orlando mezzabotta



The Teachings of Ptah-hotep are usually approached from two main directions: that of “vulgar ethics” and that of “moral philosophy”. The first one forms a sort of practical toolbox, a series of behavioural suggestions to be applied in specific situations so that one may be judged as a subject who knows and follows the rules of Truth and Justice, the Egyptian *mꜣt*, gaining thus wordly esteem and respect. The other approach tries to extract from these teachings the basic components of a general moral structure explaining features of the ancient Egyptian world-view of which *mꜣt* is the luminous guiding light. Interpretations both valid and not mutually exclusive and which share a common opinion concerning the profound wisdom of Ptah-hotep’s maxims.

This is exactly the point I would put under scrutiny so as to show how these teachings may in fact perform a role somewhat different from the one usually assigned to them. A new perspective that can also explain a few apparent anomalies, the more notable being the “beneficent effects” the teachings may provide to the king himself:

|                            |   |
|----------------------------|---|
| <i>jh jr =tw n =k mjtt</i> | And the like will work for you.                 |
| <i>qr =tw šnw m rhyt</i>   | Troubles shall be forced out from the subjects, |
| <i>bꜣk n =k jdbwj</i>      | the Double Banks will serve you.                |

Ptah-hotep has just asked the king to let him appoint his successor, his staff of old age (*mꜣw-jꜣw*), more precisely his son, whom he is going to transmit the wisdom he himself has received from those who came before (*jmjw-ḥꜣt*) and who had been instructed by the gods themselves (*pꜣw sdm n ntrw*).

Coming from such a source one might expect to be enlightened by the quintessence of wisdom; and, were it so, those teachings might indeed be useful to the king as well. The fact is that if we look at them from a disenchanting perspective, divested from the romantic aura of which they are abundantly adorned, the unquestionably useful suggestions and valid moral attitudes they offer seem to be what, inside a

patriarchal society, any man of average common sense and good will (of Ptah-hotep's time, of course) should normally be acquainted with. Furthermore, leaving aside a few considerations concerning public administration, one can hardly see in them vizier-oriented specific teachings.

Last not least if they were meant to be a sort of catechism one might duly ask how come they be so ambiguous in their linguistic expression as if anticipating, in many instances, Heraclitean obscurity and working for modern translators as a sort of Rorschach test, so different are their rendering of cryptic passages. Should we then judge these apparent and alleged anomalies due to the scribe's deficiency? I'd say NO, definitely. For what my opinion might be worth I consider this text one of the most refined, nuanced and intelligent sample of scribal skill of ancient Egyptian literature, starting from its external form where the maxims (with their intricate syntax and not so easy interpretation) are placed within the virtual embrace of a prologue and an epilogue of relatively smooth reading. As if to point out that the teachings, coming from yonder times qualitatively different from the one of Ptah-hotep's contemporaries, must be listened to with an "adjusted" and cultivated ear. Which is exactly the concept that the epilogue points out in its multifarious references to the central image of "hearing" (*sdm*), the second section igniting a sort of firework of creative linguistic inventions.

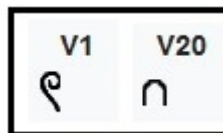
As regards the sequence of the teachings there is a general agreement about its randomness, which seems to exclude a logic chain. True that they may be gathered into three specific groups: (i) personal and familiar ethics; (ii) social behaviour, namely interrelation with fellow citizens; (iii) administrative functions, describing how a person in a position of responsibility should act in accord with his office; nonetheless the various circumstances follow one another without any apparent design or intention. There is no taxonomy, with only one exception regarding the group of the three initial maxims which suggest the proper attitude one must assume when facing someone who talks nonsense, according to his social rank (higher, equal or lower to that of the interlocutor). That's an example of valid classification and I doubt it be mere chance. The scribe seems in fact to know quite better than that.

Let us focus our attention on the last maxim. One would expect a significant grand final. Nothing of the sort. It is about a wife who, having lost her former sex appeal, should not nonetheless be repudiated in force of her wit and pleasant character. No matter how decently founded that does not seem to be such a relevant fact. But if we now turn to the first maxim that gives the start to the series we see humble female servants at the grindstone possessing more wisdom than alleged wise men. Thus

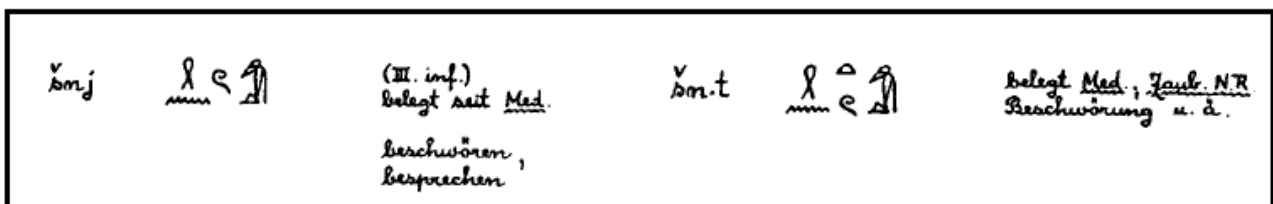
we are spectators of the critical scrutiny of a patriarchal society within the embrace of female knowledge. Are we entitled to look at these women as an allusion to the double *m3't*? (There is, true, in one of the maxims, another female figure, but she is no more than her husband's property and not allowed to mix with household's affairs, thus without social relevance.)

I am aware this may be quite a far-fetched interpretation, but I am convinced that the scribe did know what he was doing and that there's method in his randomness. Let us try to reconstruct the "theatrical" setting of the scene. We are in the pharaoh's audience hall, probably filled with the courtly entourage, where the old and fatigued Ptah-hotep is going to take his leave from his vizier office and pass it, with the king's *nihil obstat*, to his son, his "staff of old age" (*mdw j3w*). In apparent contradiction with his sentences stating that old age impairs speech (*r3 gr n mdw.n -f*), breathing (*fnd db3 n ssn.n -f*), standing and sitting (*n tnw 'h' hmst*) he seems yet to be able to perform his not so brief debriefing for the whole world to hear (*sdm, sdm, sdm!*)

I can't help seeing in that a sardonic touch merged with a knowing scribal wink. And I would not exclude that the old man's weariness (*phty hr 3k n wrd jb*) be in fact a way to state that he is really fed up dealing with so many courtiers whose moral and mental levels he can stand no more. His venerable age (110 years) does perhaps hide an ironic allusion? Its hieroglyphic rendering (but hieratic is almost similar) shows a rope (V1) and a hobble for cattle (V20)

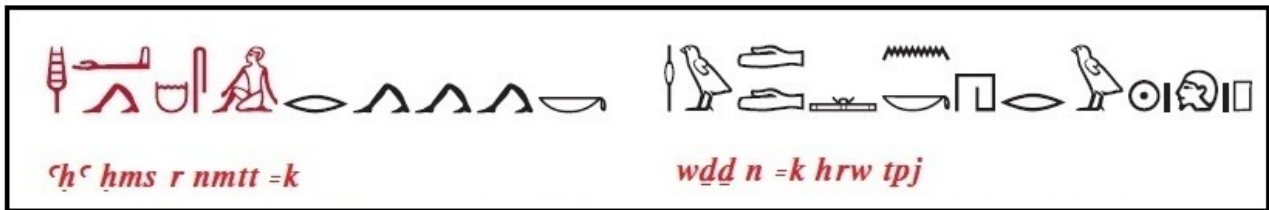


thus valuable instruments to control off-track wanderings. And if we listen to its sound we hear "*šn(t)-mdw*", where "*šn(t) = 100*) might have possible assonances with "*šnj / šnt*" (to critique, to discuss, to conjure, to litigate)



and "*md(w) = 10*" with "*mdw*" (speech) and "*mdw*" (staff). Thus the staff might indeed be the rod that the wise old man uses for "castigating" (via speech) the unruly

officers of the royal entourage. From this angle we might also see in the ancestors who once listened to the gods (*jmjw-ḥꜣt pꜣw sꜣm n nꜣrw*) those very courtiers who, when they took their office, had been told how to behave

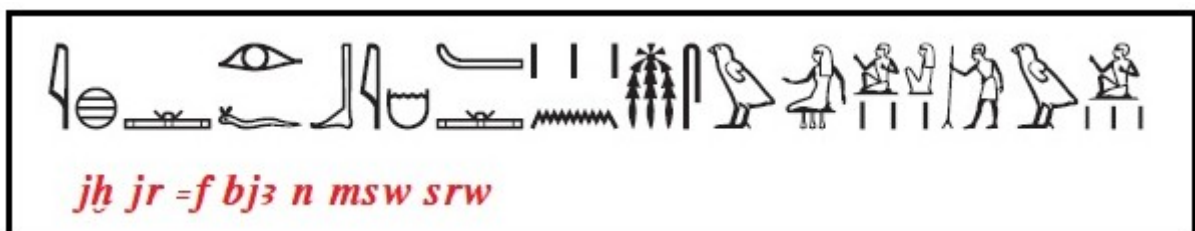


but then probably took the wrong course for private profit or blameworthy conduct. “*jmjw-ḥꜣt*” are in fact not only those who came before, the ancestors, but also “those who are in front”. Thus why not see in them the courtiers who are at that moment “in front” of the king and through whose crowd Ptah-hotep passes in his significant exit?

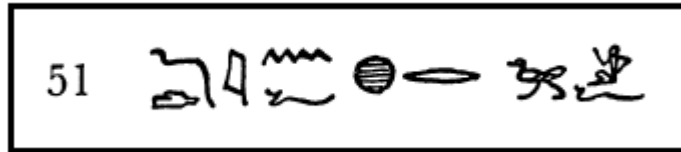
This would explain the apparent randomness of the teachings. While passing through the entourage Ptah-hotep instructs his son to beware those “specific” courtiers whose wrong behaviour is made manifest by each maxim and which we may assume these “unqualified subjects” can hardly make out (that is perhaps the motive of their often contorted syntax).

From this angle the teachings would not only be read as sound and unquestionably valid moral directions, but also as sardonic epigrams, underlining, with annoyed contempt, the meanness of disreputable officers who, for various reasons, are present in the royal court. Having them under control and knowing what they are would no doubt be useful to the king himself; and that would give sense to the above mentioned and somewhat puzzling lines (*jh jr =tw n =k mjtt*).

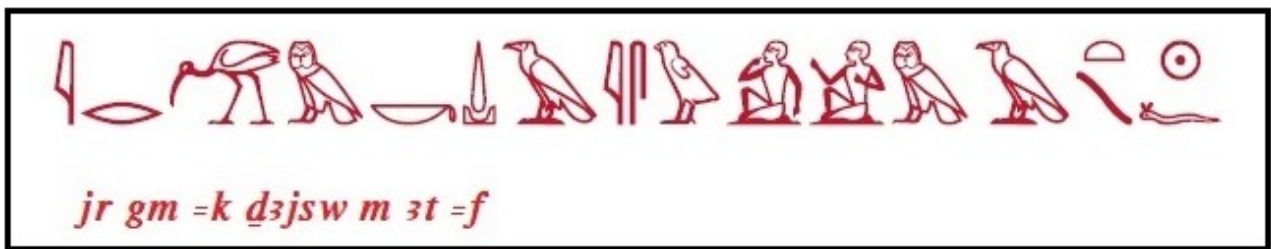
These moral targets would thus play the “bad guys” whose examples should be rejected by their “righteous” successors; perhaps those “*msw srw*” whom the new vizier, Ptah-hotep’s son, should be a model (*bjꜣ*) for.



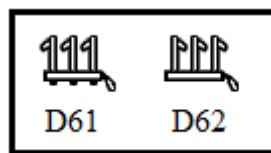
Now a last observation concerning the number of maxims. Some state they are 37, others 36. It depends on how one considers the section that starts with



where Ptah-hotep advises his son not to be proud of his knowledge since there is no limit to learning and one might find wisdom even amongst servants at the grindstone. This may be read as a general prologue and be assigned a 0, if only because it is not written in red ink as the beginnings of all the other maxims are. Thus the total number would be 36. I am of this opinion, probably because it better fits my interpretation. In fact 36 has a singular affinity with the 36 decans of Egyptian astronomy. And that might be an ironic allusion to the cosmic disorder generated by unqualified officers from whose foul proximity Ptah-hotep subtracts himself taking his disdainful leave. This sarcastic starry touch may be in fact be detected in the first three maxims sharing all the same “stupid” figure of someone making show of himself while talking nonsense:



As said above this is the only circumstance in which we remark a taxonomic method. I would not exclude that, within the above suggested parodic cosmic allusion, these three subjects be assembled into a D61/D62 graphic rendering:



namely “toes”, namely “s3h”, namely Orion, namely Osiris:



And that would be the perfect image of vain and pompous stupidity (people convinced they have reached the starry height of Osiris/Orion) juxtaposed to the

