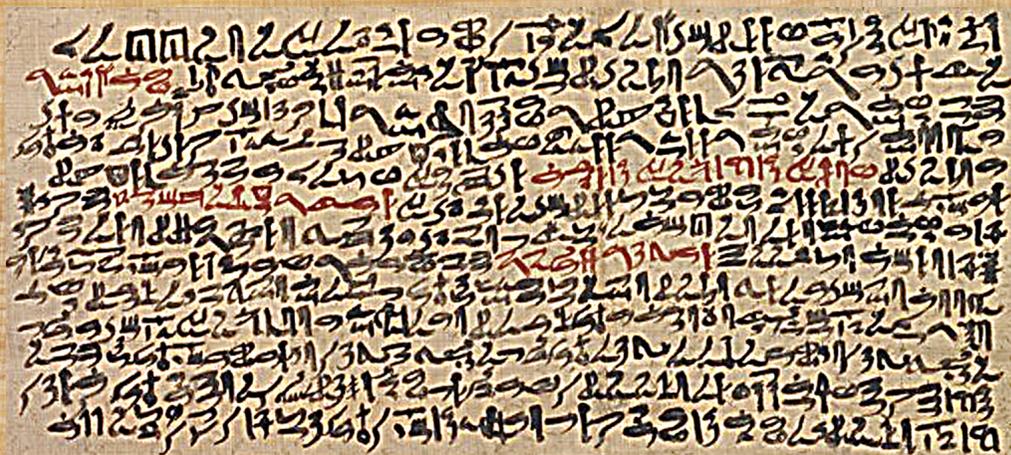


# The Egyptian Gentleman

The Maxims of  
Good Discourse

by Ptahhotep

the oldest book in the world



WIM VAN DEN DUNGEN

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# **The Egyptian Gentleman**

The Maxims of Ptahhotep

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**no one is born wise**

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## Preface

The French egyptologist Christian Jacq wrote : ‘An egyptologist who does not believe in the Egyptian religion, who does not share a total sympathy with the civilization he studies, could not, in our opinion, utter but *dried-up words*. Intellectualism, brilliant as it can be, has never replaced *lived sentiment*, even in a scientific discipline.’ – Jacq, Ch., *Le Monde magique de l’Egypte ancienne*, Du Rocher – Paris, 1983, p.7, my italics, and translation.

What does this ‘believe’ imply ? Does it mean one has to dress up like Ancient Egyptian deities and mimic rituals one cannot possibly reconstruct ? No. Does it call for us to worship the deities as the Egyptians did ? No. Perhaps we should understand the deities differently and see how they represent bridges connecting the shores of phenomenal and noumenal reality ?

‘The gods of Egypt cannot be characterized aptly as “the vital essence of a form of existence that recurs in the most diverse circumstances.” They are formulas rather than forms, and in their world, one is sometimes as if displaced into *the world of elementary particles*. In his edition of Papyrus Salt 825, Philippe Derchain used similes derived from physics, explicitly disregarding the “moral aspect” of the gods and analyzing them dispassionately. Moreover, what striking conceptual parallels there are between the smallest and the greatest ! A god is combined with another and becomes a new being with new characteristics, and then at the next moment separates into a number of entities. *What he is remains hidden, but his luminous trail can be seen*, his reaction with others is clear, and his actions can be felt. He is *material and spiritual*, a force and a figure, he is manifest in changing forms that should be mutually exclusive, but we know that within all this something exists and exercises power.’ – Hornung, *Conceptions of God in Ancient Egypt*, 1996, pp.256-257, my italics.

Belgian universities offering philosophy majors do not mention Ancient Egyptian sapiential teachings. Due to their uncritical acceptance of Hellenocentrism, most Western academia promotes the

wrong idea that philosophy (a term coined by Pythagoras of Samos) began with Thales of Miletus in 6<sup>th</sup> century Ionia.

'It is a persistent, if no longer intentional, bias of Western thought that "serious" philosophy began with the Greeks. In the sense of philosophy as a science –a system of intellectual principles developed according to fixed rules of investigation– this is true. But in a broader sense of philosophy as *a system of human thought* it is, of course erroneous. (...) Nearly every religious text, and many that we might classify as secular, reflect then-current thinking on what the universe is like and how it came to be. No one text, however, records the results of such speculation for that reason alone. All have an ulterior purpose that supersedes the purely speculative.' – Allen, *Genesis in Egypt : The Philosophy of Ancient Egyptian Creation Accounts*, 1988, p.ix, my italics.

The sapiential instructions, a tradition beginning ca. 2600 BCE, point to another approach, less cosmologically inclined. Here we find the idea of a *crucial transmission*, of imparting ancestral wisdom to the younger generation. Thus, the cherished principles of justice and truth (*ma'at*) may endure, and Egyptian civilization last.

The *Maxims of Good Discourse* of Ptahhotep form the first complete text elaborating the Memphite view on the way of life of what I, somewhat metaphorically, refer to as 'the Egyptian gentleman,' an upper-class individual able to interact with all-important layers of Egyptian life, thereby fostering harmonious social relationships.

The core of his message is to never hinder the way of a balanced heart (*Ib*) satisfying vital energy (*Ka*) and thus fulfilling Ma'at.

## Introduction

The *Maxims of Good Discourse*, named after the thirty-seven wisdom sayings making out the bulk of this exceptional and ancient text, is a literary composition evidencing intentional cognitive design beyond that of a record, list, or mere collection of moral ideas. Written in the format of a deliberate instruction given by a father to his (spiritual) son, it enables the latter, by way of right speech, to live the good life by doing the right thing, the outcome of not interrupting the moment of the heart (☐, *Ib*, F34), offending one's vital energy (⊔, D28 or *Ka*). Such an excellent son, an Egyptian gentleman during life, becomes a justified deceased in the afterlife. This work from Ancient Egypt's Old Kingdom (ca. 2670 – 2205 BCE), written ca. 4400 years ago by a man called 'Ptahhotep' (Ptah is pleased), has been labeled 'moral,' but, according to Lichtheim (1975), does not 'amount to a comprehensive moral code,' nor are its precepts 'strung together in any logical order,' a position rejected by Jacq (1993), for whom the *Maxims* form 'un tout cohérent.' He agrees with Chabas, who called it 'le plus ancien livre du monde.'<sup>(1)</sup> As will become apparent, it is not because formal order is absent that the *Maxims* are devoid of an *organic structure*. Besides morality, the text also teaches –by example– psychology, politics, diplomacy, and the emancipation of everyman. It touches 'upon the most important aspects of human relations.'<sup>(2)</sup>

The compositional backbone of this remarkable composition is *good discourse* and its dynamics, suggestive of the verbal sapience of Memphis.<sup>(3)</sup> Moreover, an 'ascetical' approach to divinity<sup>(4)</sup> is present, for none of the gods are mentioned by name (exception made for Pharaoh, Osiris, Ma'at, and the Followers of Horus). *Netjer* ('god' or 'the god') is a single flagpole without determinative. This refers to Ptah. The *netjeru* (the plural of 'god' or 'the gods') are invoked by that word only once (line 24) and are next referred to as 'they.'

This absence of constellational elements contrasts with contemporary royal texts, such as the *Pyramid Texts of Unas*.<sup>(5)</sup> It will remain typical for didactical literature as a whole.<sup>(6)</sup>

In the tomb of king Unas (ca. 2378 – 2348 BCE), we read how both the gods and Pharaoh ‘fly’, while ordinary men ‘hide.’<sup>(7)</sup> Thanks to the *Maxims*, we catch a glimpse of the soteriology reserved to non-royal officials and commoners, a teaching to be recommended to all those who lacked an effective spiritual dynamism or ‘soul’ (𓆎, G29 or *Ba*) to ascend.

Ptahhotep (I) was the vizier of Djedkare Izezi (ca. 2411 – 2378 BCE) of the late Vth Dynasty. He and his family were buried at Saqqara. His tomb is a mastaba located in North Saqqara (D62), where he was to be laid to rest by himself. In this tomb, mention is made of his son Akhetotep (I), who was also a vizier. Ptahhotep’s (I) grandson, Ptahhotep Tshefi, identified as Ptahhotep (II), lived under king Unas and was buried in a double mastaba (D64) together with his father, Akhetotep (I). This tomb, mentioning his two sons Akhetotep (II) and Ptahhotep (III), is famous for depicting Egyptian life. While the *Maxims* affirm Ptahhotep’s (II) grandfather to be the author, Ptahhotep Tshefi has also been considered. Did he receive the oral lineage from his father Akhetotep (I) and grandfather, king Izezi’s Ptahhotep (I) ; making the family tradition persist ? ‘Various indicators prove that the work of Ptahhotep remained present during the whole of pharaonic history and even continued beyond that, for Coptic monks, the first Egyptian Christians, appreciated certain of the maxims.’ – Jacq, *L’Enseignement du sage Égyptien Ptahhotep*, 1993, p.12, my translation.

In the expression *tjesu en medjet neferet*, usually translated as ‘the maxims of good discourse,’ the word *tjes*, ‘maxim’ also means ‘speech, utterance, phrase, sentence.’<sup>(8)</sup> Added to it was the determinative of a papyrus roll (𓏏, Y1 – writing and thinking). The word *nefer* (𓆎, F35) has a complex semantic field : ‘beautiful, fair, good, fine, necessary, happy, lawful’<sup>(9)</sup>, while *neferet* conveys ‘good things, what is good.’ ‘Good’ discourse is *a fortiori* ‘right’ speech.

The central concept ‘discourse’ (*medu*) indicates ‘speech, address, plea’ and has A2 (𓆎) as determinative, a man with hand to mouth, indicative of activity, *in casu* the act of actually using words.

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The *Maxims* describe a special kind of discourse leading to a happy life by engaging in proper thoughts, speech, and actions. A 'mantric' necessity is at hand, for given the right words, enduring positive effects will be generated *de opere operato*. Morality (good or evil actions) is rooted in thought (or heart) and speech (right or wrong use of the tongue, 𓆎, *nes*, F20). In this sense, the *Maxims* provide insight into the diplomacy of Ancient Egypt.

Coordinated schemes (myth), pre-concepts (pre-rationality), and concrete concepts (proto-rationality)<sup>(10)</sup> define the fundamental semantics of the edifice of Egyptian sapience, elucidating origin, continuity, and demise of creation and humanity. In the mythical, Neolithic mind, surrounded by danger and change, *stability* and *order* were sacred. Natural cycles manifested the enduring part of creation. Cycles related to birth, growth, death, and rebirth became the domain of the 'Great Goddess' of the sacred, appearing in Ancient Egypt as early as ca. 4000 BCE.<sup>(11)</sup> The belief the human skeleton represents the *enduring within man* is (still) part of Shamanism, the natural, unorganized, religious culture of hunters and early settlers, so prominent in the Neolithic. Mummification takes the *conservation* of the ephemeral a step further, for what is meant to disappear (flesh and blood) is sustained, to allow for the existence of the vital double (*Ka*) and the soul (*Ba*), both intimately associated with this grand talismanic object, the entombed mummy (*sah*). Thus the 'second birth' in the kingdom of Osiris was assured. Challenging the decay process was one of the essential features of their funerary preoccupations and characteristic of the Ancient Egyptian mentality. The message Ptahhotep seeks to transmit is about what *endures in the realm of the heart (Ib)*, the abode of consciousness, free will, conscience, thought, and speech, in short, the mind. His 37 maxims exemplify Ma'at, the goddess of truth, justice, and equilibrium. The (spiritual) son who heard what is said and who carefully listens, acquires rectitude of mind, affect and action, the proper balance and steering capacities to navigate the heart in such a way that effective results ensue, so that evil (*isefet*), injustice (Seth) and the 'fire of the belly' are gone.



**Fig.1.** Jasper Heart-amulet of Nakhtamun  
ca. 1350 – 1250 BCE – British Museum (EA15619)

Ptahhotep puts his trust in our cognitive capacities, in mind (heart) and speech (tongue). The wise acquire and manifest just good and right speech. It is *just* for never transgressing Ma'at, *good* for yielding effective results and *right* because coherent (circulatory) in every possible spiritual, social and psychological situation, never offending one's vital energy (*Ka*).

|  |                                |   |
|--|--------------------------------|---|
| Order of Pre-Creation<br>Nun and Atum only           | Ma'at is not                   | 'first time'<br>Ogdoad or Ennead        |
| Order of Creation<br>deities only                    | Re creates<br>Ma'at            | the spirits<br>immortal and eternal     |
| Order of Pharaoh<br>divine king ( <i>nesu</i> ) only | Pharaoh returns<br>Ma'at       | the divine soul<br>deified and immortal |
| Order of the Two Lands<br>everyman                   | Egypt/Nile<br>circulates Ma'at | the state of veneration<br>justified    |



**Fig.2.** The Weighing of the Heart – *Papyrus of Ani*  
XIXth Dynasty – British Museum (EA10470)

The hieroglyphs of this scene read :

‘Osiris, the scribe Ani, said : “O my heart which I had from my mother ! O my heart which I had from my mother ! O my heart of my different ages ! May there be nothing to resist me at the judgment. May there be no opposition to me from the assessors. May there be no parting of You from me in the presence of him who keeps the scales ! You are my *Ka* within my body, which formed and strengthened my limbs. May You come forth to the place of happiness whereto I advance. May the entourage not cause my name to stink, and may no lies be spoken against me in the presence of the god ! It is indeed well that You should hear !”’

‘Many Egyptian texts explain indeed that the heart is the organ that receives Maat and also emits Maat. This role of reception-emission of Maat played by the heart is the way by which men participate in maintaining the balance of the cosmic as well as the human world and the free flow of life. (...) In other words, the picture shows the balance obtained through the right circulation of Maat through the heart. The Ancient Egyptians seem to have some precise and now lost knowledge about the circulation of solar energy. They applied it to many aspects of life and within them to justice through the concept of Maat. (...) The essential message we draw from the pic-

ture is the role played by the heart in the flow of Maat.' – Mancini, *Maat Revealed*, 2004, pp.55-56.

Besides Pharaoh and his representatives (the high priests), nobody was able to directly address the spirits (*Akhu*) of the deities (*netjeru*), who at all times abided in the sky (*pet*). They interacted with the realm of the mortals by sending their *Bas* and *Kas*. The latter were attracted to and gratified by our (voice-) offerings, particularly by the power sum of vital energy (*kau*). The voice-offerings of the divine king, his authoritative speech (*hu*), and understanding (*sia*) had tremendous vital (*ka*) and protective (*sa*) power, as well as *magical potential* (*heka*). His daily ritual gratified the pantheon. The king alone mediated between heaven (*pet*) and earth (*ta*) because he alone, as Follower of Horus and son of Re, was the *sole god incarnate* in Egypt. His great speech performed rectitude, returning Ma'at to its creator, his father Re, and so guaranteed the 'Balance of the Two Lands,' the unity-in-division, always risking outer (Seth) and/or inner (*isefet*) disruption and corruption. The divine king was the source of life, property, and health. So was the Nile, ever-flowing from South to North, taking part, together with the son of Re, in the eternal recurrence (*neheh*) of birth, life, death, and rebirth. This is the power of the *orderly circulation of a multitude of vital energies* (*kau*). Commoners hoped to be justified (*ma'akheru*) and enjoy a 'second birth' in the Field of Reeds of Osiris (*aru*), while the divine king and his kin ascended to the Field of Peace of Re (*sekhet-hetep*), traveling with him on his glorious 'Bark of Millions of Years.' Both king and the Nile embodied Egypt. The link was profound. He alone guaranteed a 'good Nile.' This grand river fed Egypt. Yearly, it inundated and fertilized the land, leaving 'black soil' (*kemet*) behind. So dependent were the Egyptians on the Nile, they referred to their own country as 'Kemet,' the 'black land.' Too much or too little water could wreak havoc. A 'bad Nile' meant the gods were not pleased. The divine king was the only one able to fix things. Was he able to do so? Was his magic (*heka*) strong enough?

Did Re bless his son? The circulation of goods along the Nile had been essential in the process of unification, bringing North (Lower Egypt) and South (Upper Egypt) under a single rule, strategically establishing the House of Ptah at Memphis (*Men-nefer*), the 'Balance

of the Two Lands.' Under the authority of Ptah, kingship would – just as Imhotep's architectonic canon – become a sublime example of temporal and spiritual unity as present in the living king.

In the *Memphis Theology*<sup>(12)</sup> we read : 'Then Horus stood over the land. He is the uniter of this land, proclaimed in the great name : *ta-Tenen*, South-of-his-Wall, Lord of Eternity. Then sprouted the two Great in Magic upon his head. He is Horus who arose as King of Upper and Lower Egypt, who united the Two Lands in the Nome of the (White) Wall, the place in which the Two Lands were united. Reed (heraldic plant for Upper Egypt) and papyrus (heraldic plant for Lower Egypt) were placed on the double door of the House of Ptah. That means : Horus and Seth, pacified and united. They fraternized so as to cease quarreling wherever they may be, being united in the House of Ptah, the 'Balance of the Two Lands' in which Upper and Lower Egypt had been weighed. ' – *Memphis Theology*, lines 13c - 16c.

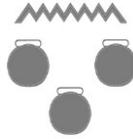
The House of Ptah pacifies and unites Horus and Seth.

Seeking endurance motivated inscribing the texts in hard stone (another activity ruled by Ptah). Egypt adhered to a grammatology of presence. To writing was attributed the capacity to *abolish the temporal limitations of speech* and to extend the latter *infinitely*. The texts were inscribed on the walls of sealed tombs, protected sarcophagi (coffins) and talismanic mummies, hiding amulets and talismans, especially the heart-talisman placed upon the physical heart left inside. The deceased was not supposed to 'read' these sacred words but be aware of their sacred power (*sekhem*), manifest as text and ritual. They facilitated the process of transformation (Osiris) and rose to heaven (Re). They acted *de opere operato*, out of their vital energy encased in the sacred glyphs. This activity endured.

In the Old Kingdom, the question of how creation came into existence gave rise to three interconnected stories or theogonies. Heliopolis introduced *cosmogonic self-creation*, Hermopolis the *creative Great Word*. In Memphis, creation is a fact because of *divine cognition* and *divine speech*. Ptahhotep was a Memphite.

## Heliopolitan Cosmogony

The Heliopolitans (from Heliopolis, *Iunu*) formulated the dominant royal theology of the Old Kingdom. It became canonic. Order (creation) is considered self-caused (*kheper*, 𓆎) *amid everlasting undifferentiated chaos*. The latter is called 'Nun,' a cultless, dark, pre-creational chaos-deity.<sup>(13)</sup>



**Nun**

Pre-creation was imagined as a limitless, everlasting, primeval sea, water, or ocean, called by various names : *nu* (Nu), *nuu* (Nuu), *nenu* (Nenu), *nenuu* (Nenuu), *nenenuu* (Nenenuu), *niu* (Niu). In the *Pyramid Texts*, *nenu(u)* (Nenu) is the most frequent form (22/30). The core sound, the biliteral *nu*, was vocalized in Coptic as *Noyn* or *Noun* (Y = U), from which the English Nun has been derived. *Noun* has been translated as 'abyss,' 'depth of Earth,' 'sea,' ...

However, pre-creation is more than a deadly abyss of the lifeless absence of space and time. More than a formless mass of confusion, inert, dark, and damaging to order and life. In this dark, boundless, and abysmal expanse, potential light and so potential creation are present. When do they become actual ? Like the seeds in the ball of dung pushed by the beetle, Nun has a *Ba* called Atum, a co-relative dynamical factor present in pre-existence next to Nun, a balanced opposite, representing singularity, order, light, and life.

Creation is the unfolding within the undifferentiated waters of the elements of Nature, viewed as the self-realization of Atum. Nun exists outside the recurrent cycle of time (*neheh*), representing everlastingness or eternal sameness (*djedet*). As such, Nun is a pre-cosmic, primordial, pre-existent, but pregnant of cosmic possibilities. Nun does not create the world. Atum creates Atum, who creates the world. Even after this, Nun continues to lurk in the

darkness of the deep and is encountered during sleep (bad dreams) or in the netherworld (*duat*), either as the destroyer of the heart of the deceased (*Ammut*, whose curse is lifted by the chaos-gods) or as the snake Apophis (*Apepi*) trying to halt Re (in the 7<sup>th</sup> Hour).

Another manifestation of this lurking chaos was the destruction of one's name (*ren*) after death. This occurred when the deceased was unbalanced of heart. At this point, the latter was eaten by the monstrous devouress of the dead (*Ammut*, entering the scene after Amarna), which had the head and jaws of a crocodile, the hind-quarters of a hippopotamus, and the middle part of a lion. This was a 'second death,' the irreversible destruction of the person and the return of all physical and non-physical factors to the elements.

But Nun, besides this hostile aspect, also had a fruitful and regenerative side. The divine king and the *Ba* of his father Re could regenerate by magically contacting the 'first time' of this dark, primordial realm.<sup>(14)</sup> 'In temporal terms, too, regeneration is possible only *outside the ordered world of creation*. In order to be rejuvenated, that is, to reverse the course of time, one must step for a little outside time and see oneself at the beginning of the temporal world, at creation or even in the *world before creation*, which knows *no time*.' – Hornung, *Op.cit.*, 1996, p.161, my italics.

This interaction between the timeless and the temporal order is mediated by ritual and ritual speech ; *per invisibilium ad visibilium*.

'Through the paradox of rite, every consecrated space coincides with the center of the world, just as the time of any ritual coincides with the mythical time of the "beginning." Through repetition of the cosmogonic act, concrete time, in which the construction takes place, is projected into mythical time, *in illo tempore* when the foundation of the world occurred.' – Eliade, *The Myth of the Eternal Return*, 1965, p.21.

This view on pre-creation was unique and highly influential.

'Scarcely any other civilization has integrated the nonexistent and its creative potential so perfectly into its way of life, acknowledging

the nonexistent without falling prey to it. Perhaps this is the source of Egyptian creativity, of the balance and sense of the measure of things which we encounter in all manifestations of Egyptian culture, and which are striking especially in comparison with other Near Eastern cultures of the time.' – Hornung, *Op.cit.*, 1996, p.184.

The world process consists of four stages. The first two 'occur' before existence (in everlasting timelessness and in the 'first time'), and the two last involve creation itself and its subsequent end.

- pre-creation :

- (1) *before the beginning* ;
- (2) the '*first time*' before actual creation ;

- creation :

- (3) the *actual manifestation* of creation as a primordial mount ;
- (4) the *end of creation* (the return of Osiris and Atum to Nun).

**Phase 1** : *before the beginning*

Before the beginning (phase 1), there was only Nun, with Atum 'afloat' on this infinite, dark, timeless, and spaceless ocean. Atum, the *Ba* of Nun, is the operational aspect, whereas Nun is wholly passive and without differentiation. At this point, Atum is not active, *dispersed* on the infinite surface of Nun.

In pre-existence, Atum is asleep. And as long as Atum does not observe Atum, the seed of creation remains virtual and hidden in pre-existence.

'(Nun :) I am the Waters, unique, without a second !  
 (Atum :) That is where(in) I developed,  
 on the great occasion of my floating that happened to me.  
 I am the one who developed,  
 round as a seed in his egg.  
 I am the one who began therein, in the Waters.

See, the Flood is subtracted from me.  
 See, I am the remainder.  
 It was through my power that I brought about my body.  
 I am the one who made me.  
 It was as I wished,  
 according to my heart,  
 that I built myself.'

*Coffin Texts*, Spell 714.

**Phase 2** : the '*first time*' before the actual creation

Creation begins with Atum contracting to a singularity (phase 2). Atum, called the 'Father of the Gods' (*Pyramid Texts*, 1521a, 1546a) derived from *tm*, suggestive of completion, totality, was conceived by the Heliopolitans as *causa sui* and fugal. He is an alternation-point between pre-creation and creation. He was also called 'Lord of All' (*Coffin Texts*, Spell 167), 'Lord of the Limits of the Sky' (*Coffin Texts*, Spell 709), and 'Lord to the Limit' (*Coffin Texts*, Spell 553). The *bisexual* Atum created himself. This gives rise to remarkable images. Atum masturbated, taking his seed into his mouth, thereby spitting out (sneezing) the constituents of creation. His self-creation is his unfoldment. The pantheon and so creation itself are simultaneous with Atum creating Atum and splitting.

This act of self-creation and its consequences happens in the 'first time' (*zep tepy*), in the 'Golden Age' of creation, manifest in a virtual sense only (grammatically given by the virtual adverb clause, as in 'he has had not yet ...').<sup>(15)</sup> We are still in pre-creation, but the advent of creation is imminent. An interstitial zone is at hand.

The 'first time' exists between the point when Atum stops being merely afloat (ending the period *before* the beginning – phase 1) and the moment creation actually manifests (phase 3). It is the time of creation as *virtuality* or *potentiality* (phase 2). This is the period of Atum's creation of his company of *gods and goddesses* (*paut*). This primordial creative activity of Atum was imagined to happen in a realm existing in-between pre-creation and actual creation. This is the 'beginning' paradoxically 'happening' in absolute time or no-

time (pre-creation is not left). Primordial creativity is the ejection of the pantheon out of Atum, the deities emerging in this 'first time' *out of his point of singularity*. The origin of creation is Atum's self-creation, no longer 'floating' (phase 1) but active in pre-existence, in this mythical 'first time' of divine creativity (phase 2). In this 'first time,' Atum constantly *recreates himself* (eternal recurrence) and the world, depending on this sustaining activity, is –at every moment–recreated (a notion returning in Sufism).

The nine essential elements of creation (the Ennead), including Atum, the ontological principal, unfold in this 'first time.'

This enneadic process involves three 'generations' : the first pair formed was Shu and Tefnut (preparing the cosmos), the second Geb and Nut (arranging Earth and sky), and the third Osiris, Isis, Seth, and Nephthys (making the human realm ready). As a fugal monad, Atum first self-created and then simultaneously split into two fundamental creative principles (space –Shu– and time –Tefnut–), out of which the multitudes orderly emerged. The first pair reflected the fundamental structure of creation, the second pair its cosmology, and the third pair defined the human realm with its family structures and their drama (with Seth killing Osiris).

### **Phase 3** : the *actual manifestation* of creation

Creation bursts forth and actualizes (phase 3) when the first ray of the Sun (Atum turned into Re) hits the 'risen land' (*tatenen*), the primordial mount. At this point, primordial creation (the Ennead) manifests as the daughter of Re, Ma'at. At the same time, this also heralds the advent of Horus (*heru*), the vindicated king, whose name may be a reference to the Sun as the 'Far One.'<sup>(17)</sup> Creation eventualizes as a complex 10<sup>th</sup> element, simultaneously bringing forth the order of the cosmos (Re, Ma'at) and the Egyptian state (Horus, Pharaoh).

With this, the sacred Decad of Creation becomes fully manifest, both in the sky (the Ennead) as on earth (the Residence of Pharaoh).

'Paradoxically too, the sun can be understood not only as the source of the Ennead (in his identification with Atum) but also as the product of the Ennead, in his identification with the god Horus. As the son of Osiris and Isis, Horus is the "tenth member" of the Ennead. As "heir of his father" (CT VI 185d) he is both the culmination and the prime beneficiary of the great cosmic cycle of natural elements incorporated in the Ennead.' – Allen, *Op.cit.*, 1988, p.11.

'To say : Hail to You, Atum !  
Hail to You, Kheprer, the self-created !  
May You be high in this your name of "Height,"  
May You come into being in this your name of "Kheprer."'

*Pyramid Texts*, Utterance 587, § 1587.

#### **Phase 4** : the *end of creation*

Eschatology was not Kemet's concern. However, in the *Book of the Two Ways*, the end of time (after 'millions of years ') is mentioned : 'I (Atum) have passed millions of years between myself and yonder Inert One, the son of Geb.<sup>(\*)</sup> I will sit with him in the one place. Mounds will be towns, and towns will be mounds. Estate will desolate estate.' – *Coffin Texts*, Spell 1130. (\*) the weary one, Osiris.

As creation is defined by two jurisdictions (Atum-Re versus Osiris), the one diurnal, the other nocturnal, the whole duration implies millions of years of separation between Atum and Osiris, between the two heavens. When both are in 'one place,' creation has ended. Only Nun, Atum, and Osiris remain. This is the outcome after everything has slowly fallen apart.

'This earth will return to the primeval water, to endless (flood) as in its first state. I (Atum) shall remain with Osiris after I have transformed myself into another snake which men do not know, and the gods do not see.' – *Book of the Dead*, chapter 175.

So, three modes characterize Atum :

(1) *Atum 'afloat' in Nun* (phase 1) : the genetic potential is diffused and scattered in the infinite and inert expanse of chaos (the water of Nun). This is the mode of the everlasting foundation (*djedet*) or *Urgrund* of non-luminous things ;

(2) *Atum-Kheprer* (phase 2) : the genetic potential is drawn together to a single point, immediately splitting into an Ennead of deities and manifesting as Re, his daughter Ma'at and his representative (son) Horus (Pharaoh). As long as this universe exists, primordial power is harvested by returning to the 'first time' ; the way of eternal recurrence (*neheh*), the dynamic base of every luminous thing ;

(3) *Atum-Re* (phase 3) : the virtual Ennead becomes actual as cosmos (Atum becoming Re and Re creating Ma'at) and as the order of the world (Horus as Pharaoh).

'I (Atum) was once alone ;

I was with Re at his first appearances,  
when he arose from the horizon.

I am the Great One, the self-created.

*Who is the Great One, the self-created ?*

*He is the Great God, he is (in) the water of Nun.'*

*Coffin Texts*, Spell 335, IV 184.

### Hermopolitan Cosmogony

'May I see you go forth as Thoth when a waterway is prepared for the Bark of Re to his fields which are in a part of the sky, may you rush on as one who is at the head of the Chaos-gods.' – *Pyramid Texts*, utterance 406.

In Hermopolis (Khemenu, or 'the city of the eight gods'), Nun was an Ogdoad. While Heliopolitan theology became dominant in the Vth Dynasty, it did not repress the theology of Memphis (Ptah) or Hermopolis. The three can be read as *complementing each other*, although differences are apparent. Thoth is the head of the pre-creational Ogdoad, and when, as the sacred Ibis, he drops the creative Great Word from his beak, he creates everything. Here the mythical origin is placed under the command of the divine mind,

the word of Re, and god of magic. The primordial realm is personified. This Ogdoad of primordial deities related to the state of affairs of the primordial ocean, the great, absolutely inert, and undifferentiated Nun.

The Old Kingdom produced images and personifications of this pre-existent world. In the *Pyramid Texts*, Nun, Naounet, Amun, and Amaunet are mentioned (Utterance 301). To understand *how creation came into effect*, Nun was characterized *to allow for creation to happen*, even if the inert nature of Nun was left untouched. In Heliopolis, this was done by Atum-Re. In Hermopolis by Thoth (Djehuti). Pre-creation had to be structured to grasp how creation happened. A creative potential had to be attributed to it. This primordial structure is advanced by Hermopolitan theology, allowing the primordial ocean *to be characterized and personified*. In this scheme, the so-called 'chaos-gods' of pre-creation form the Ogdoad of eight deities. They create the *primordial egg* out of which Atum-Re hatches. They are *before* time and space. *They beget and establish the gods and goddesses*.

These primordial deities are unlike the gods and goddesses of creation, who are, as it were, always 'on the move.' They are more like Nun's characterizations (attributes, accidents) and unlike the gods and goddesses who emanated from Atum-Re. They keep their unique style and profile. The actual names of these primordial deities, the *paut* of Thoth, are put forward at Edfu, Dendera, Karnak, and Philae. The oldest pictorial evidence of their form dates from the reign of Seti I (ca.1290 –1279) in the Early Ramesside Period of the New Kingdom (early XIXth Dynasty).

The list below is of the Late Period, taken from texts found on the temple walls of the Persian Darius II (424 – 404 BCE), who built in the el-Kharga Oasis.

- Nun and Naounet : primordial waters, inertness ;
- Hou and Haouet : boundless, undefined ;
- Kouk and Kaouhet : total darkness, potential light ;
- Gereh and Gerhet : absence, negation, potential creation.

In the primordial state of boundless inertia (Nun, Hou), a dark and passive potential (Kouk, Gereh) exists. The undifferentiated Nun holds *dormant seeds*. Kouk and Kaouhet (the male and female sides of the power of darkness of Nun) were related to the cycle of the Sun. Kouk (Kekui) is later called 'the raiser up of the light' (the period of night preceding day) and Kaouhet (Kekuit) 'raiser up of the night' (the period of the night following the day). In this sense, they announce the 'first time,' the emergence of Atum out of Nun, the dawn of a new Sun over the Nile after it set. Absolute darkness and negation are *contrasted* with light and affirmation. The first three chaos-gods (Naounet, Hou, and Haouet) do not step outside the characterization of Nun as boundless and undefined. The last four chaos-gods seem to form *the primordial quaternio* preparing the emergence of Atum-Re and the start of the 'first time.' However, they, too, are in actuality *inert*. These inert qualities of Nun are associated with the *even pairs* of gods and goddesses which form the primordial Ogdoad. Created companies are usually trinities or trinities of three, i.e., *uneven, essentially unbalanced, or dynamical*. Nun and its ogdoadic matrix are without duality, split, generation, time, life, death. All are absolutely undifferentiated, finished, and complete ; the enduring, everlasting realm of *djedet*-time. In physical terms, we could say the world before creation is understood as absolutely chaotic, i.e., the measure of entropy is infinite (implying homogeneity and without flux). In Nun, there is no heterogeneity between objects. The asymmetrical balancing principle, the two moving scales of the balance characterizing creation, is absent. Symmetry is maximal.

The head of the Ennead of Hermopolis is Thoth, the god of writing, learning, medicine, and wisdom. He was worshipped as the vizier of Re. And like the Sacred Ibis, he dropped the creative and magical word in Nun. In doing so, he fashioned the world out of the primordial chaos, represented as a company of eight pre-creational deities (the Ogdoad). As head of the Ogdoad, Thoth turned it into an Ennead. Thus he organized primordial matter by establishing the rules of its functioning, conceived *in his heart*. The mythical origin of creation is thus placed under the command of the divine mind, the word of Re, and the god of magic, writing, healing, time,

mathematics, wisdom, and the like. In this scheme, Nun's chaos, pre-existing before Re emerged on the 'Island of Flames' (Hermopolis) contained all the potential forces of life, represented by the Ogdoad, four couples consisting of four males (frog-headed) and four females (snake-headed). These chaos-gods exist in Nun, coming into being there spontaneously. The primordial waters were an integral part of creation, namely its *background*. As the chaos-gods are mentioned in the *Pyramid Texts*, the Hermopolitan scheme was already in place in the Old Kingdom. In the First Intermediate Period and the Middle Kingdom texts, we meet four chaos-gods : Wateriness, Infinity, Darkness, and Lostness. In the temples of Edfu and Esna, we read that the eight *have made their seed germ*. They instilled this seed in the lotus, deposited it in Nun, condensed it into a single form. It took birth by the Great Word of Thoth under the aspect of a child, the creator Re. The Hermopolitan scheme, with its emphasis on creation through the word, was easy to combine with the Memphite theology, which became dynastic in the IIIth Dynasty (Memphis becoming the capital of Egypt).

### Memphite Cosmogony



**Fig.3.** the god Ptah  
Tomb of Tutankhamun – XVIIIth Dynasty

In the first Dynasty, the usual iconography of Ptah, the god of Memphis, identified by name in hieroglyphs, was already established (bowl, tomb 231, Tarkhan, Ashmolean 1912.574). Ptah is depicted as anthropomorphic, smooth-headed, dressed in a high-collared garment with a tassel holding his typical scepter of authority, standing in an open kiosk (or *naos*).

His austere presence on the temple walls of all kingdoms is noticeable and hardly deviates from this early appearance. Although the form of deities changed, Ptah remained the same. His form is a metaphor for stability, continuity, fertility, and authoritative command, the main features of Pharaonic kingship.

His name was not written with any determinative for divinity until the New Kingdom. The three phonograms of his name 'p,' 't' and 'h' sufficed. Its most probable etymology being the root word of later verbs meaning 'to sculpture,' 'to fashion.'

His head is enveloped in a tightly-fitting skull cap that leaves only his face and ears to view with forearms emerging from a linen wrapping that molds itself carefully around his form (compare it with the *Heb Sed*-garment of Pharaoh). In the Old Kingdom, the high priest of Ptah was called '*wer kherep hemut*' or 'supreme leader of craftsmanship,' indicating that Ptah, 'he with the beautiful face,' was the god of skills, design, sculpture, and the making or creating of something in general.

Ptah is present during the crucial life-restoring *Ritual of Opening the Mouth* performed on statues and the mummy. Ptah had no other significant role to play in the funerary rituals except as the composite deity Ptah-Sokar, who ruled the *Duat* and played a crucial role in the rejuvenation of the soul of Re (cf. *Amduat*, 6<sup>th</sup> Hour of the night). Although Ptah created everything and was the god of Ancient Egypt's most ancient and holy town (where all the kings were crowned), he nevertheless had *no personal cycle of legends*.

In the *Pyramid Texts*, Ptah is mentioned only three times (Utterance 345, 349, and 573).

The king asks :

‘Commend me to him who is greatly noble, the beloved of Ptah, the son of Ptah, that he may speak on my behalf ...’

*Pyramid Texts, Utterance 573.*

‘Hail to You, You who are great and old, ta-Tenen, father of the gods, the great god from the first primordial time who fashioned humanity and made the gods, who began evolution in primordial times, first one after whom everything that appeared developed.

He who made the sky as something that his heart has created, who raised it by the fact the Shu supported it, who founded the Earth through that which he himself has made, who surrounded it with Nun and the sea, who made the *Duat* and gratified the dead, who caused Re to travel there in order to resuscitate them as Lord of Eternity and Lord of Boundlessness, Lord of Life.

He who lets the throat breathe and gives air to every nose, who with his food keeps all humanity alive, to whom lifetime, more precisely, limitation of time and evolution are subordinate, through whose utterance one lives.

He who creates the offerings for all the gods in his guise of the great Nile, Lord of Eternity to whom boundlessness is subordinate, breath of life for everyone who conducts the king to his great seat in his name : “King of the Two Lands”

*Hymn to Ptah, in Papyrus Harris, XXth Dynasty (ca.1150 BCE), British Museum (EA9999).*

In Memphite thought, Ptah was the creator of the universe. He was both Nun and Atum. In this theology, the whole Heliopolitan process happens in the ‘form’ or ‘image’ of Atum, of events in the heart (mind) and on the tongue (speech) of Ptah. Atum is a creative verb, image, scheme, or model. His function (and that of deities as Horus and Thoth) is not denied but seen as an *outward* manifestation of the overseeing *cognitive activity* of Ptah.<sup>(16)</sup>

For Breasted, the inscription on the *Shabaka Stone* is ‘the oldest known formulation of a philosophical *Weltanschauung*’ – Breasted, ‘*The Philosophy of a Memphite Priest*,’ 1901, p.39.



**Fig.4.** *The Memphis Theology – Shabaka Stone* (BM 498)  
hieroglyphs in grey are reconstructed

‘There comes into being in the heart. There comes into being by the tongue. (It is) as the image of Atum. Ptah is the very great who gives life to all the gods and their *Kas*. Lo, through this heart and by this tongue.’ – *Memphis Theology*, line 53.

‘... Ptah “translated” the creator’s expressed perception into reality by in-forming the raw potentiality of the primordial Monad with the creator’s concept ...’ – Allen, *Op.cit.*, 1988, p.60.

According to Hare, ‘this text is written with special care to emphasize the intimacy, indeed the simultaneity and mutual implication of the intellectual and the corporeal.’ – Hare, *Remembering Osiris*, 1999, p.181. Frankfort writes : ‘The Memphite Theology presents the religious teaching for Menes’ new capital. It combines views which we can recognize as new since they concern

the new foundation ; others which we suspect to be new because they run counter to common Egyptian beliefs and could hardly have gained acceptance if they had not been part of the great movement at the dawn of history. Other doctrines again seem to be rooted in Egyptian, or even African, traditions of the greatest antiquity.' – Frankfort, *Kingship and the Gods*, 1978, p.24.

These cosmogonic speculations, essential to understanding the broader context of any discourse on wisdom, belong to the order of creation (deities), as well as to the order of the Two Lands. Both theogonies point to the fusion of religion and state.

'With regard to Ancient Egypt, "state" and "religion" are anachronistic concepts. They cannot be distinguished and confronted one to another. The political system of pharaonic kingship is a kind of religion quite in the same way as Egyptian religion is a form of political organization.' – Assmann, '*State and Religion in the New Kingdom*,' in : Allen, *Religion, and Philosophy in Ancient Egypt*, 1989, p.56.

Ptahhotep's *Maxims*, adhering to the Memphite accent on discourse, propose a *way of life* valid for everybody. Although the pyramid's base offers no panorama, its fundamental role is unmistakable, for it carries everything above it. So, what can be said of the situation of everyman ? Ptahhotep does not deny the existence of a higher type of rectitude. The deities and Pharaoh are mentioned but are not aimed at in the *Maxims*, and this despite the fact the proper circulation of Ma'at depend on them. So what can be done by someone with no divine soul (*Ba*) ? How far does wisdom alone take such a person ?

In the Old Kingdom, the wisdom of the didactical texts dealt with the *continuity of truth and justice*. These wisdom texts can and should be distinguished from schemata, pre-concepts, and concepts related to natural philosophy (the origin of the world – cosmogony, which mainly flourished in the New Kingdom).<sup>(18)</sup> Although Marxist, atheist, and humanist philosophers claimed Ancient Egypt only produced a 'cosmic' moral code *unable* to separate 'is' from 'ought,' the difference between the natural (descriptive – how things are) and moral (normative – how thing should be) order was

part of Egyptian sapience. The fact that their moral theory was in accord with their cosmology does not reduce the Ancient Egyptian sense of justice to their ontological view on how things exist. Thanks to the hard work of post-war egyptologists of all disciplines and nationalities, philosophers today may try to understand the cognitive, philosophical, religious, and sapiential implications of the Ancient Egyptian heritage and its profound, complex influence on all cultures of the Mediterranean.

Hence, words like ‘wisdom’ and ‘philosophy,’ although applicable in the general sense as *a conceptualized, practical investigation of the being of creation and man*, do not have dialogical and polemic associations. Also, pre-Greek philosophies never worked with the *tabula rasa* principle, neither with the Razor of Ockham, but rather with a multiplicity (complementarity) of approaches as evidenced by the different cosmogonies.<sup>(19)</sup>

‘But we have found on closer inspection of the evidence that the ancients’ adherence to quasi-contradictory opinions was not due to any inability on their part to think clearly, but to their habit of using several separate avenues of approach to subjects of a problematic nature. They did justice to the complexity of a problem by allowing *a variety of partial solutions, each of which was valid for a given approach to the central problem.*’ – Frankfort, *Ancient Egyptian Religion*, 1961, pp.91-92, my italics.

Different answers were put on top of each other.<sup>(20)</sup> Wisdom was a *tradition embedded in context*. This absence of debate and lively discussions does not imply the absence of philosophy, i.e., the quest for a *comprehensive understanding (within the limitations of the given modes of cognition)* of the universe and the situation of humanity, as evidenced by the *Maxims*. That ante-rational, abductive thought is not *a priori* devoid of sapiential inclinations may well balance the Hellenocentric approach of wisdom, so fashionable in the West since the Renaissance.

Let us turn to Ptahhotep and his remarkable wisdom.

The tomb of Ptahhotep (II) is a double mastaba which he shared with his father, Akhethotep. It is pretty similar to Ptahhotep's, although less decorated. Back into the pillared hall and to the left is the chamber of Akhethotep. Through a passage-way to the left is a chamber that contains a mummy that has not been identified. The passage-way leads to the pillared hall and the entrance corridor. At the end of the corridor to the right of a pillared hall and then left is Ptahhotep's burial chamber.

The reliefs there are the best preserved of the Old Kingdom. The ceilings are imitations of the trunks of palm trees. The tomb suggests Ptahhotep (II) must have held a crucial position during the reign of Pharaoh Unas. In his tomb, he describes himself as a priest of Ma'at. He was also the vizier, the chief of the treasury and the granary, and a judge. The reliefs found inside are not all completed. The main corridor has reliefs on both sides. On the left are what appear to be preliminary drawings in red. Over the red are corrections in black made by the master artist.

Among Pharaoh's courtiers (snit), the most favored ones were called 'friends' (*semru*). The most important dignitary bore the title *tjati*, translated as 'vizier,' who, in the IVth Dynasty, was regularly one of the royal princes. Later the office passed into the hands of some outstanding noble, and then it tended to become hereditary.

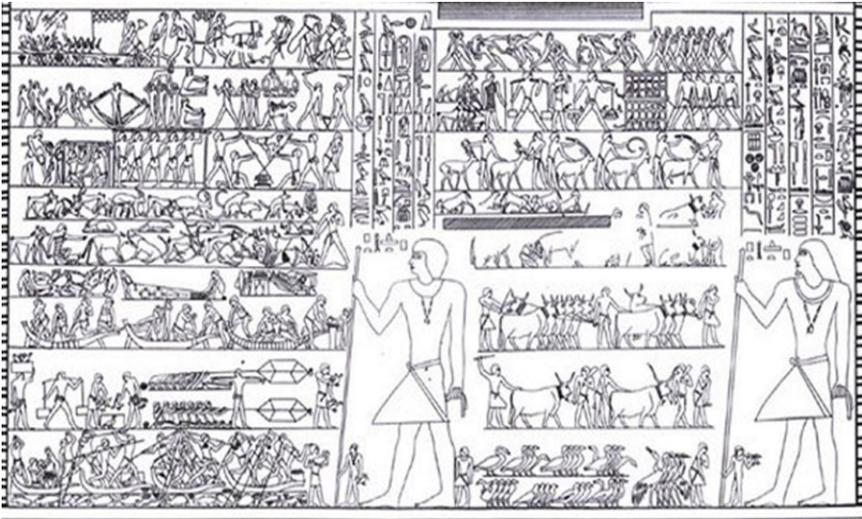
In the titularies of the early viziers, we find the title : 'superintendent of all the king's works.' He was also the supreme judge and bore the epithet 'prophet of Ma'at.' The earliest attested reference to this highest administrative office was written in ink on a stone vessel from the Step Pyramid of Netjerikhet at Saqqara (the vizier Menka of the middle of the IIth Dynasty). At the beginning of the Early Dynastic period, the vizier bore the titles *tet*. An official called *tet* is depicted on the *Narmer Palette*. He walks in front of Pharaoh and carries his regalia.

The fuller form is of later periods and involves three functions :

- (1) 'he of the curtain,' an epithet indicating the *courtly* aspect of the high office ;
- (2) 'noble' is a general designation for an *official* ;

(3) another untranslatable title was suggestive of the *administrative* aspect.<sup>(21)</sup>

The vizier was the head of the administration. Still, at various times, particularly at Thebes, the vizier might also be the chief priest. In the Old Kingdom, the role of the Egyptian state was foremost organizational : preventing local famines by bringing in the surplus, lessening the effect of calamities (irregular inundations), arbitration, and security. Irrigation works were the responsibility of the local administration.



**Fig.5.** Funerary mastaba of vizier Ptahhotep Tshefi  
Saqqara, D64, East Wall – drawing by de Garis-Davies, 1900

Above the young Ptahhotep (II), we find the cartouche of Djedkara Izezi, the predecessor of king Unas under whom he later served. Viziers heard all domestic territorial disputes, maintained a cattle and herd census, controlled the reservoirs and the food supply, supervised industries and conservation programs and were also required to repair all dikes. The bi-annual census of the population came under their authority, as did the records of rainfall and the varying levels of the Nile during its inundation.

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All government documents used in Ancient Egypt had to bear the seal of the vizier to be considered authentic and binding. Tax records, storehouse receipts, crop assessments, and other necessary agricultural statistics were kept in the offices of the viziers. Also, young members of the royal family often served under the vizier. In this way, they received training in government affairs.

It is probable that throughout Egyptian history, the viziers were some of Pharaoh's most trusted allies. The vizier was usually in constant contact with him, consulting him on many important matters. Family members, particularly those who might hold a claim to kingship, could often not be trusted. However, even though they did elevate themselves to kingship, viziers were probably most often selected for their skills and because Pharaoh could trust them to carry out his will without the fear of being overthrown.

So, Ptahhotep and his family were in touch with all layers of society and had to communicate with those above them (the king) and those of lower rank. This gave him a deep understanding of human relationships and how the right speech contributed to an orderly society and a good life. Ptahhotep was not a contemplative philosopher, but one steeped in action, who –by way of example– taught how to succeed in dealing with all facets of life.

*Papyrus Prisse*, belonging to the *Bibliothèque Nationale* (Paris), contains the only *complete* version of the *Maxims* we possess. It is in Middle Egyptian, the language of the Middle Kingdom, and was probably manufactured in the XIth Dynasty (ca. 2081 – 1938 BCE), in the First Intermediary Period (ca. 2198 – 1938 BCE). The text itself situated the wisdom-teaching in the late Vth Dynasty when Old Egyptian was still in use.

Suppose the teachings were written by Ptahhotep (I), and he originally wrote them in Old Egyptian. In that case, we are forced to assume *considerable linguistic alterations* to explain how the Old Egyptian text became a Middle Egyptian one. For Miriam Lichtheim, this is one of the strong arguments in favor of the pseudo-epigraphic nature of the *Maxims*<sup>(22)</sup>, merely attributed to Ptahhotep (I), but written down either by his grandson Ptahhotep

Tshefi or even later by some anonymous scribe of the XIth Dynasty. Because (a) many of the forms characteristic of Middle Egyptian can already be found in the biographical inscriptions from VIth Dynasty tombs and (b) the *Maxims* (together with the earlier *Instruction of Hordedef* and the *Instructions of Kagemni*)<sup>(23)</sup> fit 'into the ambiance of the late Old Kingdom'<sup>(24)</sup> and its monumental inscriptions, the author of the *Maxims* is conjectured to be most likely at work ca.150 years *after* vizier Ptahhotep (I) died, namely after Pepi II Neferkare (ca. 2270 – 2205 BCE).

As the period between the probable first redaction in the late VIth Dynasty and *Papyrus Prisse* is relatively small (the end of the VIth and the beginning of the XIth are only a century apart), only *minor textual alterations* have to be conjectured to bridge the gap between the first redaction (in the VIth Dynasty) and the extant copy.

The other line of thought suggests a Vth Dynasty original (earlier than the *Pyramid Texts of Unas*). It has to explain how an Old Egyptian text got copied and altered to become the Middle Egyptian text of *Papyrus Prisse*.

Although there is no consensus among scholars, I agree with Lichtheim that the texts of Hordedef, Kagemni, and Ptahhotep are *pseudo-epigraphic*. This does not exclude the possibility of a line of transmission going back to the historical Ptahhotep (I). In the case of Ptahhotep (I and II), this would suggest a 'Memphite school' or a community of viziers working with the scribes of the House of Life of the temple of Ptah at Memphis. Of this, we only have circumstantial evidence and no direct proof. The actual redaction of this age-old wisdom at the end of the Old Kingdom (ca. 2200 BCE) could also point to an attempt to exorcise the imminent collapse of the Memphis-based kingdom under the pressure of the provinces and their enriched nomarchs.

Was it the aim of the unknown author to summarize the best of what the past had given, because of the crisis of today, which needed to be solved so that the generations of tomorrow might endure ?

These considerations point to the following redactional levels :

- (1) *extant text* : to be found on the oldest Middle Egyptian papyrus extant, dating XIth Dynasty (ca. 2081 – 1938 BCE) ;
- (2) *original text* : probably written in Early Middle Egyptian in the late VIth Dynasty (after 2200 BCE) ;
- (3) *one or more papyrus copies* : possible copies of the text, at some point, turning Late Old Egyptian into Early Middle Egyptian ;
- (3) *original ideas* : possibly not later as the period proposed in the extant text. Djedkare Izezi of the late Vth Dynasty reigned between ca. 2411 and 2378 BCE. The legend of wisdom-teachers goes back to Imhotep, the architect of king Djoser of the IIIth Dynasty, ca. 2654 – 2635 BCE.

It remains difficult to establish with absolute certainty how far these wisdom teachings go back. In the early days of research, egyptologists dated the *Pyramid Texts* as early as possible. For Sethe, they even contained predynastic themes. Most contemporary egyptologists go to the other extreme and date the origin of texts *close to the time of their extant textualization* (even if the assumption of earlier copies of the same text is not unreasonable or even mentioned in the copy). The more we study the Predynastic Period (i.e., before 3000 BCE), the more it can be shown that essential elements of the Egyptian cultural form were already present before the Dynasties started. In the Early Dynastic Period (Dynasty I and II, ca. 3000 – 2670 BCE), the introduction of Pharaoh as a 'Followers of Horus' was vital to consolidate the unification of the Two Lands.

It is impossible to say how early the Egyptians began to cut and press the stalks of the papyrus plant to make a material for the use of scribes. However, we know that papyrus was already employed for literary purposes in the IIIth Dynasty (ca. 2670 – 2600 BCE). In contrast, uninscribed papyrus has been found in tombs of the First Dynasty (ca. 3000 BCE) ! The advancement of language ran parallel with Pharaoh's outstanding achievements. By the IVth Dynasty, Old Egyptian was written down. As the Middle Egyptian of the *Maxims* suggests the VIth Dynasty, the most reasonable earliest date is the one proposed by the extant text itself, namely the reign of Pharaoh Djedkare. Indeed, these instructions embody teachings

on justice and truth (Ma'at), which must have existed long before the XIth Dynasty. It is not impossible that the text was initially composed by Ptahhotep (I) and then transmitted to his sons.

Wisdom as a literary genre is the fruit of a society that knows leisure, peace, and prosperity. When cultures are in survival mode, no higher, less material, and more spiritual values concerning life and oneself are possible. This profound literary genre emerged more than 4000 years ago. This is highly remarkable and should mobilize more attention than it has. Conjecture that the wisest sages of Ancient Egypt were philosophers *avant la lettre*. True, they did not argue in *abstract, discursive* categories, as did the Greeks much later. Their schemes, pre-concepts, and concrete conceptualizations allow us to understand thought from an unexpected, ante-rational perspective. Wisdom literature <sup>(25)</sup> remained a literary genre<sup>(26)</sup> in Ancient Egypt from its legendary start (Imhotep of the IIIth Dynasty, who allegedly wrote the first sapiential teaching) until the advent of the Christian era.

The *Maxims* survived in 5 copies :

(1) *Papyrus Prisse* (P) : Bibliothèque Nationale (183-194). This is the most precious and oldest papyrus known (XIth Dynasty – ca. 2081 – 1938 BCE), dated ca. 1900 BCE. This seven-meter long papyrus has been well styled 'the oldest book in the world'<sup>(27)</sup>. It was bought in 1844 by Émile Prisse d'Avennes (1807 – 1879), a French engineer, painter and master draughtsman who lived in Luxor. He was passionate about Arabic and Egyptian Art and a scholar who, with the documentation collected during his many travels in the Middle East, gave a pivotal contribution to the knowledge of Arabian Art. He acquired the papyrus on the East side of the Nile (ancient Thebes – Draḥ Abou'l Negga). It immortalized his name and contained the end of the *Instructions of Kagemni* and a complete version of the *Maxims*. It appeared to be a Middle Kingdom copy of earlier copies. For Jéquier (1911), this was 'le texte littéraire égyptien le plus difficile à traduire.'<sup>(28)</sup> Breasted, Erman, and Gardiner agreed.

(2) *Papyri BM* (L<sub>1</sub>) : British Museum Papyri n<sup>os</sup> EA10371 - 10435 (Jéquier, 1911) of the XIIth Dynasty – it consists of two series of fragments and is incomplete (no beginning) ;

- (3) *Papyrus BM (L<sub>2</sub>)* : British Museum Papyrus n° EA10509<sup>(29)</sup>, bought by Budge at Thebes, XVIIIth Dynasty – New Kingdom, is incomplete (beginning only) but gives clues as to punctuation ;
- (4) *Carnarvon I Tablet* : discovered in 1908 by Lord Carnarvon (Cairo Museum n° 41790, Jéquier, 1911) is of the XVIIth or XVIIIth Dynasty – New Kingdom and incomplete (beginning only) ;
- (5) *Turin Papyrus* : not published and conserved in Turin (n° 54014) – New Kingdom and incomplete (only the beginning).

In 1956, Zbyněk Žába<sup>(30)</sup> reproduced the hieroglyphs of the first four sources comprehensively and clearly (absent in the work of Dévaud, 1916) and did a decisive translation.<sup>(31)</sup> His hieroglyphs are fully reproduced on my website.<sup>(32)</sup> Žába's hieroglyphs were published more than 60 years ago by the *Academie Tchecoslovaquie des Sciences of Prague*, i.e., in former Czechoslovakia. The translation of Wilson, published by Pritchard (1950 and 1958),<sup>(33)</sup> made use of all extant copies, and as a result, he worked from a text of his own. Recently, Brunner (1991)<sup>(34)</sup> also followed a comparative course. Lichtheim (1975) only used *Papyrus Prisse*, the oldest complete version. Jacq (1993) also gathers insight from L<sub>2</sub>.

The present English translation rests on *Papyrus Prisse* and takes *Papyri BM* into account (both in Middle Egyptian). *Papyrus BM* is used to understand punctuation and to advance a few alternative renderings. The *Carnarvon Tablet*, being the extant *terminus*, helps analyze the linguistic evolution of the text. Influenced by Žába (French), Lichtheim (English), Brunner (German), and Jacq (French and English)<sup>(35)</sup>, my efforts are backed by the hieroglyphs of *Papyrus Prisse*. Even the best hermeneutical rules-of-thumb<sup>(36)</sup> in the world will not guarantee a perfect translation, which does not exist.

The Italian dictum *traduttore traditore* (translator, traitor) holds especially true for Egyptian. As with all texts of antiquity, a large-scale comparison is the best option. Not only has the text to be contextualized, but one has to acquire the habit of looking up the same word or expression *in various contexts across time*. Gardiner's view that *to circumscribe sense is the best one can do* remains valid.