

Die Lehre Ptahhoteps und die Tugenden der ägyptischen Welt. By FRIEDRICH JUNGE. *Orbis Biblicus et Orientalis*, vol. 193. Freiburg, Switzerland: UNIVERSITÄTSVERLAG, 2003. Pp. 286. FS85.

Returning to a well-known Egyptian text, Friedrich Junge has examined the *Instruction of Ptahhotep* and presented a monograph on Egypt's oldest wisdom text (dating most probably to the eleventh dynasty/early second millennium B.C.). In a short excursus into the history of philosophy, Junge raises the question of how *Ptahhotep* fits into Jaspers' idea of the *Achsenzeit*, according to which a revolution in thinking took place in fifth-century Greece, whereas before that period ethics were basically vulgar. Junge's thesis is that *Ptahhotep* stands on a higher evolutionary plane and is very complex, despite predating the *Achsenzeit*. As Junge admits, he is not the first Egyptologist to raise doubts about the *Achsenzeit*-concept, which Jan Assmann has already rejected (*Ma'at: Gerechtigkeit und Unsterblichkeit im Alten Ägypten* [Munich: C. H. Beck, 1995], esp. 24–28, 273–88).

Any reader who expects a summary of previous research on *Ptahhotep*, a contextualization of the text within the culture of Middle Kingdom Egypt, or a description of the further development of the genre of wisdom texts in Egypt after *Ptahhotep* will be disappointed, as Junge has chosen to reach his conclusions through "close reading," i.e., an approach without premises intended to explain the text through itself.

According to Junge, this is legitimate because the instruction follows its own rules and aims at particular goals. The instruction is designed to concretize the abstract and empty principle of the cosmic world order (*ma'at*) that also regulates human and social life. The first five chapters of the book present the sections of the instruction, the maxims following a thematic order according to the lines of Junge's argument. In this way he cites from *Ptahhotep* where appropriate for his reading and comments on the translations by reformulating the messages.

Junge states that the instruction aims at instilling respect toward fellow human beings. This teaching is not just altruistic, making sure that everyone's dignity—even that of those who are subordinate—is preserved, but is intended to protect one's own dignity, which can be damaged if a superior mistreats a person who stands on a lower hierarchical level. However, this practical attitude does not turn the instruction into vulgar ethics, as Junge points out, because *Ptahhotep* argues rationally from the truth and justice of the cosmic order that is to be perceived. The text is therefore a precursor of ethics—only a precursor, for a terminological discussion is lacking and the Egyptian does not give a theory of morals. Although secular in the sense that the teaching sees the results of ethical behavior in this world rather than the hereafter, this does not imply that the instruction is devoid of God. Rather the contrary is the case: God is perceived as the ultimate power ruling the world, potentially without consideration of—or even against—human rational planning.

Junge then undertakes the development of an Egyptian psychology or anthropology as deducible from *Ptahhotep* (chapter six). Key-words are the "sense, mind" (Junge's translation for the Egyptian term *jb*), the body (*h.t*) and the ka (*h3*). The *jb* is identified as the thinking element of the Egyptian psychological apparatus which controls the desires that spring forth from the body. In this concept the role of the ka, which Junge translates as "the self" ("das Selbst"), remains somewhat unclear. Junge suggests understanding it as the identity, the consciousness which the heart has formed.

Throughout the book, by comparing *Ptahhotep* with later concepts, Junge implies that *Ptahhotep* contains ideas that have been developed in the thought of later philosophers and theologians, up to and including the psychoanalysis of Sigmund Freud (cf. the conceptualization of active entities in a human being's psyche). In chapters seven and eight this becomes more explicit, when Junge expounds his view that the basic assumption of the Egyptian instruction is that human beings are weak and need guidance, and that therefore evil can be removed by education. Thus *Ptahhotep* stands alongside the works of Plato, Aristotle, Augustine, and Spinoza, as well as aspects of modern political science.

Before the limits of these analogies are discussed—*Ptahhotep* lacks a philosophical argument and does not have any genetic relationship to the teachings of classical antiquity and thereafter (chapter eight)—Junge leaves the text's framework and briefly investigates how the instruction is to be seen within the historical context of the centralized Egyptian state of the Middle Kingdom that required guidelines for the elite. A full German translation and a detailed philological commentary end the book.

Junge, who wants to study the *Instruction of Ptahhotep* by the method of close reading, must have assumed that every reader is unbiased. Therefore it would have been appropriate to give the translation and commentary before beginning the textual discussion. This would, of course, have required an accessible and intelligible translation. However, it must be said—despite his own claim (p. 14)—Junge fails to deliver such a translation (see, for example, the eighth maxim, pp. 25/175, ll. 180–85; pp. 46/175, ll. 596–607; pp. 104/204). Various reasons can be adduced for this failure, including idiosyncratic or literal translations and occasional German grammatical mistakes. All three faults touch upon further criticisms. The book gives the impression of a certain incompleteness through repetition of ideas and discussions (e.g., pp. 26 and 41) and inconsistencies in rendering Egyptian words: sometimes these appear as unvocalized transliterations, and sometimes as vocalized reconstructions (e.g., *jb* vs. *jab*, *hft.j* vs. *haft.ej*, *h.tlhj.t* vs. *Hū'.at*—passim in chapter six. Readers who are not Egyptologists might be confused. In general, Junge's language oscillates between colloquialisms and higher registers in coining extravagant terms such as *Zuwendigkeit* and *Wohlhabenheit*. These stylistic features may present obstacles for readers who are not native speakers of German, since they will hardly find these words in a dictionary.

Another problem with Junge's approach is that it ignores other Egyptian texts while citing later philosophers. Thus his translations of *jb* "mind" (otherwise generally rendered as "heart") or *K3* as "self" are perhaps valid for *Ptahhotep*, but not necessarily elsewhere. The difficulty with taking *K3* as "self" becomes apparent when the plural *K3.w* is assigned to a single person. Here Junge must render the expression as "Selbstkräfte" and re-introduce the old idea of the *K3* as vital power. As much as the translation, Junge's analysis of the *K3*-phenomenon remains unsatisfactory, for its role within the psychological apparatus does not become clear. Here Junge is terminologically vague (pp. 130–32). Do the *K3* and the *jb* operate on the same level or is the *K3* to be placed above the *jb*—or vice versa?

Finally, it must be asked whether it does justice to the Egyptian thinking to call it a precursor ("Vorform") of philosophical ethics, because it did not develop a terminology and therefore does not reflect problems in an abstract manner. Egyptian law, for instance, is casuistic in the best sense: rules are deduced from very concrete cases, and in this it is similar to the English and American juristic system based on customary law. Junge himself makes the comparison with England and America. But, of course, English and American law is not a precursor, but the way of organizing a juristic system in a particular culture. Thus the thinking in concrete cases that characterizes both *Ptahhotep* and the Egyptian law cannot be called a precursor, but must be taken as a method of thinking in its own right.

Despite these criticisms, Junge's attempt to connect the oldest Egyptian wisdom text with occidental philosophical traditions must be warmly welcomed. Now specialists in the history of philosophy are invited to take the *Instruction of Ptahhotep* into account and to consider Egyptian thinking of the early second millennium B.C.

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