

CHAPTER • 2 •
THE EGYPTIANS
 2850 B. C. — 670 B. C.

LIFE IN ANCIENT EGYPT

You have been reading descriptions of life in ancient Egypt written by the authors of this book, two modern historians. Now you will examine writings by the ancient Egyptians themselves. These writings have been translated into modern English. Historians have used this evidence to form their interpretations of ancient Egyptian life.

READING 4
ANCIENT EGYPTIAN WISDOM

Ptah-Hotep (pah-HOE-tep) was the vizier (vuh-ZIR) to an Egyptian king who ruled Egypt about 2450 B.C. during the period of the Old Kingdom. A vizier was an important official who was a chief adviser to the pharaoh or king. In the following selection, Ptah-Hotep offered his advice on how to live a good life.

Let not thy heart be puffed-up because of thy knowledge; be not confident because thou art a wise man. Take counsel with the ignorant as well as the wise. The full limits of skill cannot be attained, and there is no skilled man equipped to his full advantage. Good speech is more hidden than the emerald, but it may be found with maidservants at the grindstones. . . .

If thou art a leader commanding the affairs of the multitude, seek out for thyself every beneficial deed, until it may be that thy own affairs are without wrong. Justice is great, and its appropriateness is lasting; it has not been disturbed since the time of him who made it, [whereas] there is punishment for him who passes over its laws. It is the right path before him who knows nothing. Wrongdoing has never brought its undertaking into port. It may be that it is fraud that gains riches, but the strength of justice is that it lasts, and a man may say: "It is the property of my father." . . .

If thou art one of those sitting at the table of one greater than thyself, take what he may give, when it is set before thy nose. Thou shouldst gaze at what is before thee. Do not pierce him with many stares. . . . Let thy face be cast down until he addresses thee, and thou shouldst speak only when he addresses thee. Laugh after he laughs, and it will be very pleasing to his heart and what thou mayest do will be pleasing to the heart. No one can know what is in the heart. . . .

. . . Do not be greedy, unless it be for thy own portion. Do not be covetous against thy own kindred. Greater is the respect for the mild man than for the strong. He is a mean person who exposes his kinfolk; he is empty of the fruits of conversation. It is only a little of that for which one is covetous that turns a calm man into a disagreeable man.

If thou art a man of standing, thou shouldst found thy household and love thy wife at home as is fitting. Fill her belly; clothe her back. . . . Make her heart glad as long as thou livest. She is a profitable field for her lord. Thou shouldst not fight with her at law, and keep her far from gaining control. . . . Her eye is her stormwind. Let her heart be soothed through what may accrue to thee; it means keeping her long in thy house.

— Adapted from *Ancient Near Eastern Texts*, second edition, edited by James B. Pritchard, Copyright © 1955 by Princeton University Press.

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1. Which of the following agrees with the advice given by Ptah-Hotep? Defend your selection.
 - a. Ignore those who have less knowledge than yourself.
 - b. Be a good and just ruler.
 - c. Greed and riches bring one respect.
 - d. Do not share good fortune with your wife.
2. How do you think Ptah-Hotep would expect other Egyptians to behave before their king?
3. If someone today followed the advice given in this selection, would that person be living a good life? Explain your answer.