

Shut up and listen!

**English transcript
to the
podcast**

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An introductory podcast to to
ancient Egyptian wisdom teachings

English transcript

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Translation by Eliane Schmid

FM = Frederike Maas

JA = Jan Assmann

FM: When we speak of ancient Egypt in the context of wisdom, one might first think of premature knowledge of a vanished advanced civilization BC. Of ancient papyri full of mystery and wonder, which give us access to cosmic worlds. But are these not rather rear projections to a supposedly golden past, in which we wish to find something that we might be missing in current everyday life? Fortunately, I have the pleasure of speaking with Jan Assmann today. He is one of the world's leading Egyptologists, who has made numerous publications that have caused a sensation far beyond the professional world. Today he will reveal what we can expect from ancient Egyptian wisdom teaching and to what extent we can perhaps still benefit from this culture today, which places a special focus on community and social relationships.

Hello Mr. Assmann. Thank you for speaking with us today.

JA: Hi. I'm also very happy to be able to speak to you about such a beautiful topic.

FM: And welcome dear listeners to Wisdom Talks, a podcast produced by METIS, the internet portal for intercultural wisdom literature and wisdom practices. You can find us at www.metis.ethz.ch.

Mr. Assmann, what can I expect from ancient Egyptian wisdom literature?

JA: So first of all, this presupposition that Egypt is about mysteries, cosmic wisdom and so on, is not so far-fetched. But this is not found in the wisdom teachings, but rather in, let's say, cultic liturgies. There are also magic books, magic texts. Magic plays a big role and magic is very closely connected with the Egyptian concept of knowledge. And Aleida (Assmann, MM) has designed a compass of knowledge with four Shakespearean characters, and there is this magical-cosmic knowledge of 'Pole Prospero'. He is prominently cast in Egypt, it really has to be said. And then there's Polonius, that's the conventional school wisdom. And there's Jaques, the melancholy, the melancholy wisdom. You can find it all in Egypt. And of course there's Solomon, the wise king, who simply knows everything and that's why he's such a great ruler, who also makes the right decisions as a judge of all things. That, too, is part of Egyptian wisdom. But if you ask now specifically about wisdom teachings: this is the most prominent, highly appreciated genre of Egyptian literature, called 'life paths' and 'life lessons' in Egyptian. So there the term 'life' plays a big role. It is about how to live well. And the main theme of a good life is to connect with others and in connection with others to become who you want to be. So woman and man. And there are certain principles that are condensed into proverbs. For example, "a person lives when led by another person", or "a person develops when surrounded by people". This idea – I call it connectivity, of course an awful word, you can't translate that into Egyptian either – but for the Egyptians, that's everything; so connectedness. And for the individual, being integrated into society. And that means, of course, to live in such a way that one makes oneself popular. And in doing so, it is considered that this helps one to remain present in life beyond the threshold of death. In other words, to stay in good memory of the community, society. That is a form of afterlife. And the Egyptian ideas of afterlife are very differentiated and very dense. And a very central part of that is the good life before the afterlife.

FM: Yes, I would like to talk about the meaning of the afterlife and the hereafter later. You already told me in the preliminary talk that there is a term that is very important in this context: "Maat". Can you perhaps elaborate on what that is all about?

JA: Yes, the Maat. So this is, you could say, the truth, the justice. It's just very interesting that there is no distinction in Egyptian. It's a term that on the one hand means the truth - what you say - and justice - what you do. So, it's the same term. And the idea behind it, always with the background of connectivity, is that you act in such a way that you promote coexistence, social harmony let's say, and you also speak in such a way. Lies destroy harmony; that's what we've experienced, after all, in the four years of the Trump administration, and are still experiencing. And the practical equivalent of destructive talk is greed. Rapacity, acting in a violent-egoistic way. That, of course, also destroys the community. And those are the two cardinal sins. Lying and being greedy. And both of those are violations of this Maat, which encompasses all of that.

FM: So the Maat is a virtue that is primarily related to social togetherness. It also reminds me of Hannah Arendt, who writes: "The individual for himself alone cannot be a human being." That is, wisdom in ancient Egypt is related to community and not so much to the individual. So as a solitary hermit in Egypt...in ancient Egypt, I wouldn't have been a sage there at all.

JA: Yes. That's very interesting, isn't it? Because on the other hand, the Egyptians are the inventors of hermitism, you could also say the Indians, the Buddhists. But Egypt is the land of the desert fathers, right? That's such a cultural turnaround, how they managed to do that. In other words, a culture in which isolation is the most horrible thing, falling out of one's social relationships. That's why the Egyptians did everything they could not to let the dead fall out of the cult of the dead. And rituals to reconstitute his person by telling him how everything works so beautifully, that his heart is back in the right place and that the limbs, the body parts, obey him, the heart has taken over again. This is all said to the dead person in such recitations to get him going again. And this inner connectivity and the social connectivity, they belong very closely together in the idea of life. And we learn so much about this because we have so many texts for the dead. These liturgies that are recited to revive the dead. And that's where these two dimensions play a big role – the bodily multiplicity, the bodily interplay of the limbs, and the social.

FM: Yes, you spoke of a contradiction. I have another contradiction in mind: I wonder, the Maat as a virtue of connectivity that wants to produce a meaningful life perhaps for all, that is, a social principle. Doesn't that contradict the fact that ancient Egyptian society was a very hierarchical society and a slaveholding society as well?

JA: Hmm. Yes, so what didn't exist in Egypt are slaves in the sense that there were people who were not members of the society, you could also say the community, because they are more closely connected through the Maat than just cohabitation. So they have a lot in common. And that's why I wouldn't talk about slaves. They are servants. It's a system of dependency. That goes from the top down. But these servants, you can't sell them. You can lend them out and then they work for someone else for two weeks. But they belong to this context and are not a different kind of people, yes, or at all, which is completely different than in Greece. And they also have legal capacity. A slave can testify in court, a servant cannot. So it would be better... the Egyptian word translates to servant. And there's also, as you know, especially from the *Code of Hammurabi*, that it makes a big difference if someone beats someone else to death. Does it make a big difference if that's a woman or a man, if that's a free man or woman woman or a slave? And there's no such thing in Egypt. They are all human beings. And this is what makes the Egyptian image of man and society very different from the Greek image. There, the slaves are largely without rights, and according to Aristotle, they are already born as slaves, they are slaves "by nature", so to speak. So that would be completely unthinkable in Egypt.

FM: You said that in Greece one is born as a slave. How is that then with the Maat, or this social connectivity. Is that also something that you carry within you, or more something that you work for?

JA: Yes. It's something you have to learn. And that's the point of these wisdom teachings. They're all educational teachings. They want to teach young people how to become fellow human beings. It's always about humanity, how to fit in, how to live in as many constellations as possible. And that has to be learned. Man only has to bring along something, namely readiness to receive, in Egyptian 'hearing'. He must be able to hear. And he must be able to be silent. So he must be able to withdraw his inner impulses in order to

be able to listen. And that's where the idea of taking oneself back plays a big role. And you have to learn this in part, but you also have to contribute something; that is, a certain receptiveness, which the Egyptian calls 'hearing'. So it is in all these ancient texts - ancient languages, if you will - that instead of what we have in abstract terms, such as receptivity, there are very concrete words, which mean much more than we do, because they stand for many things. That's a kind of abstraction. When we say 'hearing' we think of the auditory, of hearing loss, of easy hearing and so on. And when the Egyptian uses this expression, it also means obedience – there's 'hearing' in it; obeying – and it means being able to be told something. And that's something else again.

FM: Yes, so you have to learn to obey, you also have to learn to fit in. That sounds quite strict. So to fit into an existing order. What about the individual in Egypt? Does that exist at all or was there no concept for that at all?

JA: Yes, that is also something, an expression like 'individual'. You have to have a long tradition of anthropological thinking. You couldn't translate that into Egyptian. In Egyptian it simply means – and here I must apologize on behalf of the Egyptians – it simply means 'man'. It means: "A man lives when the other leads him". But meant is a person. And also an individual. The communicative need to form a specific word for this is obviously missing. If there is a need to differentiate in a discourse, to make oneself understood, then language differentiates. And this discourse, yes, took place in Egypt within the framework of education. And there it is enough to say: "A man lives when the other leads him". Everyone knew what was meant. Yes, and we Egyptologists, if we translate it in this way, then we must of course somehow make it clear in its discursive meaning, which we as readers can then use as an entry point. Then you make a footnote, or you translate 'man' as 'individual', which is obviously meant. That is always tricky business. The Egyptian text would be ruined if you put these abstract terms in there.

FM: Yes, when I think of ancient Egypt, I am above all fascinated by how long this "advanced civilization" (German: Hochkultur, MM) lasted. We know that in Greece and Rome there were repeated uprisings, for example by slaves. After what you have just told me, I wonder whether the Egyptian advanced civilization perhaps lasted so long because there was no

room for an individual – as you have explained, that there was no such thing – to rebel against an order. Is that a bold hypothesis?

JA: No, that is of course...is quite closely related. If you have this ideal of social harmony and this prohibition to lie and to enrich yourself at the expense of others, to live at the expense of others, but rather to assimilate, attentively. Then this is an enormously stabilizing principle. And indeed: In the core it is also about self-stabilization, that one continues to be present beyond death. Not disappearing, not passing away. What stays, in the memory of others? And that was also kept alive by a monumental tomb, etc. Inscriptions that narrate how great he was who lies there and so on. 'To last' is such a central concept, the 'lasting'. And that is of course very closely related to this achievement, that such a culture remains over 3000 years. And the Egyptians also invested a lot in this. What we call cultural memory, we understand as a kind of work. It is not simply an inert insistence, as Max Weber thought, on tradition. But it is work. And that is very evident in Egypt. The Egyptians have worked to persist. For example, they developed a writing system, just like the Chinese, which is iconographic. Most scripts have developed from pictorial scripts and have then developed in such a way that the pictoriality disappeared, so that it can be written more easily - also by people who are not talented in drawing. And in Egypt there have never been obliterations, yes, these hieroglyphs, they form until the Roman imperial period, realistic images of things; of animals and objects and so on, people. And since such a writing system is impractical in everyday use, one simply developed a second writing script derived from it, in which one no longer recognizes the original Hieroglyphs. This is a true cursive script. And that's very interesting, that instead of making the normal script practicable, one has simply put a new one next to it. And the idea is that the inscriptions remain legible. So that even after 3000 years, you can still read what the ancestors wrote there in their graves. And the Egyptians also visited these old graves and left so-called 'graffiti'. But that's quite different from what the tourists scribbled there later on. Rather, they wrote text of literary quality on free surfaces with ink and brushes. And that tells us that these graves were visited and admired. And that not only did some value legibility over 3000 years, but that others also valued reading these texts 3000 later to maintain connected. So that's also part of the Maat, 'lasting'. And of course, this is an enormously state-bearing principle. And that's where another genre of wisdom literature is of importance: one is these life lessons, the life path,

that you put a child on a life path that will make them happy, live successfully, fit in well. The other is to stay aware of what that depends on. That is, the task of the state is to let this Maat come into being, to realize it – it has to be supported by the state – and the opposite, to – in Egyptian it is called "Isfet" - that is, to dispel lying and robbery and so on. So, to realize the Maat, and to dispel the Isfet. That's what the state is for. And how does it do that? It does it in such a way that it gives justice to the people and sacrifices to the gods. These are the two main functions of the state. And now there are complaints. Now this is the "Jaques Pol", in this wisdom compass of Aleida (Assmann, MM). There are complaints about the evilness of the world, that nothing works anymore. Above all, that people no longer listen. People can no longer communicate, yes. That's where the social harmony has disintegrated. And this is related to the fact that the state has perished. And in fact, Egyptians have experienced this several times, that the state crumbles. So the state, that is always this central "pharaohdom"[sic]. There is the pharaoh and one head that governs the whole thing. And when this disintegrates, regional systems, notables, arise, which then ascend in their sphere of influence. And it's always about supply. Someone must be responsible for the supply. That is the pharaoh with the state storages and so on. It's just a supply economy. You collect the taxes and store them. That's wonderfully captured in the biblical story of Joseph, isn't it? During the seven years of plenty, Joseph collects the taxes, fills the storages - taxes always means part of the harvest - fills the state storages in such a way that he can then feed Egypt and the surrounding population during the seven years of famine. And this is how the Egyptian economy works. The biblical authors were so impressed by this that they used this principle in the story of Joseph...and there you can see how intensive this connection is, which is created by a central supply economy...this is a kind of state socialism. And that's where it all breaks down. And instead of the one pharaoh, who collects all supply, all taxes from the state storages, there are now regional notables, the so-called 'nomarchs', who in their sphere of influence – 'nomos' in Greek, which we translate as 'nome', always sounds a bit strange, like 'Gauleiter' in German - but that's how it is in Egyptology. So the so-called nomarchs, they rise up to become the providers of their people. And that's very interesting, a completely new semantics emerges. Pharaoh has no one beside him, he has no competition, he is a god on earth. These nomarchs – not gods on earth – they have competition. And they have to campaign. And they campaign that no one in their district goes hungry. They provide for everyone. And the relationship now is no

longer between a godlike ruler and subjects, but between a patron and clients. And they can also go to another patron. And that's a whole new semantics of rulership that's emerging. So as I said, the Egyptians experienced that at the end of the third millennium, around 2150, that the so-called 'Old Kingdom' collapses. Then come these regional rulers, which leads to a blossoming of literature, because one experiences the collapse of a harmonious overall context and starts reflecting on what that means, also for the individual, who can no longer simply integrate by practicing justice and telling the truth. And then they experienced it again with the fall of the so-called 'Middle Kingdom'. And these are always such reflection boosts. So the Middle Kingdom has already come to terms with the fact that there is an alternative. Instead of this monarchy of the pharaoh, there is also the polycracy of the nomarchs, which actually also worked well. And the Middle Kingdom now has to justify why the truth is of course the monarchy and that, I would say, realizes the divine on earth. That is a reflection boost, which again leads to great texts. And then comes the 'New Kingdom'. The Middle Kingdom also goes under, not so much like the Old Kingdom through feudalism, through this rise of the nomarchs, but it goes under because it falls victim to immigration. Semites immigrated from Palestine, settled in the delta, and finally took over the Pharaonic throne. This was, of course, a great shock, an enormous crisis. A foreign rule is still different from this disintegration of the regional administrations. And then there were wars of liberation, and that is a completely new experience. So it's also a kind of national consciousness, foreign domination, us and them. And so these discourses of wisdom also change. And there is not only this educational discourse about introducing the individual into society, but also the political discourse about the meaning of the state and how important that is. There has to be a functioning state so that the individual can participate in society.

FM: Regarding this concept of rule: We have just learned that forms of rule in ancient Egypt also changed and that this was reflected in society. I would be interested, when we talk about the state...as you have described it, the state primarily took on a caring role, perhaps one could even talk about a kind of social contract. Taxes are paid and then redistributed to society. That was a main role of the state. But in order to enforce the Maat and to ensure peace, the state also had a repressive function in the sense of perhaps a monopoly on the use of force, as we know it today. So was the Maat also enforced by force?

JA: Yes, absolutely. The state had a monopoly on violence. And the Old Kingdom went under because these feudal lords got their own house army, their militia. And there was one militia against the other and the monopoly on violence disintegrated. Tax and monopoly on violence, these are the two pillars on which the state stands, absolutely correct. Yes, that's what Max Weber calls "enforcing rods" - they certainly existed. It's very interesting: The Egyptian system is based on the dependence on a state, so that life functions and has meaning, also for the individual. And this is turned upside down by Israel. Israel negates the dependence of the people on the state and puts in its place the dependence on God. So this idea of covenant religion, yes, that God makes a covenant with people and gives them laws to help them stay in that covenant, that's basically against this Egyptian concept of total state dependence and introduces a new dependence; namely on God, with whom one is in covenant, also politically. And that is why I find this story of the Exodus from Egypt so tremendously important. Egypt is the land which one had to leave in order to enter into this covenant. That shows that the covenant is the opposite of Egypt.

FM: So Moses got a law that was given to him by God. That was not the case with the Egyptians, that the political laws also represented a divine order?

JA: Yes, although Maat is also a goddess. But she is a goddess such as Justitia in Rome. These personifications, they have such a status, a quasi-divine status. And Maat is the daughter of the sun god – that's very crucial. The sun god is also the creator god. So, everything that we see, yes, is created from the sun and is powered by the sun, by the fact that it shines and moves. Its movement enables day and night, and time, and its radiation enables flourishing. And so let's say that Maat and light are closely related. And the Pharaoh has to do the same, but on the earth. He can't shine, like the sun, but he can spread the same kind of order through jurisdiction and cult, harmony, right? And this system, that is now turned upside down in the Bible, where the world doesn't emerge from the sun, because the sun is a lamp that is hung in the sky by God on the fourth day of creation. And of course the world is created, is an object of an act of creation, has nothing at all to do with God himself, is indeed created by him, but he is not in it in this world, as for example in Egypt the sun god, from which everything arose, is also in it in this world and animates it from the inside. And

there is nothing divine in the god-created world. You mustn't worship it, you mustn't depict it and the ban on images drastically breaks the habit of people who love to worship the bull for its power – they are not allowed to.

FM: You present the Egyptian social order in relation to religion very much as a counter-image to the Jewish, monotheistic social and religious order. But I wonder if there isn't something that unites the two as well. We've spoken about this notion, also in ancient Egypt, that a lot was about the obituary, that is, a notion of afterlife in the Egyptian culture of the dead. And if I remember correctly, then deeds that one has accomplished in one's life are also weighed up in such an afterlife. That sounds like a Christian idea of the Last Judgment. That's where I would see a parallel. Is it comparable or not?

JA: Absolutely, absolutely. Yes. The big difference between the Old Testament world and the Egyptian world is this afterlife. There is no such thing in the Old Testament. Spinoza observed that for the first time. And that then led to a whole new evaluation of Egyptian lore. Yes, the Egyptians, they had that, what is natural for us, that our deeds are weighed. So that was a revolutionary realization in the 17th, 18th century, that there was a kind of worldview and knowledge in Egypt that we Christians take for granted, that doesn't exist in the Old Testament. And there are attempts, theological attempts, to show that this somehow does exist, but they all lead to nothing. So, there are passages that go like this: "Let me live, because in the realm of the dead, they don't know you, I can't praise you there". Or in Kohelet, that's such a Jaques text, so pessimistic, everything is vain. And there it's like: "Enjoy your life, because where you're going, there's none of that anymore, and there's no God anymore either." So this Sheol, the Hebrew underworld, is a place of absolute remoteness from God. And that is completely different in Egypt. People knew that. There is a...the concept of '*apologia funebris*', the apology of the dead. This is a reminder of the 125th chapter of the Book of the Dead, which was handed down somehow via Porphyry or other late sources, where the dead has to justify himself. So, in contrast to the Last Judgment, where whole mankind is judged, in Egypt it is the individual. Everybody has to undergo this procedure after death. But the image of the scale... much of it has actually made it into the Christian ideas of the Last Judgment. And there are many points in which Christianity is strangely close to Egypt. Already the idea of the sonship of God; Pharaoh has

two genealogies: On the one hand he is of course a member of the dynastic chain, and the list of kings plays a major role, which is also visible in the temple of Abydos, for example, where Seti I, is depicted sacrificing to a long, long row of ancestors. These are all the kings before him up to the so-called demigods including Manetho, which still plays a role for Vico. He took over a part of Herodotus. Yes, the Egyptians, first the gods ruled, next the demigods ruled, and then it was the turn of man. And that is connected with three forms of writing. So, the gods, that is the pure pictorial writing. And the demigods, these are emblems - so this is probably thought of heraldry, so knight emblematic. And the people, which is of course the letter writing, or poetry and prose; poetry, heroic epic and prose. So three genres with these three forms of rulership. And that is the dynastic line in which Pharaoh stands. But then he is also begotten by the supreme god in his mother, the queen. So the god Amun, he has the impression, he must bring a descendant to earth, who makes sure that sacrifices are made to the gods, that right is spoken to the people, and he sends out his Hermes - that is the handsome god Thoth -, in order to scout who would qualify. And he also finds a suitable wife. This is now the wife of the king. And that's basically pretty much the myth of Amphitryon, isn't it? So this god transforms, takes the form of the royal consort and dwells with the queen, and the next king emerges from that. And this corresponds exactly to the two genealogies of Christ: the Gospel of Matthew on the one hand goes back fourteen generations to... it's three times fourteen generations to Adam; and that corresponds exactly to this Egyptian royal line. And on the other hand, as we all know, he is directly inseminated by the Holy Spirit, yes. So that is so clearly transferred. Although it must be said that Palestine was colonized by Egypt not only in the late Bronze Age, but also in late Hellenism, that is, in the time in which Jesus lived and in which the Gospels were also written, when the Ptolemies ruled. And Egyptian ideas were very present, rampant, so to speak, in the Palestinian area. And so comes this proximity – especially of Christianity and Egypt – and the huge importance of the afterlife and the judgment of the dead. Whereby of course it already makes a big difference whether mankind as a whole is judged or not. That is connected with the creation of a new world, the coming world, *Olam Ha-ba*. That's something quite different.

FM: Yes, we're almost at the end of our conversation. Maybe to conclude, I would like to come back to the Maat, in terms of what was said about this idea of the afterlife. I was

under the impression that in ancient Egypt, afterlife is actually perceived in a completely this-worldly way. We talked about the writing and how through the writing, in fact, a present is connected to a future. And perhaps with an imagined past as well. So the Maat is really operating on multiple levels. It's about connectivity with oneself, with the community, but also a kind of supra-temporal connectivity, which is not at all related to other-worldly ideas like in Christianity of an afterlife, which is so transcendently perceived, but actually quite worldly. Did I understand that correctly?

JA: Yes. If you die in Egypt and you appear there before this court of the dead and your heart is put on one pan, on the other pan the symbol of Maat, a feather, the lightest thing you can think of. And then it all comes down to the heart being lighter than the feather. So you have to recite a long series of sins, emphasizing, "I didn't do that." And if you lie, then the scale bearing the heart becomes heavier. It's kind of like a lie detector, this scale. Yes, and if you pass that - and the gods help you: There is the god Anubis sitting there, for example, who holds the scale so that it doesn't get too heavy. And there is the god Horus and the god Thoth, this Hermes god, who records everything and sees to it that the protocol is favorable for the dead. And when that is done, then the god Horus takes you by the hand and leads you to Osiris, who is the Judge of the Dead, who says: "He did very well, he passed." And then you get a plot of land, literally. You get a plot of land in the reed fields. The reed field corresponds to the Elysian realms of the Greek idea, the Orphic. There you get a plot of land, where the grain grows as high as man and most importantly, where you are close to the gods. That's the sun god; in the ninth hour of the day, he passes through there. But you are also close to the gods all the time. So that belongs to the world of the gods. And you yourself belong to the world of gods. There are texts like that, so whoever gets there without reproach, he will be like a god, striding freely like the lords of eternity. This liberal striding out, is also a symbol of sorts. You have to interpret it metaphorically as freedom, freedom of movement, you can move, everywhere, there are no spaces hidden from you. Plays a very big role in the Egyptian world, that you can move freely, not be closed off. And he will be like a god, right? So that already goes very far, this Egyptian conception of the afterlife. But then it's so realistic; there's work to be done, you have a plot of land, it has to be worked, it has to be plowed, sown, harvested. That's the idea, Egyptian idea of eternal life.

FM: So even in the afterlife, we have to keep working. This already brings us to the end of our conversation. Thank you, Jan Assmann, for your time.

JA: Yes, I would like to thank you as well. I enjoyed the conversation very much. Once again, it has become clear that wisdom is a topic that cannot be talked about enough. A topic that develops in conversation and not so much in solitary reflection or active life, but in contemplative and social life.

FM: This podcast was produced by Martin Münnich with the support of ETH Zurich and the Udo Keller Foundation, Forum Humanum in Hamburg. I would like to invite our listeners to follow further Wisdom Talks and to take advantage of the media offerings of the internet portal for intercultural wisdom literature and wisdom practices at metis.ethz.ch, for example via the link to our booklet to the podcast which can be found directly below the podcast. Thank you for your time and goodbye!