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THE IDEA OF WEALTH ACCORDING TO ANCIENT EGYPTIAN WISDOM TEXTS

Emil Buzov

The subject of gaining wealth and the approach to it and the wealthy people in general is particularly interesting as it shows the economical and social relations in the country in mind, along with the moral standards of the society itself. This fully applies to Ancient Egypt, which thanks to its long history gives us the opportunity to follow these concepts through the different historical periods and to examine the changes, which set in the society and ideology of the ancient Egyptians. For that purpose, we shall turn to the texts belonging to the genre of *Teachings*, which have examples from the time of Old, Middle and New Kingdom. Teachings themselves make claims to describe the moral values of society, hence, will be a priceless source to examine the attitude toward wealth, the rich man and the ways to acquire wealth.

In spite of the relatively big number of text evidences, the question of wealth in Egypt hasn't been object of many studies⁵³. The most extensive work belongs to H. Brunner⁵⁴, and even though he mentions most of the texts concerning the matter, it does not render an account of the change in the treatment of the Ancient Egyptians towards having wealth during different time periods.

Usually, property can be acquired only in two ways. The first is bound up with inheritance, meaning what father gives to his son or daughter. Here we may add marriage as well, thanks to which one can also gain wealth. It is to be noted that in texts a great inheritance and the privileges connected to it are rarely mentioned. It is true that one of the compulsory conditions for the existence of Maat is the inheritance of the father to be passed on to the hands of the son, but it is hardly a great wealth. The main way of getting rich in Egypt is thanks to the office which the person occupies in the hierarchy of the state. This is well attested in multiple bio-

⁵³ W. Schenkel. Reichtum. *In: Lexicon der Aegyptologie*. V. Wiesbaden 1984, 211-212; S. D. Katary. Wealth. *In: Oxford Encyclopedia of Ancient Egypt*. Oxford, 2001, III, 485-487; H. C. Washington. *Wealth and Poverty in the Instruction of Amenemope and Hebrew Proverbs*. Scholars Press. Atlanta, Georgia, 1994.

⁵⁴ H. Brunner. Die religiöse Wertung der Armut im Alten Aegypten. *Saeculum* 12, 1962, 319-344; Armut und Wohltätigkeit im Alten Aegypten. Frankfurt am Main. 2002, 159-184.

graphical texts from different time periods. The office does not only guarantee income, but is also a source of many privileges such as houses, land, cattle and people who take care of this property. All these privileges are not to be given as inheritance, because they are not part of the reward of a nobleman for his office⁵⁵. After he ceases to fulfill the office in question (dies or advances in his career) all material wealth assigned to him passes to the hands of the next nobleman who has been given the office. The climb up the ladder requires years of hard work and a constant demonstration of personal qualities. The best example of this is the career of the high priest of god Amun in Karnak Bakenkhons from the time of Rameses II. His father fulfils the duties of a priest in this temple at the time of Bakenkhons's birth. He begins his education with a 4-year training in the temple school of Mut in Karnak, followed by 11 years of working as an apprentice in the king's stables, where he learns the basic knowledge of king's administration. Not until then is he appointed as a common priest in the temple of Amun in Karnak under the supervision of his father. From that time his career in priesthood slowly begins its growth to the highest offices. He will need as many as 37 years to reach the highest office – High priest of Amun, which is a duty that Bakenkhons will carry on in the course of 27 years⁵⁶.

From all said before, it becomes clear that wealth in Ancient Egypt is accumulated mainly thanks to the office of a person. Let us now focus on texts. Within the framework of the Old Kingdom, given that there is a strong king's power, wealth can only be gained thanks to the mercy of the king. At the head of the Egyptian state stands a king who is perceived as a deity. By executing whatever he commands, every Egyptian actually serves to the god. And the king (god) precisely rewards each and everyone, who serves him loyally. This notion for the time of Old Kingdom is shown best in the *Teaching of Ptahhotep*:⁵⁷

snḏ.n.f ḥft ḥprt n.f
n iy is ḥt ḏs.s

⁵⁵ See also: Ю. Я. Перепелкин. Частная собственность в представлении египтян Старого царства. ПС, 16 (73), Москва, 1966; О. Д. Берлев. Трудовое население Египта в эпоху Среднего царства. Москва, 1972.

⁵⁶ For Bakenkhonsu and his biography see: Statue in Munich GL.WAF 38; Cairo CGC 42155; tomb TT 35; sarcophagus World Museum Liverpool M13864; texts KRI III 297, 4 – 299, 6; M. Plantikow -Münster. Die Inschrift des *B3k-n-ḥnsw* in München. ZÄS 95 (1969), 117-135; K. Jansen-Winkeln. The Career of the Egyptian High Priest Bakenkhons. JNES 52 (1993), 221–225; E. Froot. Biographical Texts from Ramessid Egypt. Society of Biblical Literature. Writings from the Ancient World. 26, Atlanta, 2007, 39-46.

⁵⁷ Here we will neither be discussing the question of the exact dating of the text, nor the problem of the authorship of all the texts from the genre of Teachings. For all these questions see E. Buzov. Notes on Egyptian Wisdom texts. JES V (2015), 49-83.

hp.sn pw n mrrwt.sn
ir ttf.f iw snd.tw.n.i
in ntr ir ikr:f
*hsf.f hr.f iw.f sdr*⁵⁸

“Respect the nobleman for what came from him,
 for wealth does not come by itself.
 This is their (gods’) law for the one they love.
 If it is abundant while it is timid,
 this is because it is the god who makes his wealth
 and he protects his face while he sleeps”.

ir ʕ3.k m-ht ndsw.k
ir.k ht m-ht g3t tp im
m niwt rh.t(w).n.k
m sš3w hprt n.k hntnw
m kf3 ib.k hr ʕhʕw.k
*hpr n.k m rdw ntr*⁵⁹

“If you are a great one, after you have been small,
 manage the wealth, after you have been in want,
 in the town you have known,
 as opposed to what happened to you before.
 Do not trust on your wealth,
 Which came for you as a gift by the god!”⁶⁰

From the text, it becomes clear that wealth belongs to god (king) and he gives it as a gift to those who deserve it. Then, we should ask ourselves the question: what must a common Egyptian do in order to deserve their own property or higher of-
 fice? Once again, we find the answer in the *Teaching of Ptahhotep*:

hms s3.k n hri-tp.k
imy-r3.k n niswt pr
wnn pr.k mn hr ht.f
*db3w.k m st iry*⁶¹

⁵⁸ Pt. 177-185 = Z. Žaba. *Les Maximes des Ptahhotep*. Prague, 1956, 29-30.

⁵⁹ Pt. 428-434.

⁶⁰ See also: *ibid.* 229 *in ntr shnt st* / var. L2 *in ntr ir ikr* “It is the god who raises the place / It is the god who makes wealth”.

⁶¹ *ibid.* 441-443.

“Bend your back to him who is above you,
 your overseer of the king’s house
 and thy house shall be resilient with thy property;
 and your reward in the proper place.”

The strict execution of each and every order given to you by the higher man, actually meant doing the will of the king. On this account we should not adopt this example as an attempt to lend a back to your superior in order to advance in the career. The main goal to work in favor of the superior may be presented in another way with the expression “following the heart”:

*hpr ht šms ib*⁶²

“Wealth happens once you follow the heart.”

To follow your heart is to live according to the plans of the god. In accordance with the Egyptian thought, god Ptah sojourns in all hearts, hence, to follow your heart means to follow god.⁶³

Thus, for the time of the Old Kingdom property can be gained if you fulfill your duties given to you by the superior. Then, if you serve the god (king), given that he is the only possessor of all wealth, he shall reward you. A confirmation of this idea is to be found in the extensive biographical inscriptions that occurred during the VI dynasty, where the wellbeing of a nobleman depends solely on their personal qualities and the fulfillment of each and every order of the king.⁶⁴

The First Intermediate Period brings serious changes into the ideology of ancient Egyptians. The lack of king’s power means a lack of a guarantor to take care of the subjects and to maintain order – Maat.⁶⁵ Public and social disorder is shown in detail in *Admonitions* and *Prophecy of Neferty*. Here the lack of Maat is shown through multiple repetitions and descriptions of antipodes – widely used methods in ancient Egyptian literature. As a result of that, every aspect of the state is upside down, including the ways to gain wealth:

⁶² *ibid.* 192.

⁶³ For the expression see: H. Kees. Die Lebensgrundsätze eines Amons Priesters der 22 Dynastie. *ZÄS* 74 (1938), 73-87; D. Lorton. The Expression *šms-ib*. *JARCE* 7 (1968), 41-54; *ibid.* A Note on the Expression *šms-ib*. *JARCE* 8 (1969/70), 55-57; Т. Леков. Скрытое знание. Свещените книги на Древен Египет. София. 2004, 49.

⁶⁴ For biographic inscriptions from the Old Kingdom see. N. Kloth. Die (auto-)biographischen Inschriften des ägyptischen Alten Reiches: Untersuchungen zu Phraseologie und Entwicklung. *In: Beihefte SAK* 8 Hamburg, 2002.

⁶⁵ Neferti 68-69 = W. Helck. Die Prophezeiung des Nfr.tj. Wiesbaden. 1970, 57; Merikare 45-49 = W. Helck. Die Lehre für König Merikare. Wiesbaden. 1977, 26-28; Amenemhe II, 10-III, 4 = W. Helck, Der Text der Lehre Amenemhets I für seinen Sohn. Wiesbaden. 1969, 69-78.

*iw ms šw^cw hpr m nb.w špss
tm irr n.f_tbwt m nb ^ch₃w⁶⁶*

“Behold, the nobleman becomes master of precious things.
The one who did not make sandals for himself is a master of wealth.”

iw ms špsw m nhwt šw₃w hrj ršwt⁶⁷

“Behold, the nobleman is weeping, the poor man is rejoicing.”⁶⁸

di.i n.k nb m nhp.w rwjtj htp.w⁶⁹

“I show you a master in need and an outsider in content.”

The previously made description should have sounded as a real horror in the ears of the ancient Egyptians. These people, who are used to having order and discipline, to slowly rising in hierarchy and gradually getting rich thanks to their qualities and skills, now see how only for a few days the wealthy man becomes poor and the poor man, incapable of labor, grows rich. This is the place to clarify the negative attitude toward the poor people, so commonly seen in Wisdom texts. The poor man according to the ancient Egyptians, is a personification of failure. He is a man who doesn't have personal qualities, doesn't work and is not worth your trust. The Egyptian state is a living, breathing organism and every human in it must aid the daily recreation of life through their actions. If you do not work, then you are an enemy to the people and to the king himself⁷⁰.

After the First Intermediate Period, the notion of acquiring wealth only through your service to the king returns to its original state. Even though the subject of wealth is rarely affected in the abundance of Wisdom texts in the Middle Kingdom, we are able to point a few examples. During the X dynasty, whence the Teaching for Merikare originates, the king advises the future heir to the crown how to treat his noblemen well and to lean on them.

*s^c3 wrw.k ir.sn hpw.k
nn nm^c n hwd pr:f
nb ht pw tm g₃w
n dd.n šw₃ww m m₃^ct.f
n ^ck₃ n dd h₃.n.i*

⁶⁶ Adm. 2,4-2,5 = A. H. Gardiner. The Admonitions of an Egyptian Sage from a hieratic papyrus in Leiden. Leipzig. 1909, 24.

⁶⁷ ibid. 2,8. See also: ibid. 7,7-7,10.

⁶⁸ See also: ibid. 7,7-7,10.

⁶⁹ Neferti 47.

⁷⁰ See Merikare 28 *iw tw₃w sh₃ mš^c* – “Precisely the poor man is he who confuses the army”.

*nm^c.f n mrj.f
g³sw.f n nb db^cw.f⁷¹*

“Glorify your noblemen, for they carry out your orders.
The rich man does not take side (in) his home,
he is not greedy for anything, one who is master of things.
And the poor man does not speak in his truth.
The one who says, “I want” is not right.
He is narrow minded to the one he loves
and leans toward the master of his reward.”

But if this advice is more of an attempt to centralize the disunited country and to reduce the power of the provincial nomarchs, in the *Teaching of a Man for his Son* we see a display of the whole idea that everything relies only on the king.

*iw.f shprw.f hm r rh
msdd hpr.w m mrwt
iw.f dj.f snnj n ktt wr
hrj phwj m tpj
šw m hrt m nb ^ch^cw
^cnd t³ m nb hnwj
iw.f dj.f mnj šw(.w) m mnj.f
swn.w m nb dmjt⁷²*

„He (the king) is who makes ignorance change into knowledge,
the hateful to change into a loved one!
He is the one who allows the small to pass into a big
and what is behind to come in front.
The one who is empty of things into lord of wealth,
the man, poor of land in a master of family.
He is the one who gives a berth to the one who does not have one and
[turns] the weak into lord of the city.”

After the Second Intermediate Period, with the beginning of the New Kingdom, the old concepts, known from the Middle Kingdom, return. In the *Teaching of Any* – a text from the end of the XVIII or the beginning of the XIX dynasty⁷³, the attitude toward wealth seems to be unchanged:

⁷¹ Merikare 42-44 = W. Helck. Die Lehre für König Merikare. Wiesbaden, 1977.

⁷² Teaching of a man to his son IV5 – V3 = W. Helck, Die Lehre des Djedefhor und die Lehre eines Vaters an seinen Sohn. Wiesbaden. 1984, 45-50.

⁷³ For the date of the text see: G. Posener. Ostraca inedita du Musée de Turin. *RdE* 9 (1951),

“Do not fill your heart with a desire for another one’s wealth!
 Keep what you have done for yourself.
 Do not rely on someone else’s property,
 lest he becomes lord in thy house...
 (6:10) Beware of foolishness and your god will bestow upon you wealth!”

The addressed guidelines are entirely in the spirit of all that we have seen from previous periods. A person is supposed to be humble and not to crave for wealth. He should not rely on the property of someone else. If he obeys these principles, then god shall bestow upon him wealth.

At the end of the New Kingdom, the established idea of gaining wealth changes fundamentally. In the *Teaching of Amenemope*, dated from the time of the XX dynasty, it is mentioned that in spite of the existence of a strong king’s power, wealth can be acquired without this being dependent on the will of the king. At this time, it is already possible for a person to become rich or to own property and at the same time to be an enemy of the weak people in his town:

iirrw.k si33 p3 irrj sw hr tp b3
iw.f hnwjtj n kbw
iw.f hfti n whnj m hct.k
iw nhm nht m ir.t.f
iw p3j.f pr hfti n p3 dmi
iw n3j.f sc3 wg3pw
iw fw 3 ht tw.f m drt mswt.f
dd tw p3j.f nkt n kj⁷⁴

“Recognize the one who does this on earth:
 He is an oppressor of the weak,
 he is an enemy in your flesh
 and the taking of life is in his eye.
 His house is the enemy of the city,
 his granaries shall be destroyed,
 his wealth shall be taken from the hands of his children.
 His property shall be given to another.”

171–189; J. F. Quack. *Die Lehren des Ani. Ein neuagyptischer Weisheitstext in seinem kulturellen Umfeld*. Freiburg, 1994.

⁷⁴ *Teaching of Amenemope VIII*, 1-8 = E.A. W. Budge, *Facsimiles of Egyptian Hieratic Papyri in the British Museum, Second Series*. London 1923, 9-18 and 41-51, pls. 1-14.

For the first time after, Teachings we come upon an inconsistency between wealth on one side and the closeness to god and the love of people on the other:

*ʒh p3 nmḥw m dṛt p3 nṯr r ws m wd3*⁷⁵

“Poverty is more useful in the hand of god,
than wealth in the granary.”⁷⁶

Such a contradiction of moral principles with gaining wealth is unknown for the time of the Old and Middle Kingdoms. The idea that a person may become rich by doing mischief occurs during the First Intermediate period with the lack of strong kingship. In the end of the New Kingdom, this notion returns once again and becomes an antithesis of the righteous way of life. The kings from this period have great resources and Egypt turns into an empire. In spite of that, it looks like the authority and strength of the kingship as an institution decreases. What changes in the concept of the ancient Egyptians is their attitude toward the king. This process is well attested in other texts and is called “personal piety”. It is connected to an increase of the personal responsibility to the principle of Maat⁷⁷ and at the same time a decrease of the role of the king as a mediator between god and people, thus turning him into a common monarch. From the time of the New Kingdom, it is no longer necessary for the king to stand between the person and god himself. This is clearly shown in the great number of stelae where their owner communicates directly to god. That’s why we should not be surprised when in search of justice the common man does not lean on the king’s support, but directly on god’s:

*Imn imj msdr nti sdm.k n wʿtj m ꜥnbt
iw.f nmḥw bn m ntf wsr
iw t3 ꜥnbt hr g3bw.f ḥd nbw n n3 sš nt tm3 ḥbs n n3 šmsw
gm irj Imn ḥpri.f m Ḃtj r di.t prj p3 nmḥw
gm(.w) p3 nmḥw ḥprw m3ʿt snnj nmḥw wsr*⁷⁸

“Amun, open your ear for the one who is alone in the court,
who is poor and not rich.

When the court takes away his silver and gold for the scribes on the mat, the
clothes for the officials,

⁷⁵ *ibid.* IX, 5-8.

⁷⁶ See also: Amenemope XVI, 11-14 *ʒh ḥs m mrw n rmt r wsr m wd3* “Praise and love of people are more useful than wealth in the granary”.

⁷⁷ Т. Леков. Скритото знание. Свещените книги на Древен Египет. С. 2004, 271.

⁷⁸ Pap. Anastasi II, 8, 5 - 9, 2 = R. Caminos. *Late Egyptian Miscellanies*. London. 1954, 56-57.

may Amun make his shape in his capacity of a vizier in order to release the poor man.

May the poor man be found rightful. May poverty surpass wealth.”

The last sentence shows the end of the belief that only the one who serves the king and has “correct heart”⁷⁹ is able to acquire wealth. From the New Kingdom on, wealth is in contrast with the righteous way of life. The most precise picture of this concept is to be found in the well-known part of “The Stories of Setne Khamwas and his son Si-Osire”⁸⁰. The demotic text, which has come to our knowledge in a copy from I century BC, but is for sure written much earlier, tells us about Si-Osire and how he takes his father to the Afterlife. There, all people who were wealthy in the real life suffer terrible punishments on account of their erroneous life, while the righteous poor man is surrounded by honors.

As we can see, from the time of the Old Kingdom the Egyptians knew that everything in this world, including wealth, belongs to the god and depends on him. This concept remains unchanged during the New Kingdom:

*ir rmt ʿmʿt dh3wt
p3 ntr p3j.f kd
sw whnj sw kd m mnw
sw irrj h3 n tw3 n mr:f
sw irrj rmt h3 n hj
iw.f n t3jw.f wnw n ʿnh⁸¹*

“People are mud and straw,
God is their builder.
He demolishes, he builds every day.
He makes thousands of people poor at will,
he makes thousands of people rulers,
when he is in his hour of life.”

In the Late period, even though many of the earlier concepts of the society are lost or changed, the idea that wealth is in the hand of god remains unchanged:

⁷⁹ The expression “correct heart” ʿk3-ib; mtj-ib is one of the main terms in the Didactic Literature. The one who is with a correct heart is “empty” of evil, he lives in accordance with Maat and does everything the right way.

⁸⁰ Pap. British Museum 604 verso = F. L. Griffith. *Stories of High Priest of Memphis*. Vol. I-II. Oxford, 1900.

⁸¹ Amenemope XXIV, 13-20.

“God is he who gives wealth and poverty.”⁸²

“It is God who gives wealth and the wise one is who keeps it.”⁸³

The notion that wealth belongs and depends only on god exists throughout the whole history of Egypt. The change that sets in is that if for the time of the Old and Middle Kingdoms the common man knew the key to how they can get rich – through fulfilling whatever the king orders, from the New Kingdom on wealth no longer depends on his will alone.

During that Late period the idea of wealth in Egypt becomes similar to the understanding of the Hebrew described in the Holy Bible. God is the holder of all wealth and he may offer it as a gift⁸⁴, but the wicked may also become rich⁸⁵. That’s why, as a whole, there is a negative attitude toward the wealthy man and wealth in general. It is interesting to be noted that all the used expressions in both cultures are the same⁸⁶.

Through the long history of the Old Kingdom until the Late period, Egypt comes the long way from the rhetorical question: *in ndyt itt ‘h’ n p3 ndjt mni sp.s*⁸⁷ “Does injustice bring wealth? Injustice cannot bring its success closer!” to getting wealthy with criminal deeds. This process is due to the double-sided nature of man, keen on doing good and evil, and at the same time to the gradually dying divine kingship.

Taking that sad fact aside, we find something else extremely important. The change regarding wealth and the rich man in Egypt, witnessed in Teachings, shows us that these literary works are not static and do not describe only well-known to all Egyptians ethical norms. On the contrary, they are a direct reflection of the society and actually represent the outlook on life of the ancient Egyptians. They describe the reality in the country. The change that is noticeable is in contradiction with the thesis that these texts are created by the elite of the ancient Egyptian society and serve merely as entertainment. After all, nobody likes to be reproached for their social status.

⁸² Pap. Insinger 17, 2 = M. Lichtheim. *Ancient Egyptian Literature*. Vol. 3 Berkeley/Los Angeles/London. 1980, 198.

⁸³ *ibid.* 5, 15. See also: 7, 17; 15, 20.

⁸⁴ Ecclesiastes. 5, 8; 6, 2.

⁸⁵ Psalms. 72, 11-12.

⁸⁶ For the similarities of the Egyptian didactic literature and numeral texts of the Old Testament see: D. C. Simpson. *The Hebrew book of Proverbs and the Teaching of Amenophis*. *JEA* 12 (1926), 232-239; R. J. Williams. *A people come out of Egypt*. *VTSup* 28 (1975), 231-252.

⁸⁷ Pt. 92-93.

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