

Student Handout 5: Comparing Primary Documents from Mesopotamia and Egypt

Document B: A Sumerian Father Gives Advice To His Son (About 2300 BCE)	Document B: Instructions Of The Vizier Ptah-hotep To His Son (About 2450 BCE)
<p>My son, let me give you instructions. Pay attention to them! Do not beat a farmer's son, or he will break your irrigation canal.... Do not break into a house... Do not speak with a girl when you are married, the [likelihood of] slander is strong... Do not allow your sheep to graze in untested grazing grounds... Submit to strength. Bow down to the mighty man.</p>	<p>If you sit at the table of one greater than you, speak only when spoken to. Laugh after him.</p> <p>When carrying a message from one great man to another, be accurate. Beware of making words worse through vulgar speech [slang], and so making for hostility between them.</p> <p>If you have a son who listens to you and takes care of your property as he should, do not cut your heart off from him. But if he does not carry out your instructions, if his manners in your household are wretched, if he rebels against all you say, cast him off. He is not your son at all.</p> <p>If you want to make friendship last in a home to which you have access as a master, a brother or a friend, beware of approaching the women. Do not do it. Do not be greedy, or envious of your own kindred.</p> <p>Love your wife at home as is fitting. Fill her belly, clothe her back. Make her heart glad as long as you live. Do not contend with her at law, but keep her from gaining control.</p> <p>Bow your back to your superior, then your reward will be as it should be. Opposition to a superior is a painful thing.</p>

Directions: Compare the advice to sons in the two B documents. Discuss as a group and share your ideas. Each group member is responsible for writing the answers to the questions that follow on their own sheet!

1. What can you infer (make your best guess based on the evidence) from the Mesopotamian document about the likely occupation and social position of the father?

2. What differences exist between the Mesopotamian and the Egyptian fathers' advice that could be explained by their different occupations and positions?

3. What can you infer about:
 - a. The relationships between fathers and sons?

 - b. Between women and men?

 - c. Between the upper and lower classes?

 - d. What evidence did you use to make these conclusions?

4. What would your reaction be to this kind of advice? Is it still applicable today? Why?