

**The Egyptian New Kingdom
“An Empire’s Quest for Religious Continuity”**

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Introduction

It would be known as; the land of the pharaohs, land of gods, and breadbasket for the ancient world but one aspect of Egyptian life would remain astonishingly consistent throughout Egypt's more than three thousand years of history, its religion – all except for a brief experiment long before the advent of what the western world would call monotheism. Ca.1353BCE, a young pharaoh named Amenhotep IV (ca. 1353-1336BCE) praying to his god in the early morning before his god had risen recited a dedication hymn;

Oh living Aten, who initiates life....
Oh sole god, without another beside him!
You create the Earth according to your wish....
You are in my heart, and there is none who knows you except your son. (Gore 2001: 38)

In the ancient Near East, it was common practice to favor one god in the pantheon of gods. In Mesopotamia Marduk was the patron god of the city of Babylon. The Sumerian god Enlil was the patron god of Nippur, and many other local gods were worshiped either above all other gods in the pantheon or at least were heavily favored in their local cities and villages. The New Kingdom experienced a vast change in the worship of the gods and this paper will; 1) explore the worship of the Egyptian gods before and during the New Kingdom; 2) investigate how the empire shaped the religious views of its inhabitants or ignored them; 3) examine whether the religious beliefs strengthened or worked against the imperial government.

Religious Implications Before and During the Egyptian New Kingdom

Due to the yearly flood of the Nile and Egypt's closeness to natural earthly renewing processes, Egypt exaggerated cyclical eternity in its religion. One example of how Egyptian religion evolved and changed over the course of Egyptian history can be found in the creation myth. There was not any one homogeneous and concise Egyptian myth of creation. Similar associations could be found in most of the

cult centers and they could fit into an overall framework (Wilkinson 2003:16). The Egyptian dynasties creator gods were in a pantheon company of eight *Hermopolitan Ogdoad* or nine *Heliopolitan Ennead* gods (Wilkinson 2003:16-18). While Amun, the sun god featured prominently as the main god in these myths, Ptah was chosen within the Memphite view of creation and they called him the father of the gods (Wilkinson 2003:18-19). These variants on the creation myths seem to have core elements and allow for the deities to have a basis in power throughout Egyptian dynastic periods. In the predynastic period, Atum as the sun god, and Horus were combined to form the god of the sky and the sun (Perry 2005:79). As the Old Kingdom became increasingly powerful the earlier beliefs were combined with Re, and the Osiris-Horus myth and legend (Perry 2005:79). This religious syncretism and continuity with the pantheon of gods continued with some minor changes. The sun was understood to undergo a kind of death and rebirth in the minds of the Egyptians as well as other Near East cultures. The origins of the cult of Amun in the Middle Kingdom was directly related to the Old Kingdom sun worship. It was during this phase of the Egyptian dynasties that Amun was combined with Re to form a collective god, Amun-Re (Perry 2005:220). The main cult center for Amun-Re was at Karnak, located at Thebes.

As syncretism within the pantheon continued, the New Kingdom pharaoh Thutmose IV (ca. 1401-1391BCE) had an inscription recorded on a dedication stele for the restoration project in antiquity of the Sphinx. This stele told a story on how Thutmose IV had a divine encounter with the sun god Re-Horahy or “rising sun” in which he was told to clear away the sand from the Sphinx and for this deed he would become the next pharaoh.¹ During the New Kingdom the temple cult of Amun at Karnak became more powerful. Amun-Re was depicted as the rays of the setting sun. Re eventually became the precedent for any association with the physical presence of the sun. Deities were also elevated in status at different times by adding “Re” to their names (Perry 2005:79). Egyptian pharaohs also had many designations of their name written in a cartouche, which represented their divine place on earth as well as in the afterlife. The royal names of pharaohs had praenomens such as; Nefer-kheperue-**re** (Amenhotep IV), Maat-ka-**re** (Hatshepsut ca.1473-1458BCE), and Neb-kheperu-**re** (Tutankhamun ca. 1336-1327BCE). The pharaohs

¹ From the Dream Stele, Sphinx, Giza Plateau, Egypt.

also had other non-royal names. The most evident name change occurs with the boy king, Tutankhamun. His non-royal name changed from Tutankhaten to Tutankhamun reflected a change from the worship of his father's Aten back to the traditional worship of Amun. This religious change is also evident within the royal family of Tutankhamun in which his wife, Ankhesenpaaten (Ankhenaten's daughter) also changes her name to Ankhesenamun.²

Religious Forces in Empire Building

It appears that religion was the inspiration for Egypt's building frenzy over its long history. The pyramids appear to be an attempt to capture the rays of Re and allow pharaohs to transcend to other worldly plains. The New Kingdom had its fair share of building projects. During the reign of Amenhotep III, the Aten became to be utilized in the names of the palace, royal barge, and part of the army (Gardiner 1961:34-54). This signified the change in state policies and a new focus for the religion of the empire. Amenhotep III's palace building project at Malaka in southern Thebes was a departure from the traditionally mortuary and funerary and tombs of the west bank.

An important artifact relating to the Aten is the scarab of Thutmoses IV, which describes the reception of Mitanni tribute and possible arrival of a Mitanni princess. The last line of the scarab text alludes to "subjects to the rule of Aten forever" (Reeves 2005:49). What can best explain the appearance of the Aten as an important god? The Egyptian empire was at its height and stable during the years of Amenhotep III's reign, and it is possible that the empire needed a more universal god. This god would be able to be worshiped in any regency or vassal state of the empire. Its solar implications are found in every Near Eastern religion. Shamash, who was the sun god in Babylonia and Assyria also corresponded with the sun gods Utu in Sumeria and with Ba'al in Canaan and Phoenicia. For a solar imperial god, the Aten fit this bill accordingly and became the manifestation of imperial power in which the pharaoh and the sun god would become "one" in death. While this became the universal god in the empire, it would be used to

² "Egyptology Online." Accessed 12 November 2006. Available <http://www.egyptologyonline.com/>.

represent kingship itself (Reeves 2005:50-51). This expanded the idea of kingship that was originally merged into the cult of Amun-Re, a century earlier by Hatshepsut (Reeves 2005:101). It appears that this religious syncretism between the Aten and pharaoh (divinity and royalty) may have been elevated to a new height by Amenhotep III, and fervently pursued and completed by Akhenaten (Reeves 2005:91).

The implications of this new religion had profound effects on politics. On a dedication stele found at Tell el-Amarna (Akhetaten), the inscription read; “declares and oath that Aten’s wish will be carried out and that the burden for the project would fall upon those in attendance” (Reeves 2005:109). The stele specifically states the boundary for the new city and the rhetoric structure in the inscription then takes an abrupt turn. It appears that Akhenaten’s speech may have written down near verbatim. The stele indicates that Akhenaten makes clear that “things” were “against my father” and “offensive” (Reeves 2005:111). The stele was reportedly damaged after the Amarna period was over and is an important insight into the populace’s consciousness. Was Akhenaten attempting to justify the existence of this new religion to the priests of Amun, the people of Egypt, alliances, or enemies? Some previous pharaohs had an uneasy association with the priests of Amun, but those tensions had lessened to some degree during the reign of Amenhotep III. The inscription on the stele is clearly harsh and was possibly meant to intimidate the priests of Amun who were unhappy with the revolutionary change in worship. Another possible motive may have been an assassination attempt on a member of the royal family by the Thebian cult (Reeves 2005:111).

The move to Tell el-Amarna (Akhetaten) must have had some widespread support in order for this undertaking to occur. Some evidence suggests that it was the young people who thrived on excitement and adventure for this revolutionary change (Reeves 2005:113). The city of Akhetaten held within its area and estimated population of 20,000 to 50,000 (Reeves 2005:119). The new city was dedicated in the ninth year of Akhenaten’s reign and was an oasis of green urban planning. The city seemed to be focused on the royal tombs being constructed for Akhenaten and his royal family and courtly advisors (Reeves 2005:119-136).

The Changing Religious Views of Egypt's Pharaohs, Priests, and Inhabitants

It was tradition that a man should preside over the people as pharaoh. This religious and political tradition was challenged when Queen Hatshepsut took on the personification of a pharaoh and ruled with her husband's secondary wife's child, Thutmose III (ca. 1479-1425BCE) as co-regent. Hatshepsut chose not to offend her people and temple priests and adopted all of the customs of kingship, except the personification with the Apis bull. Statues depicted her as a man adorned with the pharaoh's false beard, which was a time-honored tradition. Hatshepsut's support came from temple priests and officials who were loyal to her and wanted her to remain in power. It was the power of the scribes whose task it would be to compose an account of Hatshepsut's divine ancestry that dispelled any doubt in this world or the next that she had a sacred claim to her position. A story was inscribed on her mortuary temple at Deir el-Bahri on the west bank at Thebes in which Amun impregnates Queen Ahmose, her mother. A daughter is born, Khenemetamun Hatshepsut, which means "She Whom Amun Embraces, Foremost of Noble Women." With this godly inspired created myth, Hatshepsut put any question of her divinity aside. Hatshepsut Reinforced this new concept of divinity and ascendancy by ruling over a period of stability. Under Hatshepsut, Egypt prospered from regular floods and bountiful harvests. After a reign of approximately two decades, Hatshepsut died or was deposed by the rightful heir, Thutmose III. Within a short amount of time, Thutmose III erased references to Hatshepsut by defacing statues, and chiseling her cartouche from as many monuments as possible to obliterate her memory from the populace and history. The empire was back to its traditional religious practice of worshiping a man as a god-king. Under the reign of Amenhotep III (ca. 1391-1353BCE), available records do not reveal any conflict between the priests of the god Amun and the king. (Baines 1991:74) The increasing power of the temple priests especially at Karnak and had been a concern of the pharaoh since the reign of Hatshepsut one hundred years earlier. Red Chapel inscriptions at Karnak show a pledge of allegiance to Amun from Hatshepsut. (Reeves 2005:37)

While the sun gods of Egypt transcended the Egyptian dynasties, foreign rulers, and priestly cults, the New Kingdom pharaoh Amenhotep III, and his co-regent son and predecessor, Amenhotep IV (Akhenaten), changed the manifestations of sun worship into a predominant god. In a slight change from the normal sun worship, Amenhotep III would include worshipping the sun-disk god, Aten. This would represent the sun at its highest at midday (Perry 2005:322). After Amenhotep III's death, Akhenaten took the worship of the Aten one step further and made the Aten the chief god and the other gods to be known as false gods. Akhenaten rejected thousands of years of Egyptian polytheistic worship and focused on a single god. His religious zealotry and dedication to the Aten changed the structure of religious beliefs and practices for temple priests, and the populace who had roles in the temple economy. Before Akhenaten, these temple economies were thriving enterprises especially the main Amun cult center at Karnak. Priests obtained great power by organizing the temple economy on the behalf of the gods and the pharaoh. These temple economies were the recipients of the empire's conquests and the granaries for the workers who built the pharaoh's temples and tombs. Akhenaten closed the temples of the proclaimed false gods and converted some temples into worshipping the Aten. Akhenaten's early religious transformation was apparent in combining the familiar concept of the religious center at Karnak with that of his fathers for his new city, Akhetaten. Tell el-Amarna, its present name, contained an equivalent causeway of the one used in the Opet Festival between Karnak and Luxor temples. This new causeway at Tell el-Amarna was used for the procession of the new public triad of Aten-Akhenaten-Nefertiti instead of the private triad of Amun-Mut-Khonsu at Thebes. This revolutionary change from the former worship of Amun to the new worship of the Aten would transcend all areas of Egyptian culture. One particular new religious aspect was that divinity and pharaoh became one with the Aten. This elevated the pharaoh to the high priest of the Aten (Reeves 2005:101). The name change of the pharaoh and the royal family had even more significance since it now means "He Who Is Effective on Aten's Behalf" (Reeves 2005:101). This not only meant that Akhenaten was Aten's representative on earth, but his father's representative since his father, now in death, was "one with the Aten", and they would all continue to rule together (Reeves 2005:101). This completes the cycle of god-king ascending and the passing of kingship

to the son as heir. The religious revolution would be complete with this concept that divinity is shared between both father and son, and combined with the true god, Aten.

The religious implications of Akhenaten's reign may have been from the pharaoh's presuppositions that competition for power and control of the temple economies and the temple priests of Amun would be the beneficiaries (Baines 1991:74-75). Eventually, Akhenaten had individuals in charge of removing all of the depictions of the god Amun erased from monuments and sought to eradicate the memories of all of the gods (Baines 1991:82). In most cases, at first, the solar deities were tolerated but they eventually were removed in favor of the Aten, as well as the plural form of the word, "god" (Baines 1991:82). The one exception was the god Ma'at who remained consistent throughout the period (Baines 1991:82). Another important development was the inclusion of the spoken language as evident in a boundary marker for Akhetaten (Tell el-Amarna) in which Akhenaten appears to speak directly to the public for the existence of his new city. Consistently, during the Amarna period texts consciously included elements of the spoke language which was a departure from traditional inscriptions techniques (Baines 1991:79). While traditional gods were the subjects of hymns, the Aten hymns were intrinsically dedicated to expression and not to the older traditional subject of struggle (Baines 1991:83). Akhenaten chose not to depict the Aten in any new myth, which was the traditional method of understanding the place in religious beliefs for the pantheon of Egyptian gods (Baines 1991:83-84).

The Condition of the Empire before, during, and after Akhenaten's Reign

The empire was stable under the reign of Amenhotep III who was successful both militarily and diplomatically (Perry 2005:320). The empire was at its high point. Art and architecture achieved new levels of sophistication. A cache of statues found in the temple at Luxor exemplified the craftsmanship of the age. Some of these statues were the largest ever created at the time, and only surpassed by Ramesses II (Perry 2005:320). Wealth from international trade as well as national economic prosperity dominated the Egyptian landscape. Under Akhenaten, the empire at first was still benefiting from his father's

successes. Glimpses mostly from the Amarna letters found in a cache at el Amarna suggest that Akhenaten was a weak administrator of an empire. It appears from the cuneiform tablets that Akhenaten was infatuated with religious concerns more than expanding or maintaining his empire (Gore 2001:53)

The last years of Akhenaten's reign are shrouded in mystery, but the Hittites seemed to unite behind one king, and city after city in the northern empire seemed to fall. Letters to Akhenaten went unanswered and their pleas for military assistance ignored (Perry 2005:340). When the "boy king", Tutankhaten, later Tutankhamun came to power at the age of six, the kingdom was divided by religious strife, and reeling from the economic effects of a diminished empire. It would be Tutankhamun's successors Ay (ca. 1324-1320BCE) and Horemheb (ca. 1320-1292BCE) that would restore some resemblance of cohesion and attempt to hang onto what was left of a mighty empire (Perry 2005:340).

The Possible Connections to Later Monotheistic Religions

It is said by many historians that Akhenaten's concept of "one god" was the world's first brief monotheistic religion. From this conceptional manifestation of a single god that cannot be seen and not created in human, or anthropomorphic form, Akhenaten's pioneering efforts may have had profound influence on the development of the world's religions to come. (Baines 1991:82). While some may think of the Aten as a non-anthropomorphic and invisible god, it does have elements of the rays of the Aten coming down as human hands, and most often holding the Ankh (key of life) and Ma'at (food of the gods) (Baines 1991:83). This contradicts the one-god monotheistic view of the Aten, especially since Ma'at was considered an Egyptian deity in its own right.

Another possible connection to the foundations of monotheism is explored by David Rohl in Pharaohs and Kings a Biblical Quest. He systematically re-dates the traditional modern Egyptian chronology and creates a new chronology in which Akhenaten's poor attention to the Levant gave rise to the Israelite monarchy. (Rohl 1995:199). Rohl claims that the Amarna letters prove that the Habiru are in fact the Hebrews, and that additional proof has been found through astronomical calculations (Rohl

1995:200-201). Although this theory was discredited in the 1970s Rohl revived this concept for his new chronology, that allows for a band of Hebrews leaving Avaris and settling in the Levant before the mass Exodus led by Moses. This, for tales of grandeur, degrades the Exodus to a small skirmish as Rohl puts it, and delegates it to a story about nation building (Rohl 1995: 200).

Conclusion

While the some of the New Kingdom and most of the Amarna period is shrouded in mystery, glimpses of its remarkable existence emerge and continue to fascinate historians, archaeologist and Egyptologists alike. Akhenaten's experiment could be examined as the first intellectual revolution in history or it could be seen as an attempt to curb the political influence of the priests of Amun vying for power in a prosperous empire. Hatshepsut's gender bending concept of kingship and subsequent banishment from history by her co-regent and successor Thutmose III could be considered evidence of the social anxieties of a jealous pharaoh, or power hungry priests, or a gender conscious populace. The evidence of the restoration of the old religious practices shortly after Akhenaten's death and the eventual destruction and removal from history of Akhenaten and his new religion points in the direction that most people of the time did not agree with his political, social, and religious reforms. The eradication of these histories may be the result of a people wanting to return to tradition or the effect of denying a civilization considered ancient even during Akhenaten's time, an Egyptian old-world view of the gods and goddesses, they knew all too well. It is possible that continued research in the fields of archaeology, history and Egyptology could catapult the New Kingdom, Hatshepsut, Akhenaten and the Amarna period evermore closer to a clear and concise understanding.

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