

Akhenaten and Monotheism



Akhenaten and Monotheism

Introduction: The History of Monotheism

- Eastern societies embrace **monotheism** more broadly, more strictly and earlier than their Western counterparts
 - e.g. Egypt and Judea
 - Islam is the strictest form of monotheism yet
- cf. pants



Akhenaten and Monotheism

Introduction: The History of Monotheism

- most important to historians, the Hebrew religion is not the earliest form of monotheism attested in the historical record
 - moreover, Hebrew monotheism developed slowly over time, as we'll see in Section 11
 - that is, long before Hebrew records confirm the growth of a monotheistic religion in Canaan, the Egyptians experimented with a novel form of single-deity worship

Akhenaten and Monotheism

Introduction: The History of Monotheism

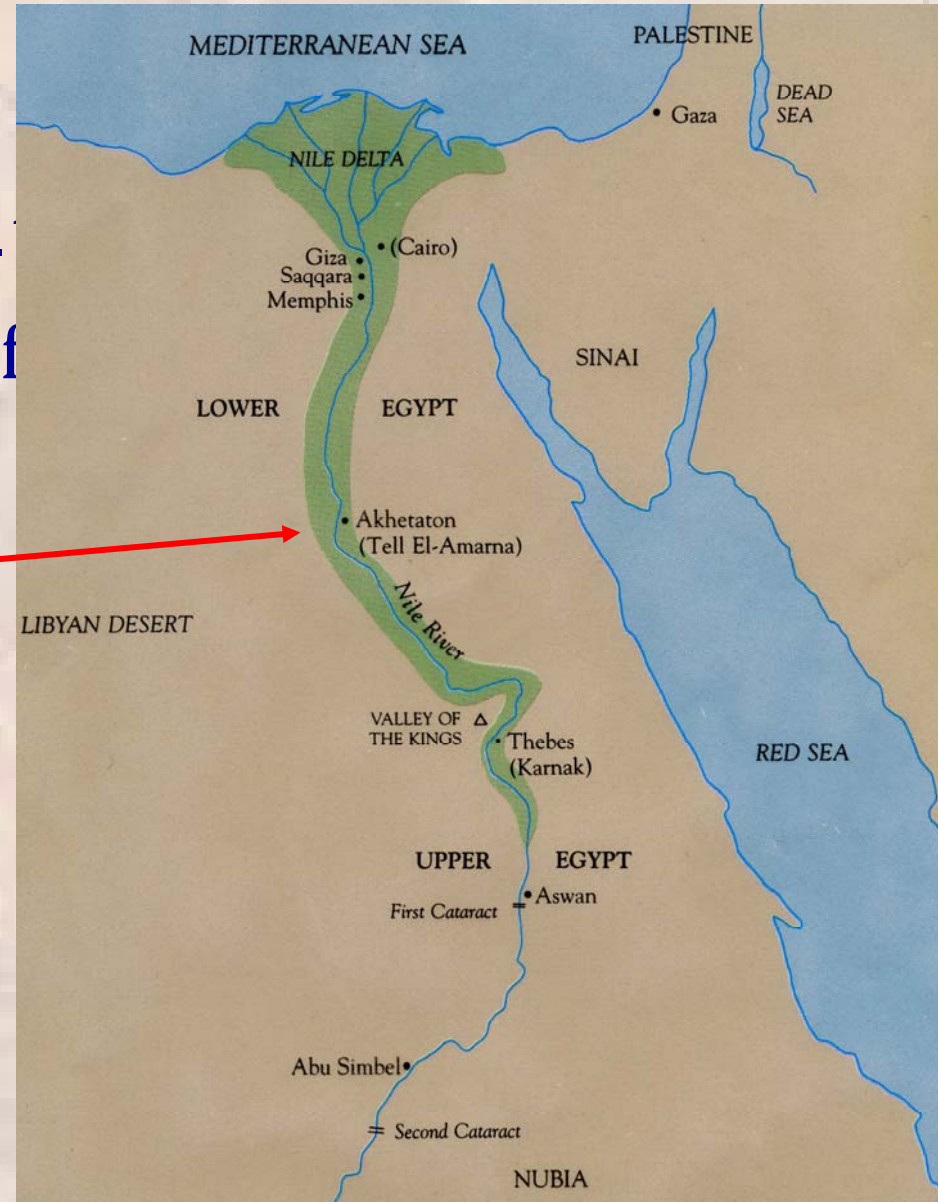
- during the reign of the mysterious pharaoh **Akhenaten**
- the big question then is:
“Did Akhenaten’s religion influence or somehow affect the growth of monotheism among the ancient Hebrews?”



Akhenaten and Monotheism

Akhenaten

- Akhenaten was born
 - ruled Egypt: ca. 1352-
 - died in middle age, of
- the **Amarna Period**
 - at **El-Amarna**
 - in Akhenaten's day this city-site was called "Akhetaten"



Akhenaten and Monotheism

Akhenaten

- Overview of Pharaohs (Amarna Period)
 - Akhenaten (1352-1338 BCE)
 - Smenkhare (1338-1336 BCE): virtually unknown
 - Tutankhuaten, later Tutankhamun (1336-1327 BCE): famous tomb
 - Ay (1327-1323 BCE): aged uncle put on the throne in the absence of other legitimate adult male heirs



Akhenaten and Monotheism

Akhenaten

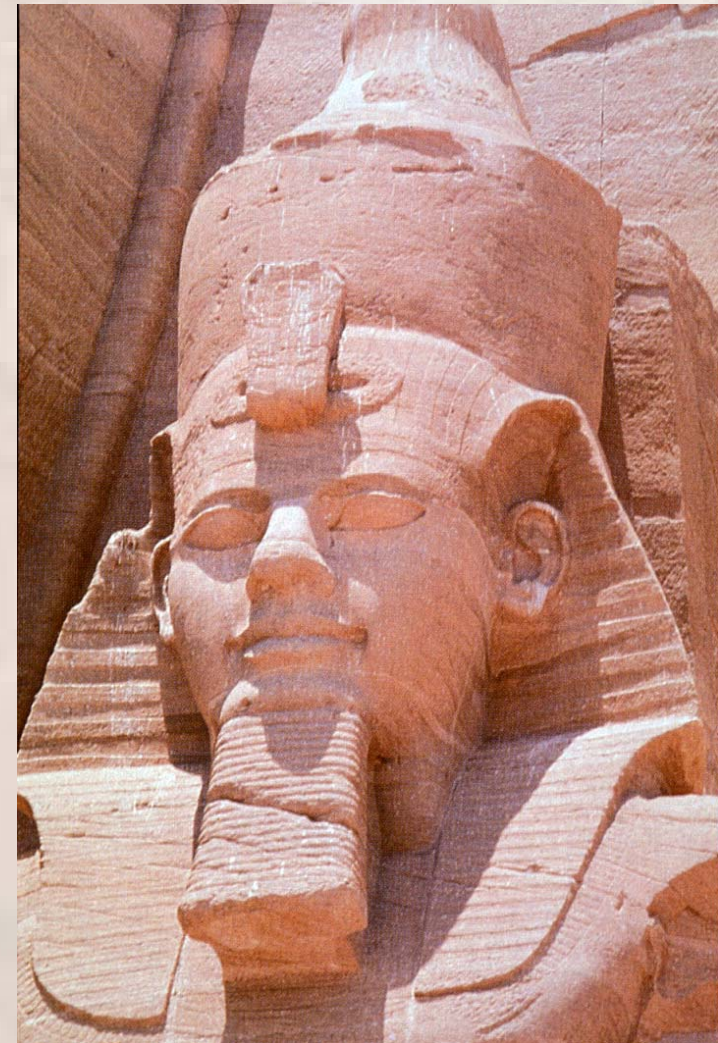
- after Ay, the next pharaoh was Horemheb (1323-1295 BCE)
 - a general not related by blood to the royal line of Ahmose
 - the end of the 18th Dynasty
 - thus, Ay was a transitional figure leading the way for the next dynasty, the **Ramessids (19th Dynasty)**



Akhenaten and Monotheism

Akhenaten

- the most important ruler of the 19th Dynasty was **Ramses II**
- during this period, El-Amarna was abandoned and later destroyed
 - official purge of the memory of Akhenaten
 - it's hard even to find hints of Akhenaten's religion in later Egyptian culture



Akhenaten and Monotheism

Akhenaten

- yet we do know about Akhenaten!
 - in fact, we know more about him and his reign than most Egyptians did fifty years after his life
 - indeed there's more surviving evidence from Akhenaten's regime than the later part of Ramses II's reign
 - because of the Ramessids' destruction of **Amarna culture**
 - ironically, the destruction of Amarna culture preserved it, cf. Pompeii



[53]

Colossal statue of King Akhenaten
DYNASTY 18, CA. 1353–1350 B.C.
LIMESTONE; HT. 310 CM

Akhenaten and Monotheism

Akhetaten

- **Akhetaten:** Akhenaten's new capital
 - a large city built very quickly
 - out of *talatat*
 - over 45,000 found

In this masterpiece, carved on a limestone slab, two horses stand before a chariot (not shown). The horse was a common theme in Egyptian art, but here Akhenaten's artists gave it spirit and freshness through the simple device of having one horse lower his head to bite his itching foreleg.



Akhenaten and Monotheism

Akhetaten

- but while buildings with small blocks go up fast, they also come down fast
- many found in Ramses II's 9th Pylon (Thebes)
- led to excellent preservation of *talatat*, including remnants of the original paint



Akhenaten and Monotheism

Akhetaten

- Akhetaten is located in a remote part of Egypt, in a place where there was no previous settlement
 - thus, it was religiously pristine
 - on the eastern side of the Nile (=sunrise/life)
 - cf. pyramids on the western side (= sunset/death)
 - Akhetaten: “Horizon of the Sun-disk (*aten*)”
 - cf. *Akhet-Khufu* (Great Pyramid)
- a deliberate reinterpretation/recollection of Old Kingdom solar religion?

Akhenaten and Monotheism

The Early Part of Akhenaten's Reign (1352-1348 BCE)

- early in Akhenaten's life, there are a few indications of the revolution to come
- his father **Amunhotep III** died in 1352
 - Akh. was still called **Amunhotep (IV)**
 - not the eldest son of Amunhotep III
 - thus, not groomed for the throne
 - did he feel rejected and second-rate?



Akhenaten and Monotheism

The Early Part of Akhenaten's Reign (1352-1348 BCE)

- artwork is our primary evidence for the Amarna period
 - very few written records
- “recovered history”
 - based on the interpretation of changes in the art which is preserved



The carved image on this limestone fragment from Akhetaten depicts a hand releasing a lump of incense or scented fat, perhaps as an offering. The exquisitely rendered fingers—possibly the pharaoh's own—express the ideal of elegance that marked the art of the period.

Akhenaten and Monotheism

The Early Part of Akhenaten's Reign (1352-1348 BCE)

- central to that is the evolution of royal portraiture
 - cf. propaganda in modern China
- a nice side benefit of Amarna culture is that this history has not been tampered with
 - and it's beautiful too!



Akhenaten and Monotheism

The Early Part of Akhenaten's Reign (1352-1348 BCE)

- first sign of things to come: as a new king, Akhenaten assumed the title “Prophet of **Ra-Horakhte** (Ra of the Horizon)”
 - n.b. no **Amun**, the principal god of Egypt in the day
 - worshipped at **Thebes**
 - is this the beginning of a rift between Akhenaten and the **Amun Priesthood?**



Thebes

Akhenaten and Monotheism

The Later Part of Akhenaten's Reign (1348-1338 BCE)

- by 1348 BCE, the revolution had begun
- sometime between 1352 and 1348, he changed his name from Amunhotep to Akhenaten
 - Akhenaten: “Agreeable to the Sun-Disk (*aten*)”
- is this a declaration of open warfare with the Amun Priesthood in Thebes?

Akhenaten and Monotheism

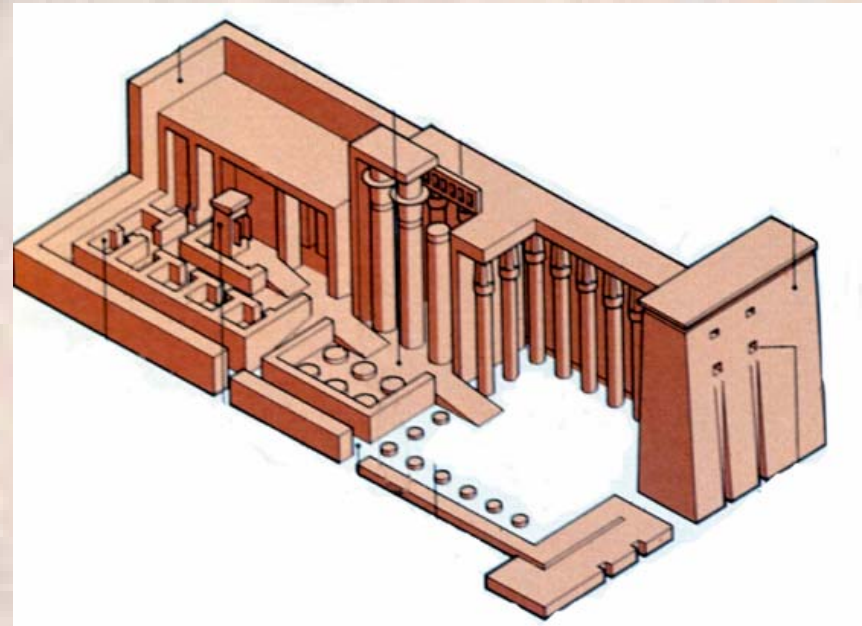
The Later Part of Akhenaten's Reign (1348-1338 BCE)

- by now the city of Akhetaten was being built
- also around this time, Akhenaten started shutting down Amun temples across Egypt
 - and scratching out Amun's name on inscriptions!
 - and changing the word “gods” to “god”!!

Akhenaten and Monotheism

The Later Part of Akhenaten's Reign (1348-1338 BCE)

- why this attack on Amun?
 - what doesn't Akhenaten like about Amun?
- Amun is the god of secrets
 - his temples are roofed and closed
 - inaccessible to anyone but the god's priests



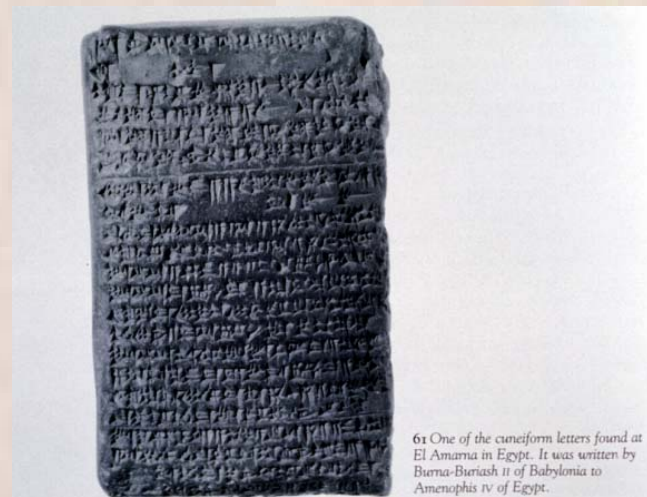
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The Later Part of Akhenaten's Reign (1348-1338 BCE)

- did Akhenaten want to open up the principal religion of Egypt to a wider community of worshipers?

- n.b. *aten* temples have no roofs, are open to the sun
- cf. a letter to Akhenaten from the Assyrian King:

“Why are my messengers kept in the open sun? They will die in the open sun. If it does the king good to stand in the open sun, then let the king stand there and die in the open sun.”



61 One of the cuneiform letters found at El Amarna in Egypt. It was written by Burna-Buriash II of Babylonia to Amenophis IV of Egypt.

Akhenaten and Monotheism

The Art and Iconography of the Amarna Period

- the art of Amarna culture is centered on the *aten* as a divine presence
 - n.b. **ankh**: the symbol of life force
- while the *aten* looks back to the Ra cult of the Old Kingdom, it also looks forward
 - most often shown as a circle
 - not as a human or animal
 - cf. Isis with cow horns or Osiris with a green face (fertility)



Akhenaten and Monotheism

The Art and Iconography of the Amarna Period

- this abstract imagery suggests that the *aten* is the source of all being and thus cannot be restricted to one animal form
 - thus, it is presented as a “universal circle”:
mysterious, without limit or division
- but are the little hands on the end of the *aten*'s beams a concession to popular taste?



Akhenaten and Monotheism

The Art and Iconography of the Amarna Period

- both abstract and nameless, the *aten* cannot then be restricted to one gender
 - nor can Akhenaten himself!
 - depicted sometimes without male genitalia
 - and odd in other ways, too
 - pot-bellied and slouching
 - with thick lips and a big chin
 - and a pointed head



Akhenaten and Monotheism

The Art and Iconography of the Amarna Period

- did Akhenaten have a birth defect?
 - eunuchoidism? but he has six daughters by his principal wife **Nefertiti**
 - others by secondary wives?
 - Akhenaten's family figures large in Amarna artwork
 - we can date the daughters' births
 - and in some cases, their deaths also



Akhenaten and Monotheism

The Art and Iconography of the Amarna Period

- scenes of family affection like the ones below are highly unusual in Egyptian art
 - and there are other unconventional images of Nefertiti and her daughters by Akhenaten
 - e.g. Nefertiti wearing the blue crown of war(!)
 - or the double crown usually reserved for pharaohs and kings



Akhenaten and Monotheism

The Art and Iconography of the Amarna Period

- Nefertiti and the daughters are also shown with pointed heads and potbellies
 - which is why Nefertiti is wearing the high hat in her famous bust
 - so, were Nefertiti and the daughters also deformed?
 - probably not!
 - thus, this must not be naturalistic imagery, but a form of stylized presentation



Akhenaten and Monotheism

The Art and Iconography of the Amarna Period

- what does this highly stylized presentation of the royal family (and only them) mean?
 - are we supposed to see them as not-completely-human, super-special, solar aliens?
 - are they our conduit to the favors of the sun?
 - cf. Akhenaten's hymn to the *aten*:
“There is no other who knows you
except your son, Akhenaten”
 - do we need these ultra-tan ET's to make the sun shine?



Akhenaten and Monotheism

The Art and Iconography of the Amarna Period

- Egyptians were used to seeing royals as divine, but the *only* divinities?
- it's hard to put all the pieces of the Amarna puzzle together and make historical sense
 - attracts outlandish theories and weirdoes
 - and as with the Zapruder film of Kennedy's assassination, a formal statement by Akhenaten of what he was trying to do would probably only complicate matters further

Akhenaten and Monotheism

The Art and Iconography of the Amarna Period

- another question: how did Akhenaten manage to take on the Amun priesthood?
 - with the support of the army?
 - but there's no record of Akhenaten leading military campaigns during his reign
 - and are we to suppose that the army worked with an effeminate-looking, secluded, family-oriented, pointy-headed sun freak?
 - only if they had a common foe!



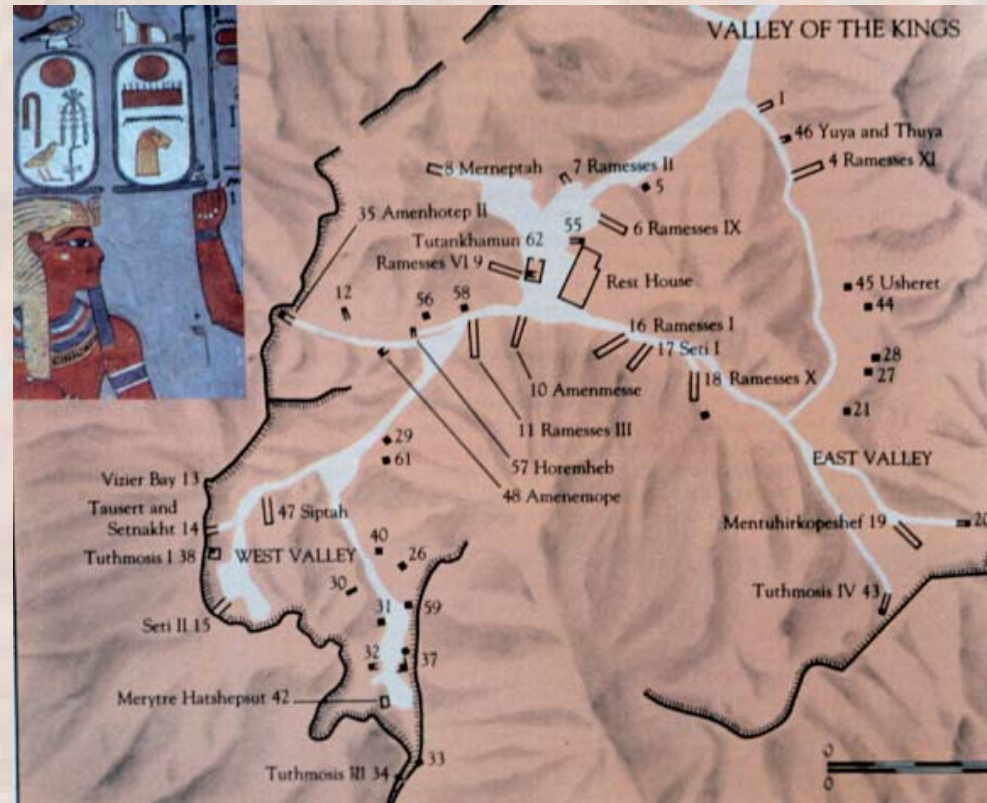
[54]

Head of King Akhenaten
DYNASTY 18, CA. 1348–1335 B.C.
LIMESTONE; HT. 24.5 CM

Akhenaten and Monotheism

The Aftermath of Akhenaten's Reign

- no tomb or funerary relics belonging to Akhenaten have ever been found
 - especially in the **Valley of the Kings**
 - we have located the tombs of most NK pharaohs there
 - was Akhenaten's tomb hidden especially well and so has never been found? Not likely!



Akhenaten and Monotheism

The Aftermath of Akhenaten's Reign

- is it possible Akhenaten was not buried?
 - not likely! his successors were close to him
 - and non-burial is the most horrific punishment imaginable to the Egyptians
 - no hint of assassination either?
 - so what killed Akhenaten?
 - sunstroke?
 - mono-*theistic*-nucleosis?
 - *aten*-tion deficit disorder?
 - and what was the reaction in Akhetaten when the sun still rose?



Akhenaten and Monotheism

The Aftermath of Akhenaten's Reign

- Akhetaten was not abandoned immediately upon Akhenaten's death
- both city and throne were occupied by **Smenkhare**, his direct heir and successor
 - Smenkhare is all but a total mystery
 - he only appears in the Amarna records about two years before Akhenaten's death
 - marries one of Akhenaten's daughters
 - was he a secondary son? (cf. Tuthmosis II)
 - dies after ruling for two years (1338-1336 BCE)
 - no known burial or funerary relics

Akhenaten and Monotheism

The Aftermath of Akhenaten's Reign

- an interesting coincidence: Smenkhare appears at about the very time Nefertiti disappears from the Amarna record
 - traditional theory: Akhenaten exiled her from Akhetaten when she produced no sons
 - new theory: Smenkhare was Nefertiti!
 - if Akhenaten knew he was dying and he had no sons, she would be the most logical successor



Akhenaten and Monotheism

The Aftermath of Akhenaten's Reign

- Hatshepsut's regime would have justified endowing Nefertiti with male attributes
- then she “married” her own daughter
 - cf. typical royal marriage between half-siblings
 - cf. Hatshepsut again
 - but no chance here of producing a Tuthmosis III



Akhenaten and Monotheism

The Aftermath of Akhenaten's Reign

- or is this just another crackpot theory like so many that accrue around Akhenaten?
- why didn't Smenkhare fare well as “pharaoh”?
 - because as a general rule supermodels don't make good kings?



Akhenaten and Monotheism

The Aftermath of Akhenaten's Reign

- and how did Smenkhare die? was s/he assassinated?
 - hard *not* to believe since s/he had so many natural enemies:
 - the Amun priesthood?
 - the army who didn't want a woman in charge?
 - her own daughter who wanted a real husband?
 - sounds like an episode of “The Guiding *Aten*”



Akhenaten and Monotheism

The Aftermath of Akhenaten's Reign

- Smenkhare's successor: the boy-king Tut
- probably the most famous Egyptian pharaoh today
 - born **Tutankhuaten**
 - but later changed his name to **Tutankhamun**
 - n.b. addition of Amun
 - moved the capital from Akhetaten back to Thebes
 - probably explains the opulence of his burial



Akhenaten and Monotheism

The Aftermath of Akhenaten's Reign

- also explains the protection afforded his tomb in the first century after his death
 - but later preservation was pure luck
- he died of complications following a broken femur
- and left behind no male heir
 - two fetuses mummified in his tomb
- with Tut, the Amarna period ends
 - as does the 18th Dynasty which had begun with Ahmose



Akhenaten and Monotheism

The Aftermath of Akhenaten's Reign

- but the discovery of Tut's tomb in 1922 by **Howard Carter** “recovered” Amarna culture, at least for the modern world
- but for the ancient world, the sun of Akhenaten's monotheism set with Tut and the Ramessids' systematic deconstruction of Akhetaten and the *damnatio memoriae* of its pharaohs
- or did it?

Akhenaten and Monotheism

Conclusion: Akhenaten and Hebrew Monotheism

- did Egyptian *aten*-worship influence the development of **Hebrew monotheism**?
- this depends on the answers to two crucial questions
 - How alike are Hebrew and Egyptian monotheism?
 - Can the Hebrews have had contact with Akhenaten's religion?

Akhenaten and Monotheism

Conclusion: Akhenaten and Hebrew Monotheism

- How alike are Hebrew and Egyptian monotheism?
 - not very much!
 - the *aten* is abstract but limited to the sun-disk
 - conversely, the Hebrew God is seen to be manifest everywhere and in all sorts of different ways
 - e.g. angels, rainbows, floods, frogs, etc.
 - conversely, the *aten* acts like a “pharaoh” surrounded by a court, motivating all things and working through chosen favorites
 - cf. Akhenaten and his family

Akhenaten and Monotheism

Conclusion: Akhenaten and Hebrew Monotheism

- Can the Hebrews have had contact with Akhenaten's religion?
 - according to the Bible, they actually were in Egypt during this time: the **Egyptian Captivity**
 - long before Israel was an organized state, but the idea could have influenced wandering patriarchs
 - still, there is little evidence that Akhenaten's religion spread much beyond Akhetaten, not even very far within Egypt
 - certainly not to **Goshen (Pi-Ramesse)** controlled by the Ramessids so opposed to Amarna culture

Akhenaten and Monotheism

Conclusion: Akhenaten and Hebrew Monotheism

- on the surface, then, it looks highly unlikely that atenism could have had any impact on Hebrew religion
 - and after all, how hard is it to suppose that there is only one god?
 - it may be a revolutionary concept but it's not a very complicated idea at heart
- but then compare Akhenaten's **Hymn to the Aten** and **Psalm 104**

Psalm 104

Bless the Lord . . . you who coverest thyself with light as with a garment . . .

Who layeth the beams of his chambers in the waters; . . .

He causeth the grass to grow for the cattle, and . . . the trees

Where the birds make their nests; as for the stork, the fir trees are her house.

The high hills are a refuge for the wild goats; . . . (As) the sun ariseth, (the beasts) gather themselves together . . .

There go the ships: there is that leviathan (whale), whom thou hast made to play therein.

Hymn to the Aten

When the land grows bright and you are risen from the *Akhet* (horizon) and shining in the sun-disk by day, . . .

All flocks (are) at rest on their grasses, trees and grasses flourishing;

Birds flown from their nest, their wings in adoration of your life-force;

All flocks prancing on foot, all that fly and alight living as you rise for them;

Ships going downstream and upstream too, every road open at your appearance;

Fish on the river leaping to your face, your rays even inside the sea.

Akhenaten and Monotheism

Conclusion: Akhenaten and Hebrew Monotheism

- the likeness is not exact but the resemblance is astounding!
 - how did this happen? what channel of cultural exchange enabled this?
- Does this give us license to reconstruct a road between Akhetaten and Jerusalem?
 - and if we do, what are we writing: history or a historical novel?
- that's the danger of studying Akhenaten: going too far, like he did!