

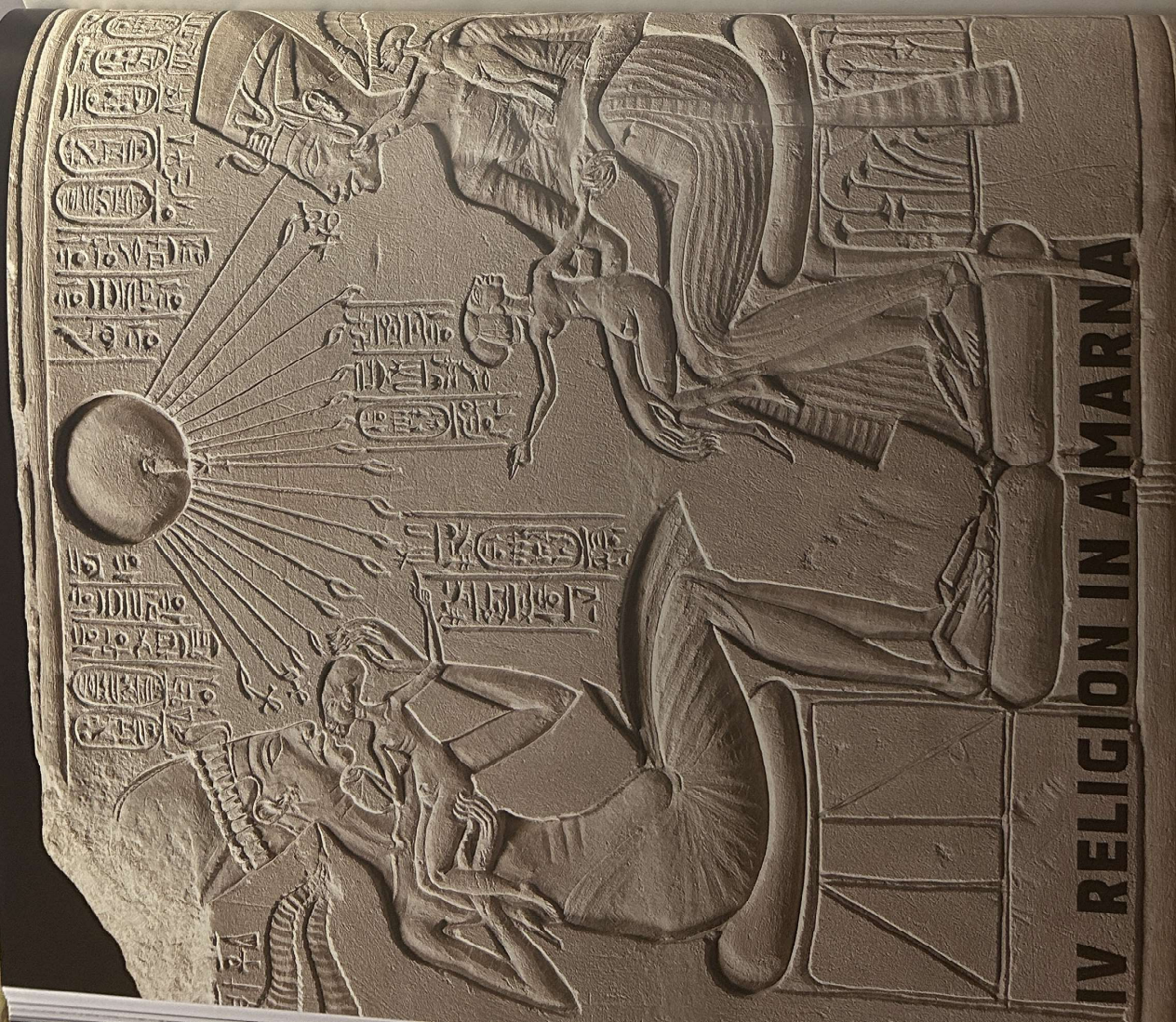
## A NEW STATE THEOLOGY - THE RELIGION OF LIGHT

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The rediscovery of the heretic king, Akhenaten, who was posthumously subject to a complete *damnatio memoriae* in Egypt, is the most significant discovery in Egyptology. He did away with traditional religion and brought in its place a new god: the god of sun and light, Aten. The old gods were persecuted, their images destroyed, their names hacked out, the cults and festivals stopped, their temples closed and their priests removed from office. On the one hand, this is a revolution of unprecedented radicalness; on the other, it is in fact the conclusion of a development that had emerged in 1500 BC, and without that development this revolution cannot be properly understood. During the New Kingdom the mythical and polytheistic world-view underwent a decisive change. According to traditional concepts, the sun god travelled through the sky and the underworld in two barques, interacting with the other gods and goddesses in changing constellations that unfolded prolifically into mythical images; now however, he appeared at an ever greater remove from the other gods and encircled the world alone in his barque. The other gods still existed but they, together with the other beings, now belonged to the world created and nourished by the sun god. Akhenaten radicalized this anti-constellatory concept by completely overturning the traditional divine kingdom. Only the sun mattered now for him, no longer travelling over the heavens in a barque but rather depicted simply as the sun with rays and without any anthropomorphic features, the only anthropomorphic trace being the hands on the ray ends.

Akhenaten's monotheism is, however – and therein lies the distinction between it and the biblical concept – still cosmotheistic: it is based on the worship of a cosmic power that is manifest in the sun. Its revelation does not consist of moralistic laws and historical actions, but rather in the realization that everything – the whole visible and invisible reality – can be attributed to the action of the sun, which creates not only light and heat through its radiance but also time through its movement. This cosmological realization came to the king as a religious revelation, which he converted with the most extreme radicalism, into reality. The traditional cults were closed down; only the new god Aten could be worshipped, and even that god practically only in Amarna. Hence, Akhenaten is not only one of the precursors of the natural philosophers of antiquity but also of later founders of religions that attack older religious traditions with a comparable degree of radicalism.

As a religious founder, Akhenaten was a pioneering thinker and an iconoclast. The cataclysmic force of the new teaching is expressed more in what it negated, overturned and banned than in what it presented positively. The 'new state theology' overturned: (1) the concepts of primeval time and creation, which are displaced by the singularity of god in a pre-world pre-existence; (2) the mythical imagery of the course of the sun, and thereby the figure of his enemy against whom the sun's progress had to be continually achieved; (3) the concepts of the underworld, the realm of the dead, the judgment of the



## IV RELIGION IN AMARNA

dead and a heavenly Elysium (the field of reeds), and (4) the personal aspect of the sun god as the ethical authority. (1) The new world-view can be characterized as pure presentism. For Akhenaten, the world is created anew at every sunrise. It takes care of everything that is reliant on there being a difference between "the here" and "the not-here," between "the now" and "the not-now": i.e. myth and cult images, that is to say the forms of symbolic representation. The mystic motifs of cosmogony, the first time, primeval time and a pre-world do not exist in the texts of the Amarna period, and similarly the cult images, which are reliant on the non-presence of the divine being because they re-present him/her. In the cult at Amarna, the king (not represented by any priesthood) and the god, who is actually present and incarnate in the light, confront each other directly. Akhenaten limits himself to the present that can be experienced through the senses. His Great Hymn deals with creation on the one hand as an embryology – the formation of life within the womb – and on the other as ecology – the wise constitution of the world, in which everything is taken care of in its own way. The central concept of this new theology may be translated as "transformation, incarnation, emanation," derived from the Egyptian word for "becoming, coming into being," written using the image of the scarab beetle. It relates to the coming into being of the sun, which, as it shines and moves, becomes what it brings into being and makes visible. At the same time, however, the visible sun itself is an incarnation of the god: it is his incarnation in the sky, while the realm of creation is his incarnation a million times over on earth. Within the concept of this incarnation, the boundaries between creator and creation are blurred. Everything that becomes visible in the light emerges from him as an incarnation. The world, opened up, ordered and accessible as a result of the light is the incarnation of the god: cities and villages, fields, pathways, the river.

(2) According to the traditional myth of the sun, the sun god is born in the form of a child in the morning issuing from the divine mother and heavenly deity, into whom he returns in the evening in the form of an old man. At midday, at the highest point of the heavens, he is at the height of his power; it is at this point that the judgment of the enemy occurs, within whom is embodied all the forces that threaten to halt or break up the course of the sun. At night the god, who has gone down into the

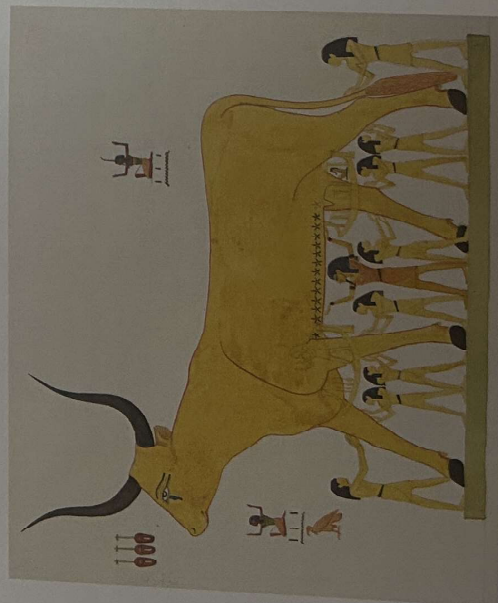


FIG. 1 The Heavenly Cow in the grave of Seti I. (circa 1300). Watercolor by Robert Hay (circa 1825) © The British Library Board (Add. 29872)

depths of the earth, unites with Osiris (the god of the dead and the past) in order to bind the new day to those that have passed and to ensure the continuity of time. This polytheistic image of the course of the sun was unfolded in many mythical images of great richness and mystery, but it had already been called into question by the new solar theology and was completely and utterly overturned by Akhenaten. His new god followed his course alone. All mythical imagery is banished from the new texts. There is no longer a mother who gives birth to the god in the morning, no nurse to bring him up, no enemy who must be overcome, no realm of the dead to which the god descends at night. Facing the god there is only a world, the object and container of his life-giving energy. The power of the religious vision and the poetical scale of the new hymns to the sun express themselves in the wealth of loving detail, with which this enlivening action is depicted: people wake up, wash themselves, get dressed and go to work, animals leap up, birds rise up into the air, fish jump in the water and ships sail up- and down- stream. The theological significance of this description lies in the fact that the mere stirrings of life are in themselves an act of praising god, which the whole of creation intones in the morning of which man is only one element. The praise of creatures is not expressed in words but in their natural turning towards the light of the sun. Also, the god does not speak but gives light. For mankind, "the living Aten" is no more than cosmic energy; only for the king does he have personal traits:

Also at night, when no eye sees you ... you are in my heart,  
for there is no one who knows you

except your son (perfect of forms is RE, sole one of RE).

You allow him to be knowledgeable about your plans and your power.  
(AHO' 92, verse 120-124)

I am your son, who is pleasing to you, who raises your name;  
your power and strength are fixed in my heart.

(AHG 91, verse 50f.)

(3) The new state theology denied the existence of a "netherworld" or "next world," and had the continued life of the dead take place in this world. The dead sleep in their tombs, which they leave in the morning in the form of their *ba*, which has been awakened by the morning light. In order to spend some time in the temples of Amarna. There they are summoned to the temple to dine and to enjoy the offering food of the god. However, this "reversal of the netherworld to this world" (Hornung) is indicative of a tendency already manifest long before Amarna. In afterlife beliefs, Akhenaten merely radicalized a pre-existing current of thought. The "discovery of this world" as a sphere to which the dead person wished to return in the form of a "ba" enriched the afterlife beliefs of the 18th dynasty and made them complex, but the afterlife beliefs of Amarna are "very simple: the dead sleep at night, during the day they accompany the Aten and the king, with his family, to the temple and are fed together with them."

(4) The traditional sun god was worshipped not only as a creator and preserver but also as the ethical authority that watches over justice:

He who hears the prayers of the one who is in distress,  
well-inclined of heart towards the one who calls to him;  
he who rescues the fearful from the hands of the violent  
and judges between the poor and the rich.  
(AHG 87c, 69-72)

This comes from a hymn to Amun-Re in which one searches in vain for such expressions and that is probably 2000 years older than Akhenaten's hymns. The god of Akhenaten is the sun and nothing other than the sun, who shines on the good and the bad and makes no distinction between the rich and the poor, the righteous and the unrighteous. In Amarna the role of ethical authority is transferred from the gods, and the sun god in particular, to the king. King and god rule here together over the world in the sense of a co-regency; thus the "great name" of the god is written inside cartouches like that of a ruling king. The god is in charge of nature, while the king is in charge of mankind.

It is now Akhenaten (who "lives from Maat") who is the ethical authority. Maat now, however, no longer stands for a general idea of justice and truth but the new teachings of the king. It is the one who listens to the teachings and remains loyal to the king who lives according to Maat. Of him it is said:

He shows his [punitive] power to him who ignores his teachings

and his favor to him who knows [acknowledges] him. (Sandman, 86)

All aspects of the divine, insofar as they relate to mankind, are now gathered together in Akhenaten. He is the

God of destiny, giver of life, lord of commands,

the light of every land,

whose gaze one lives on,

the Nile of mankind,

from whose ka one satisfies oneself;

god, who creates the great and builds up the poor,

air for every nose, by which one breathes. (AHG 234, 16–20)

The new state theology divides both aspects of the traditional sun god – as the cosmic origin of all existence and life, and as judge and savior of the individual – between the god and the king. The king is now the personal god of the individual, who is responsible for Maat, the right ordering and distribution of the things made by god in the social realm.

What finds its expression in these texts is also reflected in the archaeological legacy of Amarna. Various forms of places where the king was worshipped can be identified: the house altars in the larger private houses, which contained an image of the royal family under the rays of the Aten, the three-altar shrines in the villa and palace gardens as places for worshipping the theocratic trinity of Amarna – the Aten, the king and the queen – the windows and kiosks of appearance of the king, which are comparable to the barque stations of traditional Egyptian religion, as well as the ceremonial buildings known as shadows of the sun. Both the archaeological and literary expressions of veneration for the king point to a common underlying religious phenomenon, which should be regarded as loyalty to Amarna and which, on the basis of these sources, was of equal importance to the cult of the Aten.

The king is the god who sets out in procession, who gives signs and wonders, who intervenes in the fate of the individual and who holds life and death in his hands. This is quite different from traditional royal ideology, which is based on the divinity not of the person but the office and the role of the king. The Aten is a silent god, from whose mouth no surviving inscription records any spoken words, but who is only manifested in the light as his name. As a result, the divine was vocalized through the words of the king, in whom the presence of the divine could be directly experienced. What Akhenaten pronounced was an expression of the earthly physicality and presence of the divinity, bound directly to his person. This was continued in the development of personal piety and changed Egyptian religion just as fundamentally as his cosmological monotheism. The break-

through of personal piety" may be understood as a reaction to the experience of the Amarna period. Akhenaten had attempted to portray himself as the personal god of the individual and to stage-arrange things. After the end of his reign and the failure of his changes, the monarchy never again sought to act as the sole medium between man and god in Egypt.

Akhenaten's revolution was reversed shortly after his death, and any traces of this episode previous epoch than any Egyptian royal inscription had ever before given.

The temples of the gods and goddesses,

from Elephantine to the Delta

[were neglected and] on the point of collapsing;

their chapels were threatened by decay

and had become mounds of rubbish,

overgrown with weeds.

The country was experiencing a serious illness;

The gods had abandoned this land.

If an army was sent to Palestine

in order to broaden Egypt's borders,

it could not achieve anything

If one prayed to a god or goddess

in order to ask for something, he did not come at all.

Their hearts had become weak in their cultic bodies [statues] because "they" [Akhenaten and his followers] had destroyed those man-made things,

(Urk IV: 2025ff)

The discovery that the gods, who had been driven out of their temples, had "abandoned this land," must have come as a dreadful shock. There are clear indications that, despite all the efforts to destroy every trace of it, the memory of Amarna as a time of severe suffering continued until the very latest periods of Egyptian history. Thus, Diodorus writes that, besides the traditional ascription of the three great pyramids to Cheops, Chephren and Mycerinos, there was another interpretation (Bibliotheca Historica I, 64.13): The pyramid of Cheops, according to this assignment, was built by Hamaioi (Horemheb), the pyramid of Chephren by Amasis (Ahmose) and the pyramid of Mycerinos by Inaros (Inaros I). This can only be an allusion to three traumatic periods of suffering and those who overthrew them. Horemheb was regarded as the king who overturned the Amarna period. Ahmose as the king who expelled the Hyksos and Inaros I as the hero of the resistance against the Assyrians.<sup>3</sup> In this light, the three great pyramids appear as three monuments of trauma and triumph with the largest, the pyramid of Cheops, being linked to the trauma of Amarna and its overthrower, Horemheb. The historical transmission of these three traumatic periods must have been so vivid that they could even be linked to the three Giza pyramids.

1 Assmann, Jan, 2nd edition 1999 *Ägyptische Hymnen und Gebete*, (Obis Biblische & Orientalis) Universitätsverlag Freiburg, Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, Göttingen.

2 Urk, IV, Heck, Wolfgang, 1958 *Urkunden der 18. Dynastie, Inschriften der Könige von Amenophis III. bis Horemheb und ihrer Zeitgenossen*, Akademie Verlag, Berlin.

3 Ryholt, Kim, 2009 *Egyptian Historical Literature from the Greco-Roman Period*, in *IBAES V, Das Erbe der Griechisch-schreibung zwischen Vorfäll und Befall*, Fitzmaurice, M. Goldenhouse Publications London, pp. 231–238 especially 236f.