

THE LITERATURE OF ANCIENT EGYPT

AN ANTHOLOGY OF STORIES,
INSTRUCTIONS, STELAE,
AUTOBIOGRAPHIES, AND POETRY

THIRD EDITION

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THE HYMN TO THE ATEN

In the reign of Amen-hotep IV-Akhenaten of Dynasty 18 the royal family espoused the worship of the sun disk, the Aten, and neglected the older state and local gods, particularly Amen-Re. The king changed his name from Amen-hotep (Amun is pleased) to Akhenaten (the effective form of the Aten), and he constructed a new residence city at Amarna called Akhet-Aten, the Horizon of the Aten, marked out by royal boundary stelae and filled with temples, palaces, villas for the nobles, workshops for the artisans, and housing for the laborers. Throughout Egypt the names of the old gods were systematically backed out whenever they appeared in inscriptions on temple walls and elsewhere. The movement was viewed as a reformation, a return to the royal sun cult of the pyramid builders. It was later regarded as a heresy and did not survive the king's reign. Akhenaten emphasized the international supremacy of the sun disk and his relation to it as a son. In effect, he interposed himself between the Aten and the people, with his worship directed to the Aten and the people's attention focused upon him as the son and interpreter of the Aten. Whether the system can be considered monotheism is debatable. The broad outlook represented in these texts is a development of earlier Egyptian thought with new elements. Noteworthy is the almost anthropological view of the races of mankind differentiated in color and language. There are close parallels in wording, thought, and sequence of ideas to the verses of Psalm 104. The text is presented in hieroglyphic in N. de G. Davies, *The Rock Tombs of el Amarna*

THE HYMN TO THE ATEN

(London, 1908), pt. 6, pl. 27; this version derives from the tomb of Eye. For a lucid and interpretive account of the king's reign and times, consult Cyril Aldred, *Akhenaten, King of Egypt* (London, 1968). See *Aten bibliography*, especially Murnane 1995. I am indebted to Dr. James Allen for reading my translation and suggesting several significant improvements.

W.K.S.

- 1 Worshipping (The Living One) Re-Horakhty who Rejoices in the Horizon) (In his Identity as the Light who is in the Aten) living forever and ever, the Living Aten, the Great One who is in Jubilee, Master of all that the Aten encircles, Master of Heaven, Master of the Earth, Master of the Per-Aten in Akhet-Aten;¹ and the King of Upper and Lower Egypt, the one Living on Maat, Lord of the Two Lands (Nefer-kheperu-Re Wa-en-Re), son of Re, living on Maat, Master of Regalia (Akhenaten), the long lived; and the Foremost Wife of the King, whom he loves, the Mistress of Two Lands (Nefer-nefru-Aten Nefertiti), living, well, and young forever and ever.
- 2 He says:

You rise in perfection on the horizon of the sky,
living Aten, who determines life.
Whenever you are risen upon the eastern horizon
you fill every land with your perfection.
You are appealing, great, sparkling, high over every land;
your rays embrace the lands as far as everything you
 have made.
- 3 Since you are Re, you reach as far as they do,
and you curb them for your beloved son.
Although you are far away, your rays are upon the land;
you are in their faces, yet your departure is not observed.

Whenever you set on the western horizon,
the land is in darkness in the manner of death.

1. Just as the king's name is inscribed in a pair of cartouches, so too the Aten is regarded as a king with cartouches for his names and is considered to celebrate the royal jubilee festivals. Re-Horakhty is the sun god Re united with Horus of the Horizon. The Per-Aten is the house (temple) of Aten in Akhet-Aten.

They sleep in a bedroom with heads under the covers,
and one eye cannot see another.

If all their possessions which are under their heads were
stolen, they would not realize it.

4 Every lion comes out of his cave and all the serpents
bite,

for darkness is a blanket.

The land is silent now, because He who makes them
is at rest on His horizon.

But when day breaks you are risen upon the horizon,
and you shine in the Aten in the daytime.

When you dispel darkness and you give forth your rays
the two lands are in a festival of light,
alert and standing on their feet,
now that you have raised them up.

5 Their bodies are clean, / and their clothes put on;
their arms are (lifted) in praise at your rising.

The entire land performs its work:
all the flocks are content with their fodder,
trees and plants grow,
birds fly up to their nests,
their wings (extended) in praise for your *Ka*.

All the kine prance on their feet;
everything which flies up and alights,
6 they live when you rise for them.

The barges sail upstream and downstream too,
for every way is open at your rising.

The fishes in the river leap before your face
when your rays are inside the sea.

You who places seed in woman
and makes sperm into man,
who brings to life the son in the womb of his mother,
who quiets him by ending his crying;

7 you nurse in the womb,
giving breath to nourish all that has been begotten.

When he comes down from the womb to breathe
on the day he is born,
you open up his mouth 'completely', and supply his
needs.

When the fledgling in the egg speaks in the shell,
you give him air inside it to sustain him.

When you have granted him his allotted time to break out from the
egg,

he comes out from the egg to cry out at his fulfillment,
and he goes upon his legs when he has come forth from it.

How plentiful it is, what you make,
although they are hidden from view,
8 sole god, without another beside you;
you create the earth as you wish,
when you were by yourself, (before)
mankind, all cattle and kine,
all beings on land, who fare upon their feet,
and all beings in the air, who fly with their wings.

The lands of Khor and Kush²
and the land of Egypt:
you set every man in his place,
you allot their needs,
every one of them according to his diet,
and his lifetime is counted out.

Tongues are separate in speech,
9 and their characters / as well;
their skins are different,
for you differentiate the foreigners.

In the underworld you make a Nile
that you may bring it forth as you wish
to feed the populace,
since you make them for yourself, their utter master,
growing weary on their account, lord of every land.

2. Khor is Syro-Palestine in the northeast, and Kush is the Nubian region in the Sudan to the south.

For them the Aten of the daytime arises,
great in awesomeness.

All distant lands,
you make them live,
for you set a Nile in the sky
that it may descend for them
10 and make waves upon the mountains like the sea
to irrigate the fields in their towns.
How functional are your designs,
Lord of eternity:
a Nile in the sky for the foreigners
and all creatures that go upon their feet,
a Nile coming back from the underworld for Egypt.³

Your rays give suck to every field:
when you rise they live,
and they grow for you.
You make the seasons
to bring into being all you make:
11 the Winter to cool them,
the Heat that you may be felt.
You have made a far-off heaven
in which to rise
in order to observe everything you make.
Yet you are alone,
rising in your manifestations as the Living Aten:
appearing, glistening, being afar, coming close;
you make millions of transformations of yourself.
Towns, harbors, fields, roadways, waterways:
every eye beholds you upon them,
for you are the Aten of the daytime on the face of the
earth.

12 When you have gone
[no] eye can exist,
for you have created their sight

3. Egypt is essentially rainless and watered only by the Nile. Hence the rains of other lands are here regarded as a Nile in the sky.

so that you (yourself) are not seen
(except by your) sole [son] whom you have made.

You are in my heart,
and there is no other who knows you
except for your son (Nefer-kheperu-Re Wa-en-Re),⁴
for you have apprised him of your designs and your
power.

The earth comes forth into existence by your hand,
and you make it.
When you rise, they live;
when you set, they die.
You are a lifespan in yourself;
one lives by you.

13 Eyes are / upon your perfection until you set:
all work is put down when you rest in the west.
You who rise and make everything grow
for the King and (for) everyone who hastens on foot,
because you founded the land
and you raised them for your son
who has come forth from your body,
the King of Upper and Lower Egypt, the one Living on
Maat,
Lord of the Two Lands (Nefer-kheperu-Re Wa-en-Re),
son of Re, the one Living on Maat, Master of Regalia,
(Akhenaten), the long lived,
and the Foremost Wife of the King, whom he loves,
the Mistress of the Two Lands,
(Nefer-nefru-Aten Nefertiti),
living and young, forever and ever.

4. The king's praenomen. His exclusive relation to the Aten is stressed.