

ANCIENT EGYPTIAN RELIGION AND THE MONOTHEISTIC RELIGION OF MOSES

In the glorious Eighteenth Dynasty, when Egypt became for the first time a world power, a young Pharaoh ascended the throne about 1375 B.C., who first called himself Amenhotep (IV) like his father, but later on changed his name to Akhenaten (1370-1358 B.C.). This king undertook to force upon his subjects a new religion, one contrary to their ancient traditions and to all their familiar habits. It was a strict monotheism, the first attempt of its kind in the history of the world, as far as we know; and religious intolerance, which was foreign to antiquity before this and for long after, was inevitably born with the belief in one god. But Amenhotep's reign lasted only for seventeen years; very soon after his death in 1358 B.C. the new religion was swept away and the memory of the heretic king proscribed. From the ruins of his new capital, which he had built and dedicated to his god, and from the inscription in the rock tombs belonging to it, we derive the little knowledge we possess of him.¹

This spark of monotheism can be traced back to Akhenaten's father Amenhotep III. During his reign, ideas about the uniqueness of the sun god Re were developed in some detail. Some Egyptian priests conceived the possibility that all gods were part of a unique god from which all life originated and based on their experiential knowledge of nature (at least as they perceived it in Egypt) the sun was a good candidate for this universal god.

¹ Freud, Sigmund. *Moses and Monotheism*. (New York: Vintage Books; 1934), p. 21.

Political conditions at that time had begun to influence Egyptian religion as well. During the prosperous reigns of Thotmes III (1490-1436 B.C.) and Amenhotep II (1436-1412 B.C.), Egypt had expanded its frontiers in all directions and the nation was becoming increasingly difficult to govern. Egypt was the richest state in the world and Pharaoh represented the supreme power behind Egyptian prosperity. Annexed territories that belonged to Nubia and Syria were fully engaged in trade with the empire and the idea of a supreme and unique ruler was in perfect agreement with the idea of a supreme and unique god. In fact, the so-called revolution of Akhenaten is now thought to have been a political rather than a religious movement, a reaction to events outside Egypt. Thotmes III and Amenhotep II were great warriors who were able to take advantage of conditions in the Near East during their reigns, when many countries and petty states in the region were weak and ripe for conquest. Thotmes III and his successors poured much of the booty brought back from their Near Eastern campaigns into the coffers of Amun, one of the principal gods in Egypt at the moment; and the resulting growth in the power and wealth of his priesthood eventually weakened the monarchy. At the same time, foreign influences were brought into Egypt from its new empire and also from further afield, from places such as Crete; more especially, new men from the countries invaded by Egypt were given positions at court.²

This expanding empire was threatened on every frontier and when Amenhotep III and his son Amenhotep IV (Akhenaten) came to power, they were not much given to the pursuit

² Watterson, Barbara. *The Gods of Ancient Egypt*. (New York: Facts of File Publications, 1984), p. 152.

of war and were prepared to let the empire fend for itself. Akhenaten decided to initiate a war against the gods of Egypt to distract his people from the troubles that the empire was facing politically.³

As mentioned above, monotheistic ideas were already being developed during Amenhotep's III reign. However, Akhenaten was the first to proclaim the exclusiveness of the universal god. He went so far as to change his name from Amenhotep (IV), which contains the name of the god Amun ("*the hidden one*") to Akhenaten, which means "*he who is effective for Aten.*" He put in the energy necessary that turned into monotheism the doctrine of a universal god and ordered to change all occurrences of the word *gods* by *god* and to erase the name of other gods in all temples throughout Egypt. Akhenaten broke down more than a thousand years of artistic tradition and instructed his artists to portray the world as it really was.⁴ For a moment, Egypt was offered spiritual and philosophical renewal. Akhenaten broke with a past whose search for stasis was leading to sterility. His reign was a renaissance of culture and beliefs but at the same time brought the empire to the brink of collapse⁵.

On the fourth year of his reign, he moved the capital of the empire upriver from Thebes to a place called Tel-El-Amarna nowadays. Far from all influences, Akhenaten was now free to worship the sun god Aten and establish his religion without obstacles. However, the people of Egypt were not used to worshipping one god and were not willing to make

³ Watterson, p. 154.

⁴ Gore, Rick and Kenneth Garrett. *Pharaohs of the Sun*. From National Geographic Magazine, April 2001, p. 40.

⁵ Haag, Michael. *Egypt*. (London: Cadogan Books, 1998), p. 232.

the transition in such a short period of time. Henotheism, the worship of one god without denying the existence of other gods, and syncretism, the combination of different forms of belief or practice, were well-established practices in Egypt. Akhenaten was careful enough to implement his reforms one by one as soon as the conditions allowed him to do so. After a few years, he had eliminated all other gods and left only one god. For the first time in history the divine had become one, without a complementary multiplicity; henotheism had been transformed into monotheism. The mass of divine forms was reduced to the single manifestation of the Aten with rays, and out of the mass of names of gods all that was left was one name: Re, who revealed himself as Aten. A god without equal had become, at an enormous remove, a god without any other except for himself, and the king too is now the sole king like Aten; there was no other great one except for him.⁶

But Akhenaten's ideas did not end there. He went further on to say that Aten was so far removed as to be inscrutable, that it required an intermediary to manifest itself to mankind. *"The Aten's nature is not revealed in mythical images, but is accessible only through intellectual effort and insight – and hence is not revealed to everyone, but only to Akhenaten and those whom he teaches."*⁷ The pharaoh was the intermediary of god on earth and worship of god was conducted by worshipping pharaoh. As the mass of gods was reduced to one, so was the number of intermediaries. Faithful worshippers were

⁶ Hornung, Erik. *Conceptions of God in Ancient Egypt: The One and The Many*. (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1982), p. 246

⁷ Hornung, p. 248.

those who worshipped at home in front of a picture or figurine of pharaoh. The new creed could be summed up as “*there is no god but Aten and Akhenaten is his prophet.*”⁸

With this ideological revolution taking place over such a short period of time one wonders why people followed Akhenaten. In order to answer this question, it is necessary to look at Egyptian conception of state and of pharaoh’s role in it.

The concept of state was a divine concept for Egyptians. It was not merely a form of government or of political organization. For the Egyptian, the state was god-given and established since the creation of the world and pharaoh personified a divine force that took care of the affairs of men. His actions were a blessing that kept the well being of the nation and were guided by divine hand. Pharaoh was the source of all power, all authority and all wealth. Perhaps this sanctification of pharaoh’s duties account for the absence of any form of revolution in three thousand years of history.⁹

Therefore, anything coming from pharaoh was divinely inspired and considered unquestionable by Egyptians. Some priests however, especially those dedicated to the worship of Egypt’s most prominent god before Akhenaten’s reign, Amun, disregarded Akhenaten’s teachings and were sent into exile as a consequence. These same priests were to come after his death to abolish all trace of Akhenaten’s history and descendants ordering that all temples and statues be cleaned of his name and all written material be destroyed. Akhenaten’s existence was only to be rediscovered on the nineteenth century A.D.

⁸ Hornung, p. 248.

⁹ Frankfort, Henri. *Ancient Egyptian Religion: An Interpretation*. (New York: Harper & Row, 1961, c1948), p. 31.

After the previous discussion of Akhenaten's religion as the first form of monotheism in history, we now concentrate on a biblical person who lived in Egypt one hundred years or so after Akhenaten's death. The person in mention is Moses.

Moses is an Egyptian name. The word appears in ancient Egyptian language as meaning *child*¹⁰. It is probable that Moses was not Jewish but Egyptian. In any case, Moses grew up to be the political leader, the lawgiver and educator of the Jews settled in Egypt and he was also the man who forced them to adapt to a new religion¹¹. But was Moses religion his religion? Was it divinely inspired as mentioned in the Bible? Or was it simply adapted from ancient forms of Egyptian religion and specifically from Akhenaten's religion? These questions are very difficult if not impossible to answer for there is not much literature left from that time and all the literature that probably existed was deliberately destroyed by the priests of Amun after the pharaoh's death.

It is interesting however, to observe some basic differences and some striking similarities between these two religions and to consider the possibility that the religion of Moses was indeed that of Akhenaten purposely adapted to accommodate some ideological differences between Jewish and Egyptians. Let us start by pointing two important differences between the religion of Moses and traditional Egyptian religion.

The first main difference is that Jewish religion contemplated the existence of a unique god whereas Egyptian religion was based on a tremendous number of deities. The second

¹⁰ Breasted, James Henry. *The Dawn of Conscience*. (New York, London: C. Scribner's Sons, 1933), p. 350.

¹¹ Freud, p. 18.

difference is that Egyptian religion made careful provision for an afterlife. In fact, the god Osiris, the god of death, was one of the most popular of all Egyptian gods. The Jewish religion, on the other hand, had made no place for eternal life or immortality. These two differences between both religions suggest that Moses headed a religious reformation, which totally departed from traditional well-established ways that had been on stage in Egypt for nearly fifteen centuries. In *Moses and Monotheism*, Freud draws the conclusion that “*if Moses was an Egyptian and that if he transmitted to the Jews his own religion, then it was that of Akhenaten, the Aten religion.*”¹²”

In the following paragraphs I intend to discuss Moses religion by establishing a parallel with Aten religion and entertain the idea that both religions are the same.

First, let us examine the second difference pointed out on the previous page between traditional Egyptian religion and Jewish religion. The sharp contrast that exists between both religions in relation to life after death is astonishing. However, by going back to Akhenaten, we see that for him it was perhaps a primary necessity to exclude any doctrine related to life after death from his creed since the god Osiris, who was in charge of the afterlife, was one of the gods that Akhenaten was trying to abolish. It was necessary for him to proscribe any form of thought that could lead back to the traditional Egyptian religion of innumerable deities.

An important similarity between Jewish and ancient Egyptian culture is circumcision. Circumcision was an Egyptian practice dating back to times before the covenant between

¹² Freud, p. 27.

god and Abraham as has been verified in mummies and in hieroglyphic inscriptions. Being an Egyptian practice, it is probable that the Jews adopted it during their stay of four hundred years in Egypt and not as a way of identifying themselves as the chosen people of god. Furthermore, if Moses imposed this practice it is likely that he was Egyptian himself and not Jew. But if Moses was a Jew and not an Egyptian, why did he decide to go against his traditions to liberate the Jews who were but workers and perhaps slaves in his land? This dilemma may be explained by going back to Akhenaten's period and making the assumption that Moses lived during the time of Akhenaten and not a century later, as most historians believe. Moses was an influential person and perhaps was close to the pharaoh in some way or another. As a person close to the pharaoh, he adopted the Aten religion and made it his own. Perhaps he even envisioned himself as the leader of his people and one of the governors of the empire. After Akhenaten's death, he witnessed the severe persecution imposed on the pharaoh's legacy and saw his hopes and prospects destroyed. If he was not to recant his own beliefs, he had to abandon that land and found his own empire somewhere else. "*Moses' active nature conceived the plan of founding a new empire, of finding a new people, to whom he could give the religion that Egypt disdained.*"¹³ However, this is just mere speculation and historical research disproves the timeline of the story.

But if Moses was indeed an influential person in Egypt who adopted some form of Akhenaten's religion regardless of whether he lived during that pharaoh's time or one century later, we can go on with the story as follows. Say he was a governor of a border

¹³ Freud, p. 32.

province and came in contact with a tribe of semitic origin that had immigrated into Egypt some generations earlier. Being an influential man, Moses enjoyed their acceptance and with the years, was able to convince and teach them the forgotten religion of Akhenaten attempting to realize his own ideals through them. In this way, Moses chose his people, a statement that was later reflected in the Bible as “*Jahve chose his people.*”

Then the Exodus from Egypt occurred. Again, the precise location of this event in time is uncertain but according to most historians, the Exodus must have taken place between Akhenaten’s death in 1358 B.C. and the end of the king Merneptah’s reign in the year 1215 B.C. What happened from the beginning of the Exodus and the settling of the Jews in the land of Canaan is obscure and not much is known about this period. It is of interest here to mention two particular events that happened during this time. “*The first, discovered by Ernst Sellin, is that the Jews, who even according to the Bible were stubborn and unruly toward their lawgiver and leader, rebelled at last, killed him and threw off the imposed Aten religion as the Egyptians had done before them. The second event, proved by Eduard Meyer, is that these Jews on their return from Egypt united with tribes nearly related to them, in the country bordering on Palestine, the Sinai peninsula and Arabia, and that there, in a fertile spot called Qades, they accepted under the influence of the Arabian Medianites a new religion, the worship of the volcano god Jahve. Soon after this, they were ready to conquer Canaan.*”¹⁴”

¹⁴ Freud, p. 74.

Jahve was originally a fierce god who demanded his people to follow him and only him and to deny all other gods. From this statement, we can infer that the idea of multiple gods was still quite predominant at that time. Moses had disappeared from stage but his ideas were to shape Jewish religion over the course of time. The monotheistic idea that originated in Akhenaten's time was again obscured by this new god Jahve and was to remain in darkness for a long time to come¹⁵. During that early period in Jewish religion, Jahve was very different from the Mosaic god Aten. Aten was a pacifist, an all-loving god who was the creator of all life on earth. For a people who were ready to conquest new lands, this god certainly did not hold any appeal; Jahve was better suited for this purpose.

But as the centuries passed and the Jewish people settled in their new land, Jahve became more and more like the original god that Moses had proposed. It is quite certain that Moses was the man who first introduced the monotheistic idea to the Jews but it has been forgotten where this idea came from. Whether it was by divine inspiration directly from god or by ancient Egyptian ideologies borrowed from Akhenaten, what is certain is that it shaped the fate of an entire nation and gave rise to the modern way of thought that has come to us known as Western Thought.

¹⁵ Freud, p. 77.