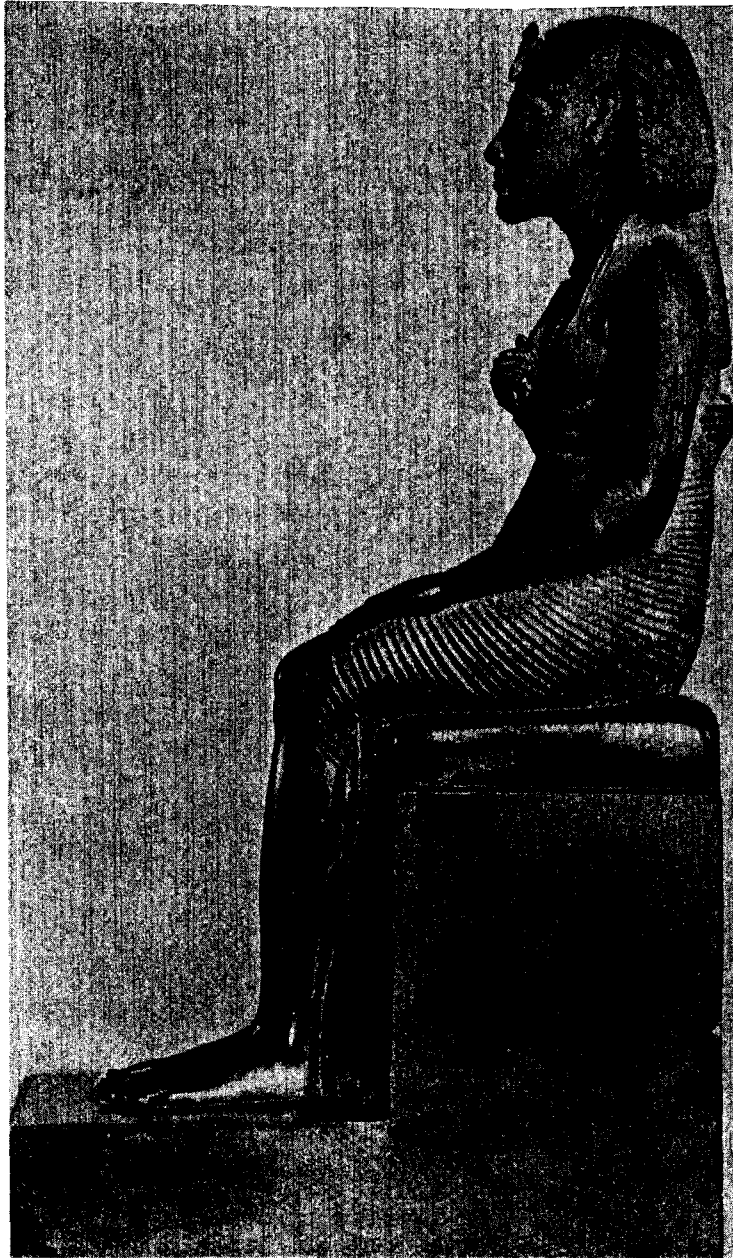


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AKHENATON: THE HERETIC KING

c. 1377 B.C.	Reign began
c. 1372 B.C.	Founded new capital of Akhetaton
c. 1360 B.C.	Died

With the enormous distance in time that separates us from ancient Egypt and the Near East, the scale of individual human size is reduced nearly to the point of oblivion. Even the greatest kings and conquerors, high priests, viziers, queens and “chief wives” tend to be reduced to lists of properties and exploits, names without substance or dimension.

For Egypt in particular the problem is compounded by the fact that the Egyptian culture tended to stress timelessness and eternity rather than history or individuals. The Egyptians had no continuous chronology. The names of successive pharaohs and their identifying epithets were often run together, overlapped, and sometimes blandly falsified in records and inscriptions or deliberately obliterated—probably for political purposes. The great modern British Egyptologist Sir Alan Gardiner, speaking of this maddening anonymity of Egyptian history, notes however that “in one case only, that of Akhenaten towards the end of Dyn. XVIII, do the inscriptions and reliefs bring us face to face with a personality markedly different from that of all his predecessors.”¹

This is the famous “heretic king,” the most intriguing figure in Egyptian history.

¹Sir Alan Gardiner, *Egypt of the Pharaohs* (Oxford: Oxford University Press; 1st ed., 1961; 1972), p. 55. The reader will note the first of several variations in the spelling of Akhenaton in this passage. Hieroglyphics did not write the vowels and there were consonant sounds we do not have. Hence considerable latitude in rendering names is to be expected.—Ed.

A Hymn to Aton

There is no contemporary biographical account of this remarkable ruler, nor should we expect to find one. But what is more intriguing, conscious efforts apparently were made to obliterate every trace of him and of his reign. His name was systematically hacked out of official inscriptions and omitted from king lists. Even the genealogical lines, so important to Egyptian royal continuity, were altered. But a handful of inscriptions did remain, the most substantial being the Long Hymn to Aton, from the tomb of one of Akhenaton's successors, Eye. Part of this inscription follows below. Although the authorship of the hymn is not recorded it is quite possible that Akhenaton himself wrote it. Yet it is not about him. It is about the god Aton, the disk of the sun, to whom Akhenaton subordinated all the other myriad of Egyptian gods, "sole god, like whom there is no other!" This was the apostasy of "the heretic king." This was the offense that seems to have created the animus toward Akhenaton, nearly unique in Egyptian history.

Thou appearest beautifully on the horizon of heaven
 Thou living Aton, the beginning of life!
 When thou art risen on the eastern horizon,
 Thou hast filled every land with thy beauty.
 Thou art gracious, great, glistening, and high over every land;
 Thy rays encompass the lands to the limit of all that thou hast made:
 As thou art Re, thou reachest to the end of them;
 (Thou) subduest them (for) thy beloved son.

When thou settest in the western horizon,
 The land is in darkness, in the manner of death.
 Every lion is come forth from his den;
 All creeping things, they sting.
 Darkness is a shroud, and the earth is in stillness,
 For he who made them rests in his horizon.

At daybreak, when thou arisest on the horizon,
 When thou shinest as the Aton by day,
 Thou drivest away the darkness and givest thy rays.

All the world, they do their work.
 All beasts are content with their pasturage;

Trees and plants are flourishing.
 The birds which fly from their nests,
 Their wings are (stretched out) in praise to thy *ka*.
 All beasts spring upon (their) feet.
 Whatever flies and alights,
 They live when thou hast risen (for) them.
 The ships are sailing north and south as well,
 For every way is open at thy appearance.
 The fish in the river dart before thy face;
 Thy rays are in the midst of the great green sea.

How manifold it is, what thou hast made!
 They are hidden from the face (of man).
 O sole god, like whom there is no other!
 Thou didst create the world according to thy desire,
 Whilst thou wert alone:
 All men, cattle, and wild beasts,
 Whatever is on earth, going upon (its) feet,
 And what is on high, flying with its wings.

The countries of Syria and Nubia, the *land* of Egypt,
 Thou settest every man in his place,
 Thou suppliest their necessities:
 Everyone has his food, and his time of life is reckoned.
 Their tongues are separate in speech,
 And their natures as well;
 Their skins are distinguished,
 As thou distinguishest the foreign peoples.
 Thou makest a Nile in the underworld,
 Thou bringest it forth as thou desirest
 To maintain the people (of Egypt)
 According as thou madest them for thyself,
 The lord of all of them, wearying (himself) with them,
 The lord of every land, rising for them,
 The Aton of the day, great of majesty.

Thou art in my heart,
 And there is no other that knows thee
 Save thy son Nefer-kheperu-Re Wa-en-Re,
 For thou hast made him well-versed in thy plans and in thy strength.

The world came into being by thy hand,
 According as thou hast made them.
 When thou hast risen they live,

When thou settest they die.
 Thou art lifetime thy own self,
 For one lives (only) through thee.
 Eyes are (fixed) on beauty until thou settest.
 All work is laid aside when thou settest in the west.
 (But) when (thou) risest (again),
 [*Everything is*] made to flourish for the king, . . .
 Since thou didst found the earth
 And raise them up for thy son,
 Who came forth from thy body:
 the King of Upper and Lower Egypt, . . . Akh-en-Aton. . . and
 the Chief Wife of the King . . . Nefert-iti, living and youthful forever
 and ever.

The Dawn of Conscience

JAMES H. BREASTED

The name of Akhenaton was scarcely known at all in Egyptian studies until the beginning of this century and the excavations at Tell el-Amarna. The documents and inscriptions that came to light—including the Hymn to Aton—fascinated Egyptologists, and they began to reconstruct the history of this king and his age. A leading role was taken by the American Egyptologist James H. Breasted. Breasted created an engaging portrait of the young pharaoh, hardly more than a boy, who turned his back upon the militaristic aggressiveness of his father, Amenhotep III, in favor of a new and revolutionary religious revelation. Breasted argued that Akhenaton was not only the first clearly discernible individual in history but the first person in history to conceive the worship of a single god, in his case Aton, the disk of the sun. Further, Breasted argued, Akhenaton anticipated the Hebrew monotheism of Moses and he adduced, as part of his case, the great Hymn to Aton and its clear affinities with the Old Testament, in particular Psalm 104.

Breasted's account of Akhenaton and his religious revolution continues in the following excerpt, taken from his most famous book, The Dawn of Conscience.

On a moment's reflection, such fundamental changes as these suggest what an overwhelming tide of inherited thought, custom, and tradition had been diverted from its channel by the young king who was

guiding this revolution. It is only as this aspect of his movement is clearly discerned that we begin to appreciate the power of his remarkable personality. Before his time religious documents were commonly attributed to ancient kings and wise men, and the power of a belief lay chiefly in its claim to remote antiquity and the sanctity of immemorial custom. Until Ikhnaton the history of the world had largely been merely the irresistible drift of tradition. The outstanding exception was the great physician-architect, Imhotep, who introduced stone architecture and built the first stone masonry pyramidal tomb of the Thirtieth Century B.C. Otherwise men had been but drops of water in the great current. With the possible exception of Imhotep, Ikhnaton was the first individual in history. Consciously and deliberately, by intellectual process he gained his position, and then placed himself squarely in the face of tradition and swept it aside. He appeals to no myths, to no ancient and widely accepted versions of the dominion of the gods, to no customs sanctified by centuries—he appeals only to the present and visible evidences of his god's dominion, evidences open to all, and as for tradition wherever it had left material manifestations of other gods in records which could be reached, he endeavoured to annihilate it. A policy so destructive was doomed to encounter fatal opposition. . . .

Here had been a great people, the onward flow of whose life, in spite of its almost irresistible momentum, had been suddenly arrested and then diverted into a strange channel. Their holy places had been desecrated, the shrines sacred with the memories of thousands of years had been closed up, the priests driven away, the offerings and temple incomes confiscated, and the old order blotted out. Everywhere whole communities, moved by instincts flowing from untold centuries of habit and custom, returned to their holy places to find them no more, and stood dumfounded before the closed doors of the ancient sanctuaries. On feast days, sanctified by memories of earliest childhood, venerable halls that had resounded with the rejoicings of the multitudes, as we have recalled them at Siut, now stood silent and empty; and every day as the funeral processions wound across the desert margin and up the plateau to the cemetery, the great comforter and friend, Osiris, the champion of the dead in every danger, was banished, and no man dared so much as utter his name. Even in their oaths, absorbed from childhood with their mothers' milk, the involuntary names must not be suffered to escape the lips: and in the presence of the magistrate at court the ancient oath must now contain only the name of Aton. All this to them was as if the modern man were asked to worship X and swear by Y. Groups of muttering priests, nursing implacable hatred, must have mingled their curses with the execration of whole communities of discontented tradesmen—bakers

who no longer drew a livelihood from the sale of ceremonial cakes at the temple feasts; craftsmen who no longer sold amulets of the old gods at the temple gateway; hack sculptors whose statues of Osiris lay under piles of dust in many a tumbled-down studio; cemetery stonecutters who found their tawdry tombstones with scenes from the Book of the Dead banished from the necropolis; scribes whose rolls of the same book, filled with the names of the old gods, or even if they bore the word god in the plural, were anathema; actors and priestly mimes who were driven away from the sacred groves on the days when they should have presented to the people the "passion play," and murmuring groups of pilgrims at Abydos who would have taken part in this drama of the life and death and resurrection of Osiris; physicians deprived of their whole stock in trade of exorcising ceremonies, employed with success since the days of the earliest kings, two thousand years before; shepherds who no longer dared to place a loaf and a jar of water under yonder tree, hoping thus to escape the anger of the goddess who dwelt in it, and who might afflict the household with sickness in her wrath; peasants who feared to erect a rude image of Osiris in the field to drive away the typhonic demons of drought and famine; mothers soothing their babes at twilight and fearing to utter the old sacred names and prayers learned in childhood, to drive away from their little ones the lurking demons of the dark. In the midst of a whole land thus darkened by clouds of smouldering discontent, this marvellous young king, and the group of sympathisers who surrounded him, set up their tabernacle to the daily light, in serene unconsciousness of the fatal darkness that enveloped all around and grew daily darker and more threatening.

In placing the movement of Ikhnaton against a background of popular discontent like this, and adding to the picture also the far more immediately dangerous secret opposition of the ancient priesthoods, the still unconquered party of Amon, and the powerful military group, who were disaffected by the king's peace policy in Asia and his lack of interest in imperial administration and maintenance, we begin to discern something of the powerful individuality of this first intellectual leader in history. His reign was the earliest attempt at a rule of ideas, irrespective of the condition and willingness of the people upon whom they were to be forced. . . .

And so the fair city of the Amarna plain arose, a fatuous Island of the Blest in a sea of discontent, a vision of fond hopes, born in a mind fatally forgetful that the past cannot be annihilated. The marvel is that such a man should have first arisen in the East, and especially in Egypt, where no man except Ikhnaton possessed the ability to forget. Nor was the great Mediterranean World which Egypt now dominated any better prepared for an international religion than its Egyptian

lords. The imperial imagination of Ikhnaton reminds one of that of Alexander the Great, a thousand years later, but it was many centuries in advance of his own age. . . .

The fall of the great revolutionary is shrouded in complete obscurity. The immediate result of his fall was the restoration of Amon and the old gods whom the Amonite priesthood forced upon Ikhnaton's youthful and feeble son-in-law, Tutenkhamon. The old régime returned. . . . In the great royal lists recording on the monuments the names of all the past kings of Egypt, the name of Ikhnaton never appears; and when under later Pharaohs, it was necessary in a state document to refer to him, he was called "the criminal of Akhetaton."

The Criminal of Akhetaton

DONALD B. REDFORD

It was inevitable that such an unequivocal and highly colored interpretation as Breasted's would attract critics. And it was not simply a matter of interpretation. The Amarna records continued to be studied and refined and new finds were made, there and elsewhere, including the dramatic discovery of the nearly intact tomb of Tutankhamen, Akhenaton's son-in-law. The continuing, patient work of Egyptologists, archaeologists, and historians has produced a rather more complicated story of Akhenaton than Breasted presented—and a considerably darker one. We now know, for example, that he actually reigned alone for only two and a half years at the most; the rest of his reign he shared with regents. This clearly implies that Akhenaton was somehow incompetent to rule, either because of physical or mental incapacity or because he chose not to exercise the powers of his office. We now know that the failure of his religious program was not a matter of the narrow jealousy of the priesthood of Amon, but a general rejection by the whole Egyptian society. It has even been argued that his monotheism may have been only a selfish celebration of his own religious totalitarianism and no true religious movement at all.

The materials for a radically revised assessment of Akhenaton and his reign have been accumulating for more than half a century and Akhenaton now stands revealed not as the clear-eyed visionary of Breasted but as the "heretic king." One of the leading figures in contemporary Akhenaton scholarship is the distinguished field Egyptologist Donald B. Redford. The following account is taken from Redford's book, Akhenaten: The Heretic King.

Possibly in the fifth month of the civil calendar in what had been his father's 38th year (January, 1377 B.C.), Amenophis IV² ascended the Horus throne of the living. If sculptors showed uncertainty as to how to treat the strange figure of their new sovereign in art, they but mirrored a general hesitancy and puzzlement about what to expect from this young and unknown ruler. In contrast to the frequent appearance of his brothers and sisters, Amenophis, the second son of Amenophis III—his older brother has died young—is conspicuous by his absence from the monuments of his father. It may well be that he was intentionally kept in the background because of a congenital ailment which made him hideous to behold. The repertoire of Amarna art has made us familiar with the effeminate appearance of the young man: elongated skull, fleshy lips, slanting eyes, lengthened ear lobes, prominent jaw, narrow shoulders, potbelly, enormous hips and thighs, and spindly legs. Of late the experts have tended to identify his problem with some sort of endocrine disorder in which secondary sex characteristics failed to develop, and eunuchoidism resulted.

Be that as it may, it is a fact that Amenophis does not appear on monuments during his father's reign. The only certain reference to him seems to be on a wine-jar seal from Malkata where his name appears in the expression, "the estate of the true(?) king's-son Amenophis." He was, then, old enough to have his own establishment during the last decade of his father's reign, and, as we should expect, was residing at that time with the rest of the court at Thebes. . . .

As we shall see, the changes in cultic iconography and, undoubtedly, the decision to build new structures for a new god belong to the very beginning of Akhenaten's reign. . . .

When Amenophis III died the great complex of Amun at Karnak seemed to have reached a stage of structural completion. . . .

For a few months into the new reign, or perhaps for as much as a single year, sculpting and architectural decoration of a traditional nature proceeded apace. . . . Sometime in the 5th year of his reign, the heretic pharaoh moved the court from Thebes to a new capital in Middle Egypt. Though the change seems to be sudden, it was in fact premeditated. It proved to be the major watershed in the Amarna period. At this point then, let us take stock of the earliest, "Theban" phase of this unusual reign, before moving on toward the denouement of the drama.

Though his intent may have crystalized in his 4th year, Amenophis IV appears to have made no move until his 5th. Then planners,

surveyors, and builders appeared at the chosen site, and work began at a feverish pace.

But the king was not quite finished with Thebes. Before departing, and almost by way of a Parthian shot,³ he unfurled his true iconoclastic colors. Amun was declared anathema. The king changed his name from "Amenophis, the Divine, the Ruler of Thebes" to Akhenaten, which means something like "He who is useful to the Sun-disc," or perhaps "Glorified Spirit of the Sun-disc." Everywhere at Thebes and other cities, in the sun-temples he had built, workmen laid coats of gypsum plaster over the second of the royal cartouches and recut the new name over the old. Undoubtedly it was at the same time that hatchetmen were dispatched to range throughout the temples of the land to desecrate the name "Amun" wherever it appeared on walls, steles, tombs, or objects d'art. Amun's congeners Mut, Osiris, and others suffered too, but to a lesser extent. . . . All efforts were now concentrated on building the new "dream city" of Akhetaten, the "Horizon of the Disc." Sometime during the 5th year, Amenophis IV, or Akhenaten as we shall now call him, arrived at the construction site with his court. No building was as yet complete, and most were probably but a marked layout on the ground; but the king was impatient to live with his father, the sun-disc, in his own special city, and was willing to put up with temporary quarters. The royal family for the rest of that year, and well into the 6th year, made do with a prefabricated dwelling, probably tentlike, which is called "tent (*imw psst*) of apartments(?)" in the texts.

If people initially treated Amenophis IV with a certain wariness born of fear of an unknown quantity, they were soon to learn that the king lacked the fear-inspiring qualities of his father. The evenhanded policy Amenophis hoped to adopt toward Egypt's dependencies, and which in a moment of foolish candor he had made known even to his least trustworthy vassal, could easily be interpreted as weakness. Perhaps from the outset it was a weakness that the king was rationalizing as fairness. At any rate, Amenophis IV soon found it impossible to enforce his will in Egypt's Levantine sphere of influence. . . .

Even the casual observer will be struck first and foremost by the negative thrust of Akhenaten's reform of the cultus. He excised from the traditional religion much more than he added. The service of the gods was done away with, and their temples allowed to sit idle. In the wake of the desuetude of the cult, the myths of the gods, which provided the hypostasis of many cultic elements, simply disappeared.

²This was the original regnal name assumed by Akhenaton.—Ed.

³The Asiatic Parthians supposedly were adept at a backward bow shot when they seemed to be retreating.—Ed.

The sun god Akhenaten championed, of course, enjoyed no mythology; after the early months of the reign he was not even permitted an anthropomorphic depiction. No archetypal symbolism informs the artistic style that celebrates the new god, and the very few names and accouterments the sun-disc borrows are entirely from the solar cult of Re and his divine congeners. The marvelously complex world of the Beyond is banished from the minds of men. No truth can come from anyone but the king, and his truth is entirely apodictic: no gods but the sun, no processional temples, no cultic acts but the rudimentary offering, no cult images, no anthropomorphisms, no myths, no concept of the ever-changing manifestation of a divine world. The Roman world might well have called Akhenaten an "atheist," for what he left to Egypt was not a "god" at all, but a disc in the heavens! . . . Roughly at about the same time that the king was laying firm plans for the move to the new site of Akhetaten, a drastic change overcame his cultic program. The decoration of the new temples was all but complete when the king openly broke with Amun. The "king of the gods," tolerated to this point, though his worship had probably languished through lack of priests, now witnessed the formal anathematization of his name and the closing of his temple. The program of defacement that followed was so thorough that we must postulate either a small army of hatchetmen dispatched throughout the realm, or parties of inspectors charged with seeing that local officials did the job. Everywhere, in temples, tombs, statuary, and casual inscriptions, the hieroglyphs for "Amun" and representations of the god were chiseled out; objects sacred to him were likewise defaced. People who bore names compounded with "Amun" were obliged to change them; and the king led the way by discarding the now unacceptable *Amenophis* ("Amun is satisfied") for *Akh-en-aten* ("Effective for the Sun-disc"). Osiris and his cycle of mortuary gods suffered a like anathematization. Funerary practices might be spared, but only if purged of all polytheistic elements. . . .

If any further proof is required of what the king was trying to do, let this one significant omission suffice: the plural word "gods" is never attested after year 5, and occasionally it is found erased in existing inscriptions. For Akhenaten's program, implicitly from the start, and now blatantly and universally, fostered a monotheism that would brook no divine manifestations. The Sun-disc was unique and supreme over all the universe, the only god there was. He did not change his shape or appear in other forms: he was always and only "the living Sun-disc—there is none other than he!"

At Akhetaten the major part of our knowledge about the character of the Disc comes from the great hymn inscribed in the tomb of Ay, quite likely a composition of the king himself. After Akhenaten's

aversion to mythology and its symbolism had obliged him to expunge from the genre of hymns all such allusions, the only concepts that could be predicated of the deity were those of universalism, dependence of life on the sun, transcendence, creativity, cosmic regularity, and absolute power. . . .

The doctrine of the sun-disc constituted a strong reaffirmation of divine kingship, as the role Akhenaten assigned himself proves. In the first five years the fragmentary texts from the *talatat*⁴ stress the paternity of the Disc and the sonship of the king: the latter is the son of the Sun-disc, the "beautiful child of the Disc" whose "beauty" was "created" by the heavenly luminary. Akhenaten has been granted the kingship by his father, and occupies his throne on earth: heaven and earth are his, his boundaries reach the limits of heaven, and all lands are beneath his feet.

Enough, I hope, has been brought forward in the preceding pages to show that the historical Akhenaten is markedly different from the figure popularists have created for us. Humanist he was not, and certainly no humanitarian romantic. To make of him a tragic "Christ-like" figure is a sheer falsehood. Nor is he the mentor of Moses: a vast gulf is fixed between the rigid, coercive, rarified monotheism of the pharaoh and Hebrew henotheism,⁵ which in any case we see through the distorted prism of texts written 700 years after Akhenaten's death. Certain affinities have long since been pointed out between the hymn to the sun-disc and Psalm 104, and the parallels are to be taken seriously. There is, however, no literary influence here, but rather a survival in the tradition of the northern centers of Egypt's once-great empire of the *themes* of that magnificent poetic creation.

If we pass in review the hard facts we have adduced above, and, in the absence of facts the circumstantial evidence, we then catch a glimpse of *this* pharaonic figure. A man deemed ugly by the accepted standards of the day, secluded in the palace in his minority, certainly close to his mother, possibly ignored by his father, outshone by his brother and sisters, unsure of himself, Akhenaten suffered the singular misfortune of acceding to the throne of Egypt and its empire. We have no idea who or what influenced him in his formative years; but he was not brought into contact with his father's court, nor is there any evidence that he spent time at Heliopolis. As a result he nurtured a fear

⁴*Talatat* are uniformly sized facing stones that were covered with texts and drawings. They were later removed from the site of El-Amarna and used as fill for other structures or scattered.—ED.

⁵The belief in one god as the specific tribal god of a particular people while not denying the existence of other gods of other peoples.—ED.

and aversion to his father's coterie of gifted administrators and the noble families from which they had sprung; and his apprehension was extended even to those foreign potentates with whom his father had been on intimate terms. There is evidence to suggest that he was a poor judge of character and a prey to sycophancy. Though he was apprehensive about his own lack of resolve, he nonetheless espoused a lenient policy toward his northern provinces which deterred him from acting unhesitatingly in the Asian sphere. Not being gifted as an administrator, Akhenaten was willing to leave the running of everyday affairs, both foreign and domestic, in the hands of military and civilian intermediaries, while he pursued his program of cultic reform.

Akhenaten, whatever else he may have been, was no intellectual heavyweight. He failed to comprehend (or if he did, to appreciate) the true role and potential of cultic mythology, possibly seeing in it a means of concealment rather than revelation of the deity. Maybe he was reacting to the sophisticated cynicism of the age, just as Luther did in the 16th century A.D.; but if so he was surely guilty of identifying the aberrations of the system with its essence. For myths are the building blocks of any religion, even Judeo-Christianity. Though they come to us as the often crass impedimenta from an early and slightly embarrassing stage in our intellectual development, myths nonetheless pose the challenge of reinterpretation on a higher plane and integration one with another to provide a new and consistent view of the supernatural. Ancient Egyptian, like modern, theologians rose to this challenge, and such documents as the Memphite Theology and the New Kingdom hymns to Ptah and Amun are philosophical treatises of the highest achievement. What did Akhenaten substitute for them, once he had declared them anathema? Nothing! If mythology (in the broadest application of the term) is the only means of divine revelation, apart from the vision of the mystic, then what Akhenaten championed was in the truest sense of the word, atheism.

For the icon he devised, that spiderlike disc, could never be viewed as "god." What it was Akhenaten tells us plainly enough: the Disc was his father, the universal king. Significant, it seems to me, is the fact that, on the eve of Amenophis III's passing, the king who sat upon Egypt's throne bore as his most popular sobriquet the title "The Dazzling Sun-disc"; on the morrow of the "revolution" the only object of veneration in the supernal realm is king Sun-disc, exalted in the heavens and ubiquitously termed by Akhenaten "my father." I will not pursue the implications of this, though they appear to me plain enough.

That Akhenaten possessed unusual ability as a poet is, I think, self-evident. For him nature itself, in all its forms, displayed sufficient fascination; the gratification to be had in ruminating on impondera-

bles paled by comparison. Although many images are derivative, the great hymn to the Disc stands out as a major, almost "positivist," statement on the beauty of creation.

I strongly suspect Akhenaten also had a flair for art, sculpture, and design, although this might be harder to demonstrate. The startlingly new expressionism that bursts on the scene in the second year of the reign probably owes more to the monarch's tastes than to those of his artists; and in the light of the well-known drafting ability of Thutmoseid kings, it would be difficult to deny that the king also had a hand in working out the details of the new canons. To me it is the art associated with his program that remains Akhenaten's single most important contribution.

Beautiful though they may be, the Amarna reliefs reveal one of the most displeasing characteristics of the way of life Akhenaten held up as a model, refined sloth. Can the king engage in no more strenuous activity than elevating offerings? True, he rides a chariot; how often does he walk? Time and again we glimpse him lounging, completely limp, in a chair or on a stool. He is seen eating and drinking at a table groaning with food, occasionally interrupting his indulgence to lean languidly from the balcony and smile weakly at some sniveling sycophant in the court beneath. Is this effete monarch, who could never hunt or do battle, a true descendant of the authors of Egypt's empire? The court over which he presides is nothing but an aggregation of voluptuaries, bent on personal gratification, and their opportunist followers.

If the king and his circle inspire me somewhat with contempt, it is apprehension I feel when I contemplate his "religion." In Egypt the sun may well be a reliable and beneficent power, but it is nonetheless destructive, and mankind seeks to hide from it. If Re must be worshipped, let there be a refuge of shade close at hand! Both Karnak and Akhetaten become infernos from March to November. Yet the monarch—with relish it would seem!—not only selected these unholy sites for his use, but insisted on the simple open shrine, with no roof and very little shade, in which to honor his father! As one stands on the baking sand of the vast Amarna amphitheater, one cannot help but sense a sinister quality in all of this.

Not content with the subjection of his own body to the rays of his father at every waking moment, the autocratic ruler demanded everyone else follow suit! A fascinating letter found in the Amarna Tablets from the king of Assyria tells us this, and thus opens a new vista on Akhenaten's mental state. Ashurballit I, eager to open relations with Egypt now that Mitanni had been weakened, sent a delegation to Akhetaten; but they must have returned saying something like this: this pharaoh must be crazy! He holds his audiences, meetings, and

ceremonies entirely in the sun, and keeps everyone standing in the heat! This occasioned the following remonstrance from the Assyrian sovereign to Akhenaton: "Why are my messengers kept standing 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. Then will there be profit for the king! But really, why should they die in the open sun? . . . They will be killed in the open sun!" The vignette here sketched is at once comical and outrageous. The regime was plainly, at this stage, intolerable.

For all that can be said in his favor, Akhenaton in spirit remains to the end totalitarian. The right of an individual freely to choose was wholly foreign to him. He was the champion of a universal, celestial power who demanded universal submission, claimed universal truth, and from whom no further revelation could be expected. I cannot conceive a more tiresome regime under which to be fated to live.

Review and Study Questions

1. Why was Akhenaton so hated and reviled by his own people in the centuries following his reign?
2. In your opinion, how important was the religious thought of Akhenaton, and how much influence did he have in the development of monotheism?
3. Was Akhenaton a heroic individual and intellectual pioneer, or was he a weak and incompetent dreamer? Give the reasons for your answer.

Suggestions for Further Reading

For all the antiquity of its subject, the Akhenaton controversy is essentially a modern one, a continuing dispute among Egyptologists about nearly everything connected with the so-called Amarna period of Eighteenth Dynasty Egyptian history and its central figure. The most extreme debunking interpretation of Akhenaton is F. J. Giles, *Ikhнатon: Legend and History* (London: Hutchinson, 1970). Very much in this tradition is Donald B. Redford, *Akhenaten: The Heretic King* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984), excerpted for this chapter. Some of the studies in an earlier work by Redford, *History and Chronology of the Eighteenth Dynasty of Egypt: Seven Studies* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1967) support his view. Dissenting from this view is Cyril Aldred, *Akhenaten: King of Egypt* (London: Thames

and Hudson, 1988), a significant revision of Aldred's earlier *Akhenaten: A New Study*. Aldred's interpretation is popularized in Joy Collier, *King Sun: In Search of Akhenaten* (London: Ward Lock, 1970), also published under the title, *The Heretic Pharaoh* (New York: Day, 1970). The chapter on Akhenaton in P. H. Newby, *Warrior Pharaohs: The Rise and Fall of the Egyptian Empire* (London and Boston: Faber and Faber, 1980) is excellent and the final chapter in A. Rosalie David, *Cult of the Sun: Myth and Magic in Ancient Egypt* (London et al.: J. M. Dent, 1980) is a good survey of the controversy. Another source is James H. Breasted, *The Dawn of Conscience* (New York: Scribner, 1933), excerpted for this chapter. The inscription "A Hymn to Aton," also in this chapter, is taken from J. Pritchard, ed., *Ancient Near Eastern Texts Relating to the Old Testament*, 3rd edition with supplement (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1969). The Pulitzer Prize-winning novelist Allen Drury has written a novel dealing with Akhenaton, *A God against the Gods* (New York: Doubleday, 1976) and one about his successor, Tutankhamun, *Return to Thebes* (New York: Doubleday, 1977). The most famous of all modern novels of ancient Egypt, Mika Waltari, *The Egyptian: A Novel*, tr. Naomi Walford (New York: Putnam, 1949), uses the revolution of Akhenaton as a backdrop for its plot.

For the larger setting of Egyptian history there are a number of excellent books. John A. Wilson, *The Burden of Egypt: An Interpretation of Ancient Egyptian Culture* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1951), republished under the title *The Culture of Ancient Egypt* (Chicago: Phoenix, 1971), while somewhat dated in its research, is still valuable for its insights and is an eminently readable book. Equally readable is Sir Alan Gardiner, *Egypt of the Pharaohs: An Introduction* (London and New York: Oxford University Press, 1972). A somewhat more popularized book is Pierre Montet, *Lives of the Pharaohs* (Cleveland and New York: World, 1968). A good up-to-date historical survey of Egypt, including the Akhenaton period, is Cyril Aldred, *The Egyptians*, rev. and enlarged ed. (London: Thames and Hudson, 1984). John Romer, *People of the Nile: Everyday Life in Ancient Egypt* (New York: Crown, 1982) is lively and interesting as are T. G. H. James, *Pharaoh's People: Scenes from Life in Imperial Egypt* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984) and *Egypt's Golden Age: The Art of Living in the New Kingdom, 1558-1085 B.C.* (Boston: Museum of Fine Arts, 1982). Finally, to understand more fully the profound nature of Akhenaton's religious revolt, students should read Henri Frankfort, *Ancient Egyptian Religion: An Interpretation* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1948; republished by Harper Torchbooks, 1961), a popular but authoritative essay, and very readable. A more recent work of the same sort is A. Rosalie David, *The Ancient Egyptians: Religious Beliefs and Practices* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1982).