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## 'THE HERETIC PHARAOH'

Amenhotep, otherwise known as Akhenaton, is one of the most intriguing figures in history. He is known as the 'Heretic Pharaoh' because he attempted to reform the traditional religion of Egypt which was centred in the worship of the god, Amon, and to replace this worship by the cult of the Aton, the sun disk. He attempted to abolish the worship of the vast number of other lesser gods, gods in animal form, gods in human form and others partly animal and partly human, and for this effort he is often referred to as 'the world's first monotheist.' His reforms were not enduring and soon after his death, through the resurgence of the influence of the traditional priesthood of Amon which soon dominated Akhenaton's successor, Tutankhamon, who was a mere boy on his accession to the throne, the worship of the Aton was abolished and that of Amon and the other gods restored.

As one stands before one of the two huge statues of Akhenaton in Cairo Museum and hears the comments passed by tourists and other visitors to the Museum, one is reminded of the contrasting opinions concerning the reformer to be found in the numerous books on Ancient Egypt in which he is discussed. Those who gaze at the huge statue often express an opinion concerning the person of Akhenaton and it is one of excessive admiration or of intense dislike, according to the reaction of the beholder. There seem to be few neutrals even among those who say nothing. There are certainly no neutrals among those who have written about Akhenaton.

The most ardent apologist for Akhenaton among the great Egyptologists is the American, J. H. Breasted, who refers to him as 'the first individual in history,'<sup>1</sup> and attributes to his influence certain real improvements in the quality of the religion of the Ancient Egyptians which he sees as the direct result of the reform movement, and he believes that Akhenaton made an impression on his country and the world which has never completely disappeared. Breasted sees in post-Akhenaton religion a growth of the interior spirit, of personal devotion to the god. He sees, too, a more realistic attitude of the follower of the god towards himself as a direct result of the Aton movement. In pre-Aton times, the prescribed attitude towards oneself was to pose as sinless, an attitude that smacks very much in the Christian view as pure pharisaism, and there was no attempt to reach self-knowledge, to see oneself not only as good and endowed with many virtues, but, as is also the true state of things in the case of all human beings, also burdened with inclinations to evil and the awareness of

<sup>1</sup> J. H. Breasted, *The Dawn of Conscience*.

evil actually performed and desired. There was no awareness at all of the 'shadow', of the dark side of oneself, and in the Book of the Dead, a collection of traditions as to how the deceased should conduct himself in the next life in order to secure a happy decision from the interrogating judges as to his lot in eternity, the dead man was always encouraged to protest his innocence from sins of all kinds, by stating a list of his virtues in a negative form which is very similar to Job's denial of his sinfulness before his confrontation with God in person and his subsequent admission of his guilt. Breasted quotes a formula which shows that Akhenaton broke away from the formula of the Book of the Dead and claims that this represents a step in the direction of the spirit of the Gospel with its approval of the Publican's, 'O God, be merciful to me, a sinner.' The formula given by Breasted runs, 'Punish me not for my many sins. I am ignorant of my own body. I am a man without understanding. All day I follow after my own dictates, as the ox after his fodder.' And he describes this as the peak of evolution in the religion of the Ancient Egyptians.

Another great Egyptologist, this time Wallis Budge, takes a completely opposite view of Akhenaton, and can be ranked among the foremost denigrators of the reformer. In his *Tutankamen, Amenism, Atenism and Egyptian Monotheism* one aspect of Budge's attack on Akhenaton is concerned with his neglect of his job of ruling the country and guarding intact the extent of the Egyptian empire in Asia, caused by his over-emphasising the religious aspect of his office and spending his time in conversation with Ai, the priest, instead of frequenting the society of men of action who would have helped him to defend his realm. He sees Akhenaton as a spoilt child who fled from Thebes, the capital, when he discovered that those about him would not accept his novel religious opinions, and established a new capital, Akhetaton, mid-way between Thebes and Memphis where he could give full vent to his religious impulses in the worship of the Aton at the expense of the welfare of the country. Budge says he was stingy, not when it was a question of the religious reform he had so much at heart, but where the interests of the whole country were involved, and accuses him of religious megalomania.

More recently Akhenaton has found an enthusiastic defender in Bratton who has written a book on him called *The Heretic Pharaoh*. The author sets out to eulogise him out of principle, the principle that emphasises the role and influence of great men in history, as against the view that sees great men as the mere playthings of forces outside themselves. He quotes Emil Ludwig in *The Nile* as saying that the experiment of Akhenaton forms the only example of a revolution

which had its origin in the ruling classes, since all others have come from the oppressed people. Bratton believes, as does Breasted, that Akhenaton shaped his age and left his impress on it as other great men have done, such as Alexander the Great and Julius Caesar.

While Soderbergh, the Swedish Egyptologist, refers to Akhenaton as 'a fanatic' and 'intolerant', in his *Pharaohs and Mortals*, Jacquetta Hawkes in *Man and the Sun* takes up the cudgels on his behalf. She says that neutrality towards the reformer is impossible, and proceeds to demonstrate very clearly that she herself does not belong to that non-existent class. Her reasons are not those of Breasted and Bratton. What she admires most in Akhenaton is his 'brilliant and potent imagination,' and she is of the opinion that those who do not share her enthusiasm for him must be ultra-conservative and devoid of all attraction towards the beautiful. She admires him, too, because his hymn to the Aton reveals a soul ahead of even modern times, since in it he reveals he is no racialist, for he expresses his wonder at the diversity of races and even mentions the Syrians and Nubians before coming to his own Egyptians. She likes him, too, as is natural, for his rejection of the theory of the inferiority of women which is implied in his treatment of his wife, the graceful Nefertiti, who appears as his equal.

The intriguing Akhenaton was also considered by G. K. Chesterton in his *Everlasting Man*, where a new point of view is manifested, one of partial approval and partial disapproval. Chesterton, an idealist himself, liked Akhenaton, whom he considered to have been an idealist, and ventured the opinion that he was a realist in art because he was first an idealist. Yet he has a very profound and original objection to the reform, an objection stemming from his deep understanding of human nature and Christian teaching. Chesterton did not like the sweeping nature of the reforms of Akhenaton, of his attempts to clear away almost everything that had gone before, as if there were nothing good in the ideas of the past. He objected to Akhenaton because his changes were too complete, and believed that he should have seen the truth in the myths of old. Chesterton saw, for example, in the nature myth of Osiris and Isis a veiled truth, that, in her search for the body of Osiris, Isis represents nature which is also looking for something, the supernatural, the divine, which completes nature, just as the female Isis is completed by the male Osiris. He also disliked Akhenaton, because he considered him a snob, who could see no truth in the beliefs of the common people and considered himself superior to the mob.

The background of each one who passes comments on Akhenaton is

usually quite clear from the nature of his remarks. As Chesterton was influenced in his estimate of the reformer through his attachment to Christian teaching, so C. G. Jung views him from the angle of psychology and gives his approval to what he sees. He commends Akhenaton for 'a psychologically valuable work of interpretation,' and thinks he did not so much abolish the other innumerable gods as unite them in the Aton and treat them as attributes of the sun. In other words he sees his reforms as a synthesis of the old gods of Egypt rather than as a process of elimination. A. H. Sayce in *The Religion of Ancient Egypt* sees the reforms of Akhenaton, as does Jung, as a 'process of fusion of the gods.'

The opponents of Akhenaton and his reform usually, though not always, take their stand on two points. One of these, his neglect of the duties of his state of life, particularly his neglect of the defence of the Egyptian Empire in Asia and his refusal to take up arms in defence of it, and his turning a deaf ear to the urgent appeals for help from his satellite Asian kingdoms of which the actual letters, written in cuneiform script on baked clay tablets, were discovered near the end of the last century in the ruins of his capital at Tell-el-Amarna, would seem to be valid, for his empire did crumble and had to be reconquered by his successors. The second point his opponents usually urge against him is based on his mental health. His body, they say, as revealed by contemporary statues, was sickly and deformed and reveals a deformed soul; they claim that he was mentally unbalanced and that he suffered from epileptic fits. The ideal state of affairs, of course, is 'a healthy mind in a healthy body,' but greatness is compatible with both physical and mental weakness, otherwise such men as Julius Caesar and Napoleon would have to be omitted from the list of the great, since both are said to have suffered from epileptic fits, while many of the world's great writers have had to battle all their lives against the handicap of crippling physical disabilities. As it seems to be true that madness and genius are closely related, it would seem to be possible for a great man to combine very superior talents with periodic bouts of mental instability. The second point would, therefore, appear to be less valid than the first.

It is difficult to deny the title of greatness to Akhenaton. The very fierceness of the controversy among those who take sides for and against him would imply the presence in him of great qualities, for nonentities do not attract admiration and scorn at the same time; rather they are forgotten. Akhenaton's experience at the hands of both writers and the public at large reminds us a little, as do those of most great men, of the complete and utter loyalty of the disciples

of Christ evoked by the attraction of his personality, and of the detestation, equally intense, of those who opposed him, of the Pharisees; of those who were ready to, and actually did, lay down their lives for him and of those who so hated him that they were ready to put him to death and actually did so. While we must keep a sense of balance and not try to see Akhenaton as another Christ, the diverse and violent reactions on the part of those who write about him must be considered a sign that in him there must have been something above the average, though it may have been contaminated by the presence in him at the same time of weaknesses that were also greater than those of ordinary men.

The effect of the new ideas of Akhenaton on art must be seen as evidence of the strength of these ideas. One needs no pretension to artistic judgement of a high order to recognise at once the works of art of the reign of Akhenaton. In fact one need know nothing at all of art to be able to see at once the effect of the new religious theories of religion upon the traditional art of Egypt, a characteristic of which was its unchangingness. Yet under Akhenaton it did change and to such a degree that the art of Tell-el-Amarna is immediately recognised by the least aesthetic of men. The naturalness of the pose of the subject as opposed to the formality of pose of Egyptian art before and after the reign of Akhenaton, the depiction of nature as it is, the characteristic elongation of the skull of subjects, such as his own daughters, all reveal at a glance that the work of art in question can belong to only one short period of the history of Ancient Egypt, that period of one generation during which a man of new ideas, expressed vigorously, succeeded in directing the artistic talents of the Egyptians into different channels, an achievement comparable to that of changing the course of the Nile. That his reforms in religion and art did not endure may have been due to the violence of the change and to the force of inertia against change, which seems to be part of the Egyptian character and which may be partially explained by the geography and climate of the land which tend to preserve whatever is produced there in the same state in which it came into being. Yet Akhenaton did succeed in changing Egyptian life, if only for a time, and this feat demanded a measure of greatness, even though the task was rendered more easy by the fact he had at his disposal in effecting his reforms all the wealth and talent of Egypt.

The nature of his religious reforms is as hotly disputed as Akhenaton's own character, particularly the question of his alleged monotheism. There are some writers, such as Heinisch in his *Theology of the Old Testament*, who deny that he taught monotheism at all and held that

his doctrine was rather pantheism, since the Pharaoh made no attempt to abolish the theory that the occupant of the throne of Egypt was himself divine. There are others, especially his admirers, such as Bratton, who hold that Akhenaton taught ‘a pure monotheism’. While a third group sees his achievements as one of fusion and syncretism, a combination in the Aton of all the ancient gods of Egypt in such a way that they could be looked on as attributes of the sun-god.

The problem has been under discussion since the time of Champollion, the father of Egyptology, who made it possible for the relics of Ancient Egypt to yield up their secrets by his great feat of decyphering the hieroglyphs. It is clearly a matter to be decided by experts in Egyptology, for if they cannot agree and are so varied in their interpretations of the significance of Atonism, the opinions of amateurs can be of little reliability. Canon Drioton, who was for years Director of the great Museum of Pharaonic Antiquities in Cairo, took an interest in the problem and came to the conclusion that not only was the teaching of Akhenaton a true monotheism but that a real monotheism had existed in Egypt from the beginning of recorded history. He believed that the oneness of God had been taught side by side with an open polytheism and that no attempt was made to reconcile them until Akhenaton tried to abolish the contradiction. The significance of the reform consisted, then, in the energy with which Akhenaton made his choice between the two ancient traditions and the violence with which he tried to make his choice of monotheism dominant over its rival, polytheism. His monotheism was a true monotheism, but he did not invent the idea.<sup>2</sup>

The main written document on which estimates can be made of the nature of Akhenaton’s monotheism is his ‘Hymn to the Aton’ which shows very close parallels with Psalm 104, even in its phraseology. The Catholic theory of inspiration is extremely wide in its concept and for Catholics there is no problem in admitting the indebtedness of the Psalmist to Akhenaton as the source of the wording of much of his composition. In fact, Psalm 104 is a perfect example of the manner in which the seed of the word of God can accept ideas and use language, drawn from pagan sources, without becoming pagan, remaining true to God’s revelation and showing that such borrowing is a true assimilation and not syncretism, a true development and not a deformation.

The most striking fact about Psalm 104 is not its resemblance to the ‘Hymn to Aton’ but its differences. The Psalm and the Hymn have this in common, that both are songs of praise to the Creator for the fact of creation and for maintaining creatures in being. Both of them

<sup>2</sup> *Cahiers d'histoire égyptienne*, January 1939

give similar examples of the conserving action of God; in both, God gives life to animals, to vegetation which supplies the food of the animals; He gives the rain to make the crops grow and has arranged the seasons; all things have come from God who is to be praised for his manifold works. Yet the whole spirit of Psalm 104 is entirely different from that of the 'Hymn to Aton', and this difference centres around the attitude to the sun taken by the authors. In the Psalm, the sun is clearly a creature made by God, whereas in Akhenaton's Hymn the sun is god. In verse 19 of the Psalm the sun appears as simply another of the creatures whose existence is due to God.

'You made the moon to mark the seasons:  
the sun knows the hour of its setting.'

Yet the symbolism of the sun for God is present in Psalm 104.

'You are clothed in majesty and glory;  
robed in light as in a cloak,' (v 2.)

but there is no suggestion that God is simply the material light of the sun as in the 'Hymn to Aton.' How different this is from the opening verses of Akhenaton's Hymn, where creation is attributed to the sun.

'Beautiful is thine appearing in the horizon heaven, thou living son, the first who lived.

Thou riseth in the eastern horizon and fillest every land with thy beauty.

Thou art beautiful and great and glisteneth and art high above every land.

Thy rays they encompass the lands, as far as all thou hast created.'

Another important difference is that Akhenaton himself claims to be divine, for in spite of his abolition of the worship of the other gods of Ancient Egypt, he did not renounce the traditional claim of the Pharaoh to be divine and the son of Re. In his Hymn he claims on more than one occasion the title 'Son of Re' and thus gives an argument to those who hold the opinion that he did not teach monotheism at all. A third difference lies in the fact that whereas in Psalm 104 there are moral implications, in the Hymn these are not present. The Psalm ends with the following prayer that the earth may be purified through the disappearance of sin and sinners:

'May sinners cease from the earth  
And may the wicked be no more.' (v 35.)

This linking of morals to the idea of the one true God makes the monotheism of Israel much superior to that of Akhenaton, if, indeed, he did teach monotheism. The Old Testament from the early days in Sinai until the coming of Christ always appealed to the Israelites to avoid the abominations of the pagans in the name of the God of Israel, but the denunciation of the horrible practices of the pagan peoples around them was the peculiar office of the Prophets of the Old



Law, who stood up against the evils of the times and defied the wrath of the great ones of this world, whose crimes they condemned in the name of the God of Israel. In paganism, including that of the Aton worship of Akhenaton, there is no equivalent of the prophets of Israel, no Amos, no Jeremiah, no John the Baptist, whose recurring presence in Israel is a testimony to the vitality and moral tone of the Jewish idea of the one true God. Certainly Ancient Egypt and the reign of Akhenaton had nothing of the kind, and the nearest they came to it was in the writings of their moralists, whose advice for the most part confined itself to manners, propriety and how to get on with the rich and succeed in life.

The Hymn of Akhenaton is interesting as revealing the perplexity the Ancient Egyptians found themselves in when they went seeking for colonies in Asia. When they got to Syria they found that there was no great Nile from which all water for irrigation came, but that at times, especially in winter, the water came from the sky in the form of rain. As they had no word for rain, which was almost unknown to them, they said that the Syrians had a 'Nile in the sky.'

'Thou has (also) put the Nile in the sky, that it may come down for them and may make waves upon the hills, like a sea, in order to moisten their fields . . .'

It is also interesting in the unexpected order given to the mention of the nations, for the Hymn speaks of the Syrians and the Nubians before it comes to the Egyptians, an unheard-of order of precedence in other times, where the Egyptians were always mentioned first. It ties in with Akhenaton's lack of aggressivity in foreign policy and the loss of his empire and with something else which was rare in pre-Christian times, an expression of affection for his wife which also appears in the Hymn, where Akhenaton ends by speaking of 'the great royal consort whom he loveth, mistress of the Two Lands, Nefernefrure, Nefertiti that liveth and is young for ever and ever.' The Hymn also uses the phrase 'Thou sole god' with references to the Aton, and this is taken by some writers as strong evidence that the Pharaoh taught monotheism. However, others, such as Dricton, show that the same phrase was used throughout the previous long history of the religion of Ancient Egypt, side by side with other expressions which are clearly polytheistic in meaning and that, therefore, its presence in the 'Hymn to the Aton,' of itself, proves nothing.

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