Akhenaten and a New Relationship

By ca 1550 Dynasty Eighteen inflicted what may have been the final blow against the Hyksos, establishing the New Kingdom (1550-ca 1200). Dynasty Eighteen established an empire of conquest in west Asia and promoted an ideological program of monument building and religion that connected the pharaohs more directly with the sun. Hapiru were no longer welcome in the Delta, and there is evidence of forced labor, which may be the basis for the later Hebrew memories of Egyptian slavery, and Moses rising to champion the Hebrew cause. Certainly there is evidence of emigrations from the Delta and restlessness in Palestine in the later years of the New Kingdom.

Far more concerned with the promotion of religious reform than military expansion or empire Amenhotep IV, the last strong member of Dynasty Eighteen, changed his name to Akhenaten to reflect his devotion to the Sun Disk, the Aten, from whom he believed all divine principles derived. Akhenaten commissioned an entirely new planned capital, Akhetaten (modern el-Amarna), untainted by the older worship. He devoted his reign to promoting within the court a new religious approach and artistic style that we call the Amarna style. The priests were in general opposed, and did little to encourage Akhenaten’s programs.

However, did such a new program challenge the balance between the people and the gods? Why was this important in a land so dependent on environmental certainty? David sums up the theories:

\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

Since the rediscovery of Akhetaten in the nineteenth century, the so called Amarna Period has constantly aroused interest and controversy. The existing evidence has been used to present different, and sometimes diametrically opposed, interpretations of various aspects of Akhenaten’s reign and his religion. Initially, historians regarded him as a ‘failed Messiah’ who had given his people a new, monotheistic religion which promoted a universal god who loved and cared for his creation; however, he was unable to succeed against the traditional, polytheistic, and counter-revolutionary forces. In more recent years, however, Atenism has been explained in terms of an evolution of earlier religious traditions rather than as a ‘revolution’, although Akhenaten’s attempt to create a ‘monotheistic’ cult that excluded the state worship of other gods is still accepted as an innovative venture. Furthermore, some historians have explained his actions in terms of political expediency, suggesting that his promotion of the Aten, and the disbanding of all other cults and their priesthoods, was an attempt to reassert the king’s own political power and to dispense with the control over the kingship that the priesthood of Amen-Re in particular had come to exert. Perhaps, however, Akhenaten cannot be viewed strictly in those narrow terms, as either a religious visionary or a political opportunist, but instead should be considered within the context of his own society, where religion and politics, and the motives that drive them, were inextricably interwoven. (Rosalie David, Experience of Ancient Egypt. London: Routledge, 2000. p 52)

The Question: Why is it difficult in the context of Egyptian society to classify Akhenaten as a reformer or an opportunist?

\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

Whereas David is content to let Akhenaten’s own society explain him, Redford sees a somewhat pathetic emptiness:

\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

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… In the wake of the desuetude of the cult, the myths of the gods, which provided the hypostasis of many cultic elements, simply disappeared. The sun god Akhenaton championed…enjoyed no mythology…The marvelously complex world of the Beyond is banished from the minds of men. No truth can come from anyone but the king…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!...

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… 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… 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 all that can be said in his favor, Akhenaten 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. (Donald Redford, Akhenaten, The Heretic King Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984, pp. 169-70, 233-5)

The Question: How does the Aten-cult of Akhenaten jar with accepted notions of Egyptian divine kingship?

\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

Redford sees an Egypt stripped of its mythology, but Aldred, one of the most influential Egyptologists of the twentieth century, sees a poorly-timed reform to put the sun back in the center of existence:

The remarkable feature of this revolution in religious thought is that it apparently springs into life from the moment of the king’s advent. The curtain falls on the old drama of the sun-god’s progress across the heavens with his divine retinue defeating the ever-resurgent forces of evil by day, and bringing a brief hour of light and life to the dead in the various regions of the Underworld by night. In its pace was presented a far less tumultuous monodrama enacted in the presence of worshipping mankind with its joyous offerings. The Aten rose and set in solitary majesty in a heaven devoid of other gods. In this respect Professor Redford is justified in speaking of Akhenaten as a literal atheist…

There was in this a return to an earlier concept of immortality which was revived by the Aten-religion and opposed to the agricultural eternity of the Osirian beliefs…

Such a creed reveals an attempt to rationalize beliefs that had developed accretions from prehistoric times. It sought to establish the relationship of the dead with the living, and mankind and all the natural world with a unique, invisible and self-created god… But it seems to have satisfied no deep need in the mass of the people. Outside of Akhetaten life was no better than before and may, indeed, have been more burdensome and ominous. Plague and sickness were becoming endemic, rumours of military reverses percolated from abroad…

…Akhenaten’s preoccupation… diverted his attention and that of his officials from the minutiae of government which had been the chief concern of the Ahmosides from the beginning of the dynasty. Such a dereliction from statecraft to theology led to neglect, corruption and near-anarchy. Moreover, the wind of change was pestilential and resulted in the virtual extermination of the ruling family.

The eclipse of Akhenaten was complete. After the Amarna interlude, the life of Egypt resumed its flow though familiar channels… (Cyril Aldred, Akhenaten, King of Egypt. London: Thames and Hudson, 1988, pp.244, 247, 248, 306)

The Question: How does Aldred justify the religious reform of Akhenaten? Why was it unsuccessful? How does this view contrast with that of Redford?

\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

Aldred is far more sympathetic to the religious program. Since the Old Kingdom, Egyptian cult had increasingly put Osiris, god of the dead, at the forefront. Akhenaten sought to restore the sun to its place at the center of existence. However, the Aten spoke only to Akhenaten and his family. Whether or not Atenism had any impact beyond the capitol at Akhetaten, there were political implications to Akhenaten’s obsession. The letter from his governor in Palestine suggests that there was certainly a political impact.

\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

“… Oh king, my Lord, there are no garrison troops here! (Therefore), the king takes care of his land! May the king take care of his land! All the territories of the king have rebelled; Ilimilku caused the loss of all the territories of the king. May the king take care of his land! I repeat: Allow me to enter the presence of the king, my Lord, and let me look into both eyes of the king, my Lord. But the hostility against me is strong, and I cannot enter the presence of the king, my Lord. May the king send garrison troops, in order that I may enter and look into the eyes of the king, my Lord. So certain as the king, my Lord, lives, when the commissioners come, I will say: "Lost are the territories of the king. Do you not hear to me? All the rulers are lost; the king, my Lord, does not have a single ruler left." May the king direct his attention to the archers, and may the king, my Lord, send troops of archers, the king has no more lands. The Hapiru sack the territories of the king. If there are archers (here) this year, all the territories of the king will remain (intact); but if there are no archers, the territories of the king, my Lord, will be lost! To the king, my Lord thus writes Abdu-Heba, your servant. He conveys eloquent words to the king, my Lord. All the territories of the king, my Lord, are lost.” (A Letter from Abdu-Heba of Jerusalem to Akhenaton EA 286)

The Question: What were the political consequences of Akhenaten’s reign?

\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

Certainly Akhenaten’s seeming disinterest in the affairs of empire, especially in Asia, affected Egyptian political power. But did the episode have any impact on the person of the king? Van Dijk suggests that kingship was so integral to the cultural identity of the Egyptians that this deliberate royal assault on religious assumptions gave the kingship lasting weaknesses.

\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

There can be little doubt that the extraordinary manner in which Akhenaten portrayed himself, his family (and, to a lesser extent, all other human beings) on his monuments somehow reflects the king’s actual physical appearance, albeit in an exaggerated physical style that has been termed ‘expressionist’ or even ‘surrealist’. Inscriptions tell us that it was the king himself who instructed his artists in the new style…Another r characteristic feature of the Amarna style is its extraordinary sense of movement and speed, a general ‘looseness and freedom of expression that was to have a lasting influence on Egyptian art for centuries after the Amarna Period had come to an end

Although the Amarna episode lasted barely twenty years, its impact was enormous. It is perhaps the single most important event in Egypt’s religious and cultural history and it left deep scars on the collective consciousness of its inhabitants. Superficially, the country returned to the traditional religion of the time before Akhenaten, but in reality nothing would ever be the same again (J. Van Dijk, “The Amarna Period and the Later New Kingdom” in B. Shaw ed.,, Oxford History of Egypt. p. 272-4, 279)

The question: How might the Amarna episode permanently affect the relationship of pharaoh to people?

\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

While Van Dijk may have a point, the priests did their utmost to erase the reign completely. After Akhenaten’s death, his heir Tutankhaten quickly changed his name to Tutankhamen and Egyptian worship resumed. Akhenaten was labeled as the Heretic. Politically, however, Akhenaten’s inattention to Asian affairs had already weakened the empire and the dynasty. Once again, the affairs of man were linked directly to the disorder in the fields and frontiers.