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Akhenaten and the Origins of Monotheism

Oxford University Press, 2015.

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As James Hoffmeier himself puts it (p. x), “With so much good literature on Akhenaten and his era, why would I even attempt to write another book on Akhenaten?”. The main reason given by the author is the new data available about Akhenaten’s religion, combined with his own wish to take a phenomenological approach to this issue, an approach devoid of the prejudices usually held on monotheism.

Chapters 1 and 2 (pp. 1-61) offer an overview of religion in the times preceding Akhenaten’s reign; the point is to show the increasing weight, in time, of the sun cult within the religious landscape, and the prominence of Amun-Re at the beginning of the 18th dynasty. Such an account, though probably mandatory, can only be superficial in the scope of this publication and causes the reader some impatience, not least since Jan Assmann has already convincingly made such a point for some time.

The inquiry becomes exciting once it really gets to the point: with chapter 3 (pp. 62-90) starts the discussion on the events and the remains from the reign of Akhenaten. First comes a depiction of the period preceding the king’s ‘conversion’ (a term occasionally used by the author, p. 141), including a quick look back upon the first appearances of the Aten sun-disc and its occurrences up till Amenhotep III’s reign (pp. 76-82), then a very complete state of the art on the identification of the numerous

temples and buildings dedicated in Karnak by Akhenaten, in his early years, to the god Aten (chapter 4: pp. 91-135). After a critical presentation of past (western) academic approaches to the history of religions, one of the key chapters, chapter 5 (pp. 136-164), while carefully paving the way for the phenomenological method that the author favours, deals with the move to Amarna and the devising of the new city, especially of its temples and boundary stela, as well as with what is known about another building project in Nubia. Chapter 6 (pp. 165-192) is concerned with the characteristics of the new doctrine after this geographical as well as spiritual revolution. Building on the evidence and arguments previously brought forth, the author can then address his main subject (chapter 7: pp. 193-210): James Hoffmeier's thesis is that Atenism was indeed a monotheistic faith. His demonstration relies on several criteria that are usually held for 'symptoms' of monotheism: revelation ("hierophany", following Mircea Eliade's terminology), conversion, affirmation of the deity as sole god and its corollary, the acknowledgment of the existence of no other (in other words, exclusivity).

Although this choice of features may seem too loaded with Judeo-Christian tradition, may appear to be resulting from a preconceived grid, the demonstration is convincing. Yet one could argue that certain statements may seem slightly naïve or trivial. This concerns e.g. the issue of the authenticity of Amenhotep IV's conversion. Its sincerity is said to be evident in the fact that the king reacted to Aten's appearance in a way typical of human beings encountering the divine, namely by erecting an altar and making offerings to the god. Resorting to arguments from Near Eastern and Biblical context to strengthen the argument (pp. 151-154, in chap. 5) may seem equally ingenuous. Offering to the numinous is the very first and elementary means to communicate with it, in whatever circumstances. Moreover, the author strongly insists on the intimate knowledge of the sun

god Akhenaten claimed to possess: “Simply put, the king claims that the Aten spoke to him directly, instructing him about his desire” (p. 155). This may not be as discriminating as Hoffmeier puts it, as we know of several other instances in history of rulers who were directly instructed by deities, e.g. Hatshepsut (cf. the extensive article on this topic by Luc Gabolde, 2014. “Hatshepsut at Karnak: A Woman under God’s Commands”, In *Creativity and Innovation in the Reign of Hatshepsut* (SAOC 69), edited by José M. Galán, Betsy M. Bryan and Peter F. Dorman, pp. 33-48. Chicago/Illinois: The Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago). The direct revelation by a deity to a sovereign of the holy place of the shrine to be built and of its layout also has a long tradition in the Near East: e.g. king Gudea’s cylinders (22nd cent. BCE), recalling how god Ningirsu himself appeared to the king in a dream to let him know exactly how he wanted his temple to be built. Chapter 8 offers an extensive analysis of the Hymns to Aten and questions the absolute novelty of the main doctrinal elements they bring forward. In the last chapter, Hoffmeier concludes, rightly in the present writer’s opinion, to the absence of a “Canaanite-Phoenician intermediary (...) between the Aten hymns and Psalm 104” (p. 255) – a theory that seemed a little far-fetched indeed given the absence of any known relevant ‘model’ in Semitic literature to match the Biblical text. The hypothesis of a direct influence of later Egyptian solar compositions on the Hebrew world is sufficient explanation, at least a simpler one, to account for the similarities noted by many scholars.

However, it is difficult to subscribe to the further observations the author presents in this last section of the book, commenting on the Exodus and the historical reliability of the Bible as far as the origins of the Yahweh cult are concerned. Hoffmeier favours the old thesis of an Egyptian sojourn of the Hebrews in Egypt and of a monotheist God brought back thence after

having revealed Himself to Moses in the wilderness, a scenario that almost no one in the scientific community stands up for today.

One of the qualities of the book is its clarity, making it accessible to a wide audience; it is nonetheless suitable for specialists, since the author does not shrink from minutely commenting upon many philological issues relevant for the interpretation of the data in hieroglyphic Egyptian phrases (e.g. on the uses of the word *gm*, pp. 141-157).

A very thorough discussion, and a fascinating one, is given on the role, in the king's religious agenda, of the first jubilee festival (*hb sd*), celebrated between year 4 and year 5 (chap. 4, pp. 117-125). It is argued here that the significance of this celebration might have been primarily to enact Aten's promotion to supremacy, and perhaps also to solemnly take on Amenhotep IV's new name Akhenaten. Let us mention, as other examples of discussion that might be of great interest to the reader, the comments upon the controversy concerning Amenhotep IV's potential co-regency with his father Amenhotep III (e.g. pp. 87-90, 119-125), or upon the idea that the deified Amenhotep III was the actual object of Akhenaten's worship (*ibid.*), both theories that the author dismisses. The book owes much to the work of Donald Redford, the excavator of the Akhenaten Temple Project, a debt the author plainly acknowledges (e.g. pp. 76-77, and chap. 4 *passim*). However, thanks to Hoffmeier's former function as a director of the excavations at Tell el-Borg (Sinai), it also provides presentations and discussions of first-hand material (pp. 179-192) that are among the most interesting ones.

One can all the more regret that the printing of the illustrations should not be of a better quality, especially when the low contrast does not allow all interesting details to be discerned on pictures of excavation fields or of damaged reliefs.

Nothing is to be found in this book on the foreign policy of Akhenaten: this is a theme the author has deliberately left aside to concentrate on the issue of monotheism.

Some further references would have been relevant for the topic addressed by J. Hoffmeier, namely Akhenaten's approach to monotheism, as they would have usefully enriched the debate.¹ According to Bickel, Egyptian individuals could, besides traditional gods such as Taweret, Bes or Hathor, invoke Aten himself, which shows this deity was actually not worshipped exclusively by the pharaoh.

The following should now be added to the rich literature mentioned by the author:

- Aidan Dodson. 2014. *Amarna Sunrise: Egypt from Golden Age to Age of Heresy*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Jan Assmann. 2014. *From Akhenaten to Moses: Ancient Egypt and Religious Change*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

The author of the latter favours the, so to say, developmental, or evolutionist, view, seeing Akhenaten's reforms as the overwhelming manifestation of a 'latent monotheism' that was there all the time in Egyptian religion. One should also mention the current controversy triggered by Nicholas Reeves's alleged discovery of queen Nefertiti's resting place, within reach of Tutankhamen's tomb through a hidden passageway.

All these late developments of the research pertaining to Amarnian and post-Amarnian matters show that the topic chosen by James Hoffmeier is

1 One of these is Suzanne Bickel's 2003 article in *JANER* 3, p. 23-45: "Ich spreche ständig zu Aton: zur Mensch-Gott Beziehung in der Amarna Religion".

still far from being exhausted, and that his work inserts itself into a wider range of publications that are part of a sort of 'thought-in-progress'.

Still, to the eyes of this reviewer, one question remains unanswered until now, nor is it asked in the book: apart from the switch from many gods to a single one, why was it so vital for Akhenaten to get rid of anthropomorphic or zoomorphic manifestations of divinity, images that had proved thitherto so powerful and so inspiring? Why did such an abstract, mute and limited shape as a sun-disc have to be recurred to in order to express the new faith and embody its mighty divine force?

On the whole, Hoffmeier's book, although it is not fundamentally innovative – as it does not bring to light fully new evidence – is a bright and useful synthesis of all the main theories on the subject and of its problems.

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