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## ABRAHAM, AKHENATEN, MOSES AND MONOTHEISM

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### Summary

*Israel's faith in one God only arose comparatively late in her history according to many biblical scholars, and so is inconceivable for a Moses or an Abraham. Yet the religious revolution of Akhenaten proves a form of monotheism was possible in the second millennium BC. The nature of the evidence for that belief, and for other religious concepts in the ancient Near East which continued over many centuries, shows there is no logical reason to deny monotheism could have existed among Israel's ancestors.*

### Introduction

The period 1350-1250 BC. was 'ideally suited to give birth to monotheism' wrote W.F. Albright in his famous book *From the Stone Age to Christianity*.<sup>1</sup> So far as Albright was concerned, Israel's faith in a single god began then, but many others do not see it emerging until the eighth century BC or later, so that W.G. Dever can write, 'the overwhelming scholarly consensus today is ... that true monotheism developed only late in Israel's history, probably not until the Exile and Return'.<sup>2</sup> Whatever opinions about the date of monotheism appearing in Israel are held, the fact remains that her faith is unique in the ancient world. No other beliefs current there have affected so many people over so large a part of the world for so long a time. A unique phenomenon is awkward for historians since they have no standard way to explain or assess it, so they make strenuous attempts to fit it with a pattern of known features in the same general category. For Israel's devotion to her one God that means bringing its date as late as possible, the time when the great passages in Isaiah 42-46, etc., declaring there is no God but the Lord, were written, and those chapters are commonly dated in the 6th century BC, the period which is seen as the acme of Israelite religious development. Yet H.H. Rowley remarked, 'It is indeed surprising, and not easily to be accounted for on simple evolutionary lines, that Israel attained a monotheistic faith'.<sup>3</sup> Following the usual view about the progress of Israelite religion and the dating of the Pentateuchal sources which accepts it, there is relatively little problem in accommodating the statements of Genesis and Exodus: they are retrojections from theological thought of the 1st millennium BC. The usual view, however, fails to treat the Pentateuch as a group of ancient Near Eastern writings and to examine it in its context. There is a constant need for that contextual study if the Pentateuch, or any part of the Old Testament, is to receive an historical assessment which may begin to approach reality. The purpose of this paper, therefore, is to explore the historical and logical possibility of

<sup>1</sup>2nd ed; New York, Doubleday 1957) 12.

<sup>2</sup>What Remains of the House That Albright Built?', *BA* 56.1 (1993) 25-35 [33].

<sup>3</sup>*The Faith of Israel* (London, SCM 1956) 73.

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### I. Moses and Akhenaten

Two famous declarations to Moses establish the identity of the God who will lead Israel from Egypt to the Promised Land with the God who led Abraham from Mesopotamia and promised the land to his posterity: 'I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob' (Ex. 3:6) and 'I am the Lord. I appeared to Abraham, to Isaac and to Jacob as God Almighty, but by my name the Lord I did not make myself known to them' (Ex. 6:3). In the song at the crossing of the Red Sea, that God is described as incomparable:

Who among the gods is like you, O Lord?  
Who is like you -  
majestic in holiness,  
awesome in glory,  
working wonders? (Ex. 15:11).

If those words do not deny the existence of other gods, they certainly imply they are not worth attention.

Moses lived, we suppose, in the 13th century BC, less than a hundred years after the well-known Egyptian 'heretic' pharaoh, Akhenaten, who reigned c. 1352-1336 BC. Under his rule Egypt experienced a revolution in religion and art. The pharaoh declared the sun-disk, Aten, to be the only divinity, changing his own name from Amenhotep (IV) to mark his new allegiance. Hitherto Egyptians had worshipped a large pantheon, with Amen-Re, identified with the sun, at its head. By the 15th century BC some theologians hailed Re as 'the Universe who has assimilated all the other gods in his being'.<sup>4</sup> The Aten was unique, without consort or family. Other gods were no longer countenanced, many of their names were erased from visible monuments and their cults stopped, especially in the cases of Amen-Re and Osiris. Even the plural word 'gods' was changed to 'god' where it stood in inscriptions. Images were apparently condemned as futile, the product of human speculation, contrasting with the sun-disk

<sup>4</sup>C. Aldred, *Akhenaten, King of Egypt* (London, Thames and Hudson 1988) 239.

who renewed and revealed himself every day. Egyptologists from the time of J.H. Breasted describe the king and his faith straightforwardly: 'the earliest monotheist';<sup>5</sup> 'Ateism ... was a genuine monotheism';<sup>6</sup> 'Where the idea of Akhenaten differed from the Re of the new [Eighteenth Dynasty] sacred books was that, instead of incorporating all the old deities in a comprehensive henotheism, it rigidly excluded them in an uncompromising monotheism.'<sup>7</sup> This unparalleled change in Egypt's worship was the king's doing. He was 'the beautiful child of the Aten', so his divine father may have revealed his nature to him. Certainly, the king announced Aten revealed to him the site for the new capital city which was to perpetuate the god's name, Akhetaten, modern El-Amarna.<sup>8</sup> A corollary of this relationship between the single god and the pharaoh was the king's position as sole intermediary between the deity and his worshippers. While historians can trace some movements in Egyptian religion towards the concept of a single god in the decades before Akhenaten ascended the throne, the cult he imposed was most likely his own creation. 'Where Akhenaten's ideas of monotheism came from in a world which widely tolerated so many diverse forms of godhead is unknown, but the inference is that they were his own, the logical outcome of regarding the Aten as a heavenly king, whose son was the pharaoh. Like the latter, he could only be regarded as "unique, without a peer".'<sup>9</sup> Not only religion stemmed from him. Another scholar has affirmed, 'The entire period, its art, its religion, its denial of accepted forms bears the imprint of a powerful mind, and it is surely unnecessary to look for this powerful mind elsewhere than with the pharaoh.'<sup>10</sup>

Akhenaten's revolution lasted little longer than he did; his successor changed his own name from Tutankhaten to

<sup>5</sup>J.H. Breasted, *A History of the Ancient Egyptians* (London, Hodder and Stoughton 1909) 264-265.

<sup>6</sup>Sir Alan Gardiner, *Egypt of the Pharaohs* (Oxford, Clarendon: 1961) 227.

<sup>7</sup>C. Aldred, 'Egypt: the Amarna Period and the End of the Eighteenth Dynasty', *CAH II.2* (3rd ed; London, CUP 1975) 88.

<sup>8</sup>Aldred, *Akhenaten, King of Egypt*, 44-49, 269-270; Gardiner, *Egypt of the Pharaohs*, 221-222.

<sup>9</sup>Aldred, 'Egypt', 89.

<sup>10</sup>J.D. Ray, 'Prophets without honour? Akhenaten: Ancient Egypt's Prodigal Son?' *History Today* 40 (January 1990) 26-32.

Tutankhamun, abandoned the city Akhetaten for the old capital at Memphis and re-instated the worship of the old gods. The names of Akhenaten, his queen and his god were obliterated from the monuments, and while their impact lingered somewhere in the country's memory the king was execrated as the perpetrator of 'The Wrong'. Formal lists of pharaohs omitted Akhenaten's name. Beyond the court and major temples, evidence suggests the Aten failed to displace the traditional gods in popular religion, for ordinary people continued to pray as they had always done to this deity or that with whom they felt a personal link.<sup>11</sup>

Since the revelation of Akhenaten's activities to modern eyes a century or so ago, many writers have attempted to explain the 'monotheistic' faith of Moses as derived from them. Whatever the similarities, the distinctions should also be given due weight. One Egyptologist has recently written, "...there is an important difference between the sun-god Aten of Akhenaten on the one hand and both the Judaeo-Christian-Islamic deity and the traditional Egyptian sun-god Ra on the other. The sun-god of Akhenaten is not engaged with humanity beyond dawning to give light and life, a task that it performs for every living being on earth as well, animal or vegetable. The course of the Aten across the sky has no moral content, and the king defends only the truth that Aten is sole god, not the moral or social order.'<sup>12</sup>

The example of Akhenaten proves that a 'monotheistic' faith could originate in the 2nd millennium BC, the product, experts declare, of a single man's mind. If there could be an Akhenaten, a monotheistic Egyptian, then logically there could be others. Albricht's basic contention cannot be gainsaid: a Moses could have promoted the worship of one god only among his people, together with the appropriate cultic and festival observances.

<sup>11</sup>See Aldred, 'Egypt', 89, for the suggestion that a Semitic influence may have crept into the attitude evident in prayers.

<sup>12</sup>S. Quirke, *Ancient Egyptian Religion* (London, British Museum Press 1992) 42-43; cf. Gardiner, *Egypt of the Pharaohs*, 229: 'A defect of the Doctrine was its complete lack of ethical teaching.'

## II. The Aten and the Divine Name

Although Akhenaten's religion was new, perhaps it was foreshadowed in the reign of his father Amenophis III (c. 1390-1352 BC) when the 'references to Aten as a solar divinity become more numerous'.<sup>13</sup> The Aten was an ancient concept as 'the sun's disk'. A famous earlier occurrence of this sort is in the Story of Sinuhe, that interesting account of an Egyptian finding refuge and living with a semi-nomadic chieftain in Canaan about the time of Abraham, a story, whether it be true or not, actually available to us in copies written only a century or so after the events it describes, demonstrating that such narratives could be created and preserved from the Middle Bronze Age. As the story opens, the Pharaoh who favoured Sinuhe has died, a moment conveyed by the expression 'the king ... went aloft to heaven and became united with the disk, the limb of the god being merged with him who made him.' Gardiner says, 'It is often difficult to tell when this term has or has not a religious implication', for it might mean simply 'the sun' or 'the sun-god'.<sup>14</sup>

Perhaps an analogy can be drawn between the interpretation and development the Aten underwent under Akhenaten and the revelation of YHWH which Moses received. In each case a term was given fresh significance, and the Aten was certainly an old term, as just noted. For a long known concept to gain an enlarged meaning and fresh currency is quite common (compare the use of 'flying' in 19th century English with its use to-day), and so the same could be true with a divine name.

The history of the Aten in Egypt may open a way to understand the revelation of the Divine Name in the Pentateuch. Beside the literal acceptance of Exodus 6:3 as commonly translated, I appeared to Abraham, to Isaac and to Jacob as God Almighty, but by my name the LORD I did not make myself known to them' (NIV), which G.J. Wenham defended positively in 1980,<sup>15</sup> stand the interpretations of W.J. Martin, taking the words as a question, '...for did I not let

<sup>13</sup>Aldred, *Akhenaten King of Egypt*, 239.

<sup>14</sup>Gardiner, *Egypt of the Pharaohs*, 217. For a translation of the story, see ANET 18-22.

<sup>15</sup>The Religion of the Patriarchs' in A.R. Millard, D.J. Wiseman (eds.) *Essays on the Patriarchal Narratives* (Leicester, IVP 1980) 157-88.

MILLARD: Abraham, Akhenaten, Moses and Monotheism 125 myself be known to them by my name YHWH?'<sup>16</sup> and of J.A. Motyer who, following earlier writers, takes 'name' to denote character.<sup>17</sup> Those two views assume the name was current long before the revelation to Moses, that it was the name of the God of the fathers.

## III. The God of the Fathers

A. Alt's famous essay drew attention to the concept of the paternal god or gods among the Nabataeans and contemporary peoples in Syria in 1929 as a source for comparison with Israelite beliefs.<sup>18</sup> A few years later J. Lewy pointed to the existence of 'the god of the father' almost two millennia earlier in the Old Assyrian tablets from the merchant colony at Kanesh in central Anatolia.<sup>19</sup> The subject has continued to provoke discussion, with debate especially over the role and identity of the god(s).<sup>20</sup> It should be observed that the 'personal god', although often anonymous, could be a major deity such as Ashur or Adad.<sup>21</sup> Among the lately published documents from Emar on the Euphrates in Syria there are a number of wills dividing property among a man's family. They state, 'the gods belong to the principal dwelling; the principal dwelling is the share of the eldest son'. These activities are only documented long after the time of the Patriarchs, close to or contemporary with Moses, but they show there was a feeling that there were family gods which belonged to the eldest son.<sup>22</sup> Although slightly later in date

<sup>16</sup>*Stylistic Criteria and the Analysis of the Pentateuch* (London, Tyndale 1955) 18-19; cf. NIV footnote and G.R. Driver, 'Affirmation by Exclamatory Negation', *Journal of the Ancient Near Eastern Society of Columbia University* 5 (1973) *The Gaster Festschrift*, 107-14, esp. 109.

<sup>17</sup>*The Revelation of the Divine Name* (London, Tyndale 1959).

<sup>18</sup>A. Alt, *Essays on Old Testament History and Religion* (ET of 1929 original; Oxford, Blackwell 1966) 1-77.

<sup>19</sup>Les textes paléo-assyriens et l'Ancien Testament' RHR 110 (1934) 19-65, although, as Alt remarked (*The God of the Fathers*, 32, n. 77) these do not contain the expression 'god of PN'.

<sup>20</sup>See recently J.-M. Heimerdinger, 'The God of Abraham', *Vox Evangelica* 22 (1992) 41-55.

<sup>21</sup>Examples cited in CAD I-J (1960) 94-97.

<sup>22</sup>Examples in D. Arnaud, *Textes syriens de l'Age du Bronze Récent* (Aula Orientalis Supplementa 1; Barcelona, Editions AUSA 1991) no. 42-13; cf. nos. 41:12, 26; 46:10; 72:10; 73:7, 48.

than the tablets of Nuzi, these Emar references may be relevant to the interpretation of statements about gods in some of the Nuzi texts formerly brought into the discussion of patriarchal customs.<sup>23</sup> What those gods were may be revealed by the many terra-cotta figures found at Emar and other sites, sometimes placed beneath the threshold, presumably to protect the occupants of a house from evil.<sup>24</sup>

The major question about the patriarchal religion is the identity of the God of the Fathers. Again, ancient texts have refreshed the discussion, leading many to assume the God of Abraham was the El of the Canaanites and the texts from Ugarit, found in various guises, El Olam, El Shaddai, El Bethel, etc. Now while every attempt to set biblical reports in their ancient context is welcome, those reports should receive due weight themselves. Either the Patriarchs worshipped several gods under various names, or they worshipped one who had several names.<sup>25</sup> The former position suits the ancient context well and so has many adherents. Still, it is the easier solution and for that reason deserves to be treated with caution; the text critic's principle of *lectio difficilior* may be apt in this area of research also. A variety of names for a single deity is by no means rare in the societies which have left a considerable range of documents. One god could absorb the attributes of others in a syncretistic way, as Amun did in Egypt before Akhenaten's revolution, or could be known in many guises.

#### IV Abraham and Akhenaten

Many centuries elapsed between the age of Abraham and the time of Moses. Could the worship of the same god continue over so long a period in a tribal society? In the Near East most

<sup>23</sup>See M.J. Selman, 'Comparative Customs and the Patriarchal Age' in *Essays on the Patriarchal Narratives*, 110; *idem*, 'The Social Environment of the Patriarchs', *Tyndale Bulletin* 27 (1976) 114-36.

<sup>24</sup>Examples in M. van Loon, '1974 and 1975 Preliminary Results of the Excavations at Selenkahiye near Meskene, Syria', *AASOR* 44 (1977) 97-112.

<sup>25</sup>See J. Barr, 'The Problem of Israelite Monotheism', *Transactions of the Glasgow University Oriental Society* 17 (1957-58) 52-62. Barr also argued there for a pre-Mosaic knowledge of the Divine Name, but as an expression of God's presence and action rather than as a proper name.

ancient written records come from urban populations rather than groups, such as the patriarchal families, who were virtually landless, or such as their descendants living in Goshen. Even when Israel became an entity in Canaan, occupying the towns as well as villages, where they could know and use writing and its products more readily, little is likely to last three thousand years for modern scholars to read, for all except the briefest and most ephemeral documents will have been written with ink on perishable papyrus.<sup>26</sup> However, occasional glimpses afforded by different writings from other areas show what could happen. North Arabian tribes of the first centuries of our era left numerous inscriptions and graffiti in Syria, Jordan and Arabia which mention their gods. A deity whose name occurs in Nabataean, Palmyrene, Safaitic and Thamudic texts is Rudá, apparently an astral deity, perhaps Mercury.<sup>27</sup> In the 5th century BC, Herodotus mentioned Orotalt as one of the deities the Arabs worshipped (Book III 8), and that name is an etymologically satisfactory form of Rudá. In 1957 the Assyriologist R. Borger identified the name of the same god in an inscription of Esarhaddon, king of Assyria (c. 681-669 BC), where it is written Rudayu.<sup>28</sup> The god Rudá is well-attested in the early Roman period, Herodotus and Esarhaddon prove his cult existed respectively four and seven hundred years earlier. Notice, however, that nothing is known of him at those earlier periods from documents produced by his own devotees. Had the Assyrian army of Esarhaddon's father, Sennacherib, not removed the statues of Arab gods and Esarhaddon then returned them, refurbished and suitably inscribed, had there been no Greek whose curiosity led him to amass and compile an immense store of information, there would be no means of knowing about Rudá's antiquity to-day.

<sup>26</sup>A.R. Millard, 'The Ugaritic and Canaanite Alphabets, Some Notes', *Ugarit-Forschung* 11 (1979) 613-16.

<sup>27</sup>See J. Teixidor, *The Pagan God* (Princeton, Princeton UP 1977) 88.

<sup>28</sup>R. Borger, 'Assyriologische und altarabistische Miscellen', *Orientalia* (NS) 26 (1957) 1-11, esp. 10.

There are doubtless other cases, a few demonstrable,<sup>29</sup> many entirely lost. The ancient Near Eastern context, therefore, was suitable ground for tribal worship centred upon a particular god or gods to flourish for many generations. Where there is documentation of continuing reverence for a certain deity by the same group at points many centuries apart, no-one doubts the fact. Since examples like that are known, the possibility of others has to be allowed, thus authorising anyone who wishes to suppose the worship of Abraham's God, named YHWH, could have continued in his family until the Exodus. The interval separating those two points in time is little greater than the centuries between the earliest witness to Rudâ by Esarhaddon and the plentiful occurrences of the Roman period.

In Egypt 'Atenism' died with Akhenaten. As the 'heretic pharaoh' had treated the old gods, so his successors treated him and his god. The fact that a new form of belief could become dominant, then disappear so completely, points to a small yet extremely powerful body of promoters, centred on the pharaoh; without his active support no major traditional customs could be changed so radically. The rapid reversal after his death shows how closely the changes were associated with the king, and neither the faith itself nor its followers had sufficient attraction or influence to resist the tide of traditionalism which rose again. Were it not for the chance retrieval of monuments and objects in the abandoned ruins of Akhetaten, the smashed sculptures, the carved blocks re-used as ordinary stones, the tombs of some of Akhenaten's courtiers and material in Tutankhamun's tomb, modern scholarship would be as ignorant of this episode in Egypt's history as Akhenaten's successors wanted their people and their posterity to be: there would be no vestige of the now celebrated 'heretic pharaoh' nor of his monotheistic interruption to Egypt's long-lived religious traditions.

Now Akhenaten was a powerful ruler imposing his new faith on his realm, celebrating it in monumental style and

with great artistry. Were there not powerful rulers able to have monuments erected or priestly establishments having books copied, what trace of other distinctive religious innovations would survive in a form clearly intelligible now? As the first hundred years of Christianity have left no traces that would be understandable without the New Testament writings, so the possibility has to be allowed that in the 2nd millennium BC there was a family, then a people worshipping one God alone in the Levant and Egypt, then in Canaan, without leaving any trace apart from the traditions preserved in writings formed at a later date.

The purpose of this study is simply to argue that there are no satisfactory grounds for ruling out of consideration the biblical assertions about the faith of the Patriarchs and Moses in one and the same God. Ancient Egyptian and Near Eastern history is more favourable to those assertions than many recognise, and the revolution of Akhenaten demonstrates that one man could conceive and establish a new mode of faith. Neither his claim to a revelation from Aten, nor the biblical claims to revelations from God can be tested by historical study. It is evident that Akhenaten had a strong conviction which he expressed in that way, and if he could have that experience, there is no reason why others could not have similar experiences, although they were not in a position to leave concrete testimonies to them.

<sup>29</sup>The case of Apladad is one, see E. Lipiński, 'Apladad', *Orientalia*.(NS)45 (1976) 53-74.