

Ancient History Sem. 1

***"THAT CRIMINAL
OF AKHETATON"***

**Lucas Wyte
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It can be proven, using secondary sources, that the adoption of Atonism by Pharaoh Akhnaton, as well as his revolutions in art, was not beneficial to him or the Egyptian empire during his reign.

Pharaoh Amenhotep the Fourth initially conducted himself as tradition demanded. Like previous pharaohs, he met with his counsellors, consulted the High Priest of Amon on state matters, and worshipped regularly at Karnak. It was not until the second or third year of his reign that Akhnaton began to adopt the religion of the Aton, to which he was to devote the rest of his life. Aton was an ages-old Egyptian word for the actual physical orb of the sun, while the sun god, Re, is a more abstract, spiritual conception which lives in the Aton. During Amenhotep III's reign, the High Priest had begun to challenge the power of the King. It can be believed (Payne, 1966, p. 99) that Atonism was originally encouraged by Amenhotep III "as one means of undermining and curbing the High Priest's power". In addition, as Egypt's empire was considerably large, Payne reasons (1966, p. 100) that, "A universal god, a god that could be understood and worshipped in common by the diverse people of the vassal states, would act as a strong, unifying force, tending to hold the sprawling empire together.". Some scholars believe (Littleton, 1975, p. 817) that "the worship of this one divinity (Aton) lingered among the Hebrews, and became an important part of the religion developed by the Hebrew leader Moses", modern day's religion that has united many of the world's people. However, one can question such reasoning after examining Akhnaton's reign, as it can be found that the adoption of Atonism by Pharaoh Akhnaton, as well as his revolutions in art, was not beneficial to him or the Egyptian empire during the period.

During the second or third year of his reign, Amenhotep IV, without warning, declared open warfare on Amon. The name of the region in Thebes where the Aton temple was located was to be changed to "The Brightness of Aton the Great", and Thebes itself, the current city of Amon, was to become "The City of the Brightness of Aton". It can be reasoned that the devoted followers of Amon may have been offended by these changes, as it is known (Payne, 1966, p. 106) that the Egyptians were "Tradition-bound and tradition

loving", however no evidence states of any opposition to the Pharaoh's decision. Soon after, the Pharaoh commenced construction on a great new city down river from Egypt's capital Thebes. Payne feels (1966, p. 101) that, "He could no longer tolerate Thebes, dominated as it was by Amon", therefore, "Amenhotep's new city was to be dedicated to the Aton, and the Aton alone". It was to be called Akhetaton - his "City of the Horizon of Aton". As his city neared completion, Pharaoh abruptly announced that he was changing his name. He announced that he was no longer to be called Amenhotep, meaning "Amon is Satisfied", but henceforth shall be called Akhnaton, meaning "He Who is Beneficial to Aton". This action has been described as "the death knell of the god Amon" (Payne, 1966, p. 102), for Pharaoh's name had great significance in Ancient Egypt, as it often indicated state policy in religious matters. By changing his name to Akhnaton, the king was declaring that Aton was replacing Amon as the crown-supported first god of Egypt and its empire. Clearly, the adoption of Atonism was not beneficial to Akhnaton or the Egyptian empire during his reign as he began to institute major changes, changes that the people were sure not to appreciate, as the Egyptians were very conservative and tradition-loving people.

Akhnaton dealt his next blow to the popular Amon religion by ordering the Amon priesthood be disbanded and Karnak to be closed. The temple holdings and revenues were to revert to the crown and Amon's name was to be erased from all monuments, temples and statues where it appeared. It is believed (Roebuck, 1966) that these actions were an attempt to cut off financial support of the religion and discourage its practice, however these actions also severely affected the economy of the empire. It has been found (White, 1967, p. 130) that, "The temples ... were not merely places where religious services were performed: they were schools, universities, libraries, archives, and centres of administration and scientific enterprise; they were workshops and granaries". Simply, Akhnaton had announced an order that was not beneficial to him or the Egyptian empire during his reign as he increased the tension already present between himself and the High Priest of Amon, and by meddling with the education and facilities of the people, he disrupted the success and cycle of the economy and interfered with the administration and order of the empire.

Suddenly, Pharaoh Akhnaton announced to the stunned Thebans that he was abandoning their city. He was to move to the City of the Horizon, which was not only built to be a religious centre, but was to serve as the new capital of Egypt. The court and administration moved to Akhetaton,

bringing with them Akhnaton's supporters, their families, servants and household possessions. Payne (1966) has determined that many would have genuinely believed in the Aton as Pharaoh did, while others may have pretended belief as it was preferable for them to do so, as those who followed were rewarded with gifts, tombs and new estates. However, others may have followed simply because they would have found it unthinkable to oppose their god-king in any matter at all. Yet, it is believed (Payne, 1966, p. 112) that the Aton "utterly failed to capture the minds and hearts of the valley people". It should also be noted that Akhnaton's mother, Queen Tiy, and her husband, did not move to the new city and with them remained those, Payne believes (1966, p. 103), "who feared Akhnaton's revolutionary defiance of Amon, and could not bring themselves to break completely with everything they had believed in and lived for all their lives". Akhnaton's decision to move the Egyptian capital from Thebes to Akhetaton therefore was not beneficial to him or the Egyptian empire during his reign as the community's common ordered practical way of life was disrupted and those who feared the new changes were forced to choose between following the Pharaoh or continuing with the lifestyle they understood and enjoyed.

It has been recognised (Murray, 1972, p. 38) that the move "was a shrewd blow to the wealth ... blocking the import trade from the northern possessions of Egypt. The riches of Syria, Palestine, and other lands of the eastern Mediterranean, which had hitherto poured into Thebes ... were now stopped at the new capital", producing economic distress within Thebes and the prevailing land. Obviously Akhnaton could have relieved the crisis if he had wanted to but it has been found (Payne, 1966, p. 104) that "once settled in his new city, he seemed to turn his back on Egypt ... he devoted himself almost entirely to his family, his city and his god". Akhnaton's adoption of Atonism contributed to the downfall of the economy of Thebes and the land, and was therefore not beneficial to him or the Egyptian empire during his reign.

Akhnaton obviously was totally obsessed with his god Aton. He had reached the conclusion, long before the ancient world was ready to accept such a concept, that there was one god, and one god alone, in all the universe. He reasoned that if there was but one true god, all other gods signified nothing and must be banished and swept away. From the City of the Horizon of Aton, a decree went forth forbidding worship of all gods save the Aton. Immediately there was alarm throughout the Egyptian empire, even among Akhnaton's devoted followers. The people were

already in distress as disorder and lawlessness were at a peak. It is believed (Payne, 1966, p. 108) that this was due to the new religion, as "Pharaoh had been so absorbed by the Aton ... Egypt was once again 'topsy-turvy'". The order to banish all other gods deepened this distress, as the Egyptians had loved, feared and worshipped their gods for more than 2000 years. It was these gods who guided and controlled every moment of their lives. White has revealed (1967, p. 130) that in ancient Egypt, "To attack religion was to attack life itself. Religion was not a theory, a thing apart: it penetrated at every point into the daily life of the community". Therefore, the removal of the religious gods and idols that the people loved to worship was not beneficial to Akhnaton or the Egyptian empire during his reign as the Egyptians were now forced to accept a new life without any sense of direction or purpose, adding to the distress and disorder already begun by the Pharaoh's religion.

The decree that banned worship of all gods save the Aton stirred up the priests of Amon and the priests of other gods. They began to wander unfrocked among the byways, elevating hostility against the 'heretic' who ruled Egypt. Roebuck has recognised (1966, p. 86) that, "The concepts of Aton were too difficult and too strange for ordinary men to understand; and ... they could not forget Amon and their old local gods". Payne also recognised (1966, p. 112) that the Egyptians "wanted the freedom to worship their old gods". Therefore, the indication is that the Egyptian people dared to ignore Akhnaton's order and worshipped their familiar gods in secret, while being encouraged by the priests that wished to overthrow the Pharaoh to do so. It is obvious that the adoption of Aton as the one god by Akhnaton was not beneficial to Akhnaton or the Egyptian empire during his reign as the order to worship only Aton prompted people to defy their Pharaoh and once again the priests of the various religions were gaining power.

For nearly 2000 years, strict artistic rules had been placed on the drawing of human beings, especially Pharaoh. As the royal patron of art, Akhnaton was able to foster an artistic revolution, breaking the traditional rules governing the painting or sculpting of himself. Pharaoh ordered that no longer was he to be painted in standard poses, nor was he to be shown to tower over the people he governed. In addition, he insisted that artists paint him "warts and all", as he was, and that he was to be painted and sculpted as he went about his daily tasks and pleasures. From then on, all of Egypt could see their god-king in homely, little scenes such as lounging in the

garden or playing with one of his daughters on his knee. It was a "refreshing and naturalistic form of art" (Payne, 1966, p. 106), however, in tradition-loving Egypt, it was not welcomed openly. Roebuck (1966, p. 85) saw the new reflections of the Pharaoh in paint and stone as "a complete reversal of the stereotype of the Pharaoh which had characterised Egyptian art for centuries". The Egyptian people needed to think of their Pharaoh as awesome and powerful, remote from society and Payne feels (1966, pp. 106-107) that Akhnaton made "a grave political mistake" and that his revolutionary changes in traditional art "seriously diminished his stature in people's eyes - and even caused them to ridicule him slyly behind his back". Akhnaton's revolutions in the artistic 'world' were not beneficial to him or the Egyptian empire during his reign, as he diminished his stature and authority in the people's eyes by once again defying tradition and portraying himself without a sense of power or awe.

Finally, Akhnaton was obsessively worshipping Aton and worldly affairs did not interest him, as there was no place in his religion for war and violence and as a result Egypt's north Syrian possessions were being invaded by Aziru and the Hitites. The letters from Pharaoh's Syrian and Palestinian administrators "set forth with painful clearness the downfall of Egyptian power" (Murray, 1972, p. 39). The letters became increasingly urgent in demands for help and assistance, giving warning that unless help was sent "the land of my lord the King will be lost" (Murray, 1972, p. 39). It has not been determined whether Akhnaton actually saw the letters or not, yet in either case, he took no action regarding his empire's pleas for help. The result of the invasion is also not known, but it is clear that the adoption of Atonism did not benefit Akhnaton or the Egyptian empire during his reign, as the religion did not allow the Pharaoh to govern his empire satisfactorily in times of emergency or to provide defence against invading civilisations.

It has been proven by the disruption of administration and the economy, the altering of the community's ordered way of life and sense of direction and purpose, the limitations on the efficiency of the pharaoh's governing, the forcing of the people to choose between the Pharaoh and 'sensible' traditions, the loss of stature and authority by artistically portraying a lack of power and awe; that the adoption of Atonism by Pharaoh Akhnaton, as well as his revolutions in art, was not beneficial to him or the Egyptian empire during his reign.

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