



(Above: Limestone relief depicting Akhenaten from the Royal Tomb at Amarna. Egyptian Antiquities Service 1891)

## **A Vine out of Egypt and the Queer Roots of Western Monotheism**

Pastor Steve  
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Akhenaten was an Egyptian Pharaoh some scholars have called the “*first individual*” in human history<sup>1</sup>. His individuality is evident in the way he broke with so many aspects of the tradition bound society of ancient Egypt. He is noted within the history of ancient Egypt for abolishing the older polytheistic Egyptian cults, especially the cult of Amun at Thebes in favor of his “One True God” who was named Aten. Akhenaten is also credited with the reinvention of Egyptian art. This took the form of liberation from the traditional linear mechanical depiction of formal ritual activity. Under Akhenaten, Egyptian art turned instead toward naturalism and toward the representation of human emotion and affection. This shift in Egyptian art is known as the Amarna period, named for the city where Akhenaten lived, a city devoted to the worship of Aten. Akhenaten ruled Egypt from 1353 to 1336 BCE and is widely appreciated as the “father of monotheism”. Sigmund Freud, in his book Moses and Monotheism, (1939) argues that

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<sup>1</sup> James Henry Breasthead, “Ikhnaton, the Religious Revolutionary” Chapter 6 of B. Bury et al. Cambridge Ancient History, vol. 2.

Akhenaten was the spiritual mentor of Moses and the originator of Hebrew monotheism. Freud's view has not found wide acceptance because he challenges the widely held social narrative of Orthodox Judaism.

After Akhenaten died, his heresy which denied the existence of all other gods except Aten would be expunged from Egyptian history by future leaders. The very name of Akhenaten would be cut off of his monuments and his monuments shattered. This was all part of a reactionary return to the older traditions shaped by the older quasi-monotheistic cult of Amun. Amun worship was different in that it allowed for and even supported worship of the lesser gods. Amun was the king of gods, not the only true God.

Scholarship of ancient Egypt is unanimous in the observation that Akhenaten was strange in comparison with other pharaohs. None of the scholarly depictions of Akhenaten work from the assumption that he was just another one of the boys in the history of Egyptian kings.<sup>2</sup> He did not make war, even when his vassal states were under attack. He did not hunt lions or elephants, a favorite pass time for other pharaohs. He is frequently depicted in informal and affectionate poses with his daughters. Many pages have been written in the history of Egyptology aimed at explaining Akhenaten's physical "deformity." This deformity was the way Victorian and Edwardian Egyptologists as well as later scholars chose to see the fact that Akhenaten is frequently represented as female. These scholars of the last century simply lacked the emotional vocabulary required to accept and to plainly depict the idea of "*queerness*." The possibility that Akhenaten was female is

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<sup>2</sup> See [Akhenaten Pharaoh of Egypt, a new study by Cyril Aldred](#). New York, McGraw-Hill, 1968.

categorically excluded from popular scholarship based on the fact that he was married to Nefertiti, a woman who has been accepted by the public, especially in Victorian times, as the very paragon of female beauty. His feminine character has also been excluded by the fact that Nefertiti bore several daughters and at least one son. The Victorian and Edwardian Egyptologists could not conceive of the idea of surrogate parenting. I have chosen to use the word “*queer*” to describe such an important historic figure in order to propose that *queerness* provides an antidote to the historically destructive inclinations of hetero-orthodox-patriarchy. My thesis here is that the roots of Western monotheistic religion and all its subsequent violent patriarchal and homophobic iterations owe their birth, their very existence to an extremely odd set of historic processes. Once these odd processes are understood, respect for the “other” may begin and the wounds of patriarchy may be healed. The idea here is that if we know where we have come from, we can make better, more liberated choices as we build our future.



(Image of Akhenaten from Akhet.co.uk Public domain/ Google images)



(Image of Akhenaten from Akhet.co.uk Public domain/ Google images)



This essay explores the possibility that Akhenaten, the great heretic and deformed pharaoh, husband of Nefertiti, and father of Tutankhamen should be seen through modern eyes as being “*queer*.” This assertion is based on the material evidence of how Akhenaten and his/her family were represented in the art of the Amarna Period, and on the assertion that one of three suppositions about Akhenaten must be true.

- Akhenaten was a man who represented himself as a woman.
- Akhenaten was a woman who represented herself as a man.
- Akhenaten was a woman who was married to another woman and who raised a family with her partner.

I assume that the third supposition, the simplest, is most likely to be true.

### **The uneasy connection between Egyptian history and Hebrew faith**

Egyptian monotheism is an important concept to understand because of the repeated connection in the Old Testament narrative between Egypt and the development of Hebrew monotheism from the time of Abraham through the time of Moses. Egypt figures prominently in the Old Testament through the the third millennium BCE, a crucial period in the birth of Hebrew faith.

The re-visioned history which follows will doubtless be troubling, or even offensive to fundamentalist Jews, Christians, and Muslims. This is the case because fundamental religious narratives must always and at all costs be fixed within their respective received scriptural narratives. Fundamental faith allows for no history outside what is written in scripture. More critical observers may note that purely scriptural approaches have the weakness of ignoring all of human history outside the cultures to which the various scriptures are addressed.

What follows is a process of historic re-visioning. We do not know exactly what went on in the ancient world because we were not there and our records are fragmentary at best. I do not present the following as literal history, but rather as a proposed scenario regarding *what might have happened* in the history of monotheistic belief. My purpose here is not to re-write history, or to weaken established sacred narratives. My purpose is to encourage us to see how our current social situation might improve if this alternative (ie *queer*) narrative should be accepted as plausible.

There is no direct evidence of a link between the early development of Hebrew monotheism in the time between Abraham (circa 2000 BCE) and Moses (circa 1200 BCE) and the development of Monotheism from the Middle Kingdom down to the Amarna period. Other than the common geography and chronology, and some linguistic and theological links, we can't find a solid connection between the faith of Moses and the faith of Akhenaten.

While we can't find a direct connection, we also can't deny the possibility that there must be something there, some connection between earlier Egyptian monotheism and the monotheism of the Old Testament. In an unpublished essay, a student of mine produced a remarkable comparison between the theology of light expressed by Ambrose the Bishop of Milan in the 4th century CE and Egyptian hymns to Amon Re and to Aten from a thousand years earlier.<sup>3</sup> What unites these monotheistic expressions of praise over so much time is the common theme of light as a creative aspect of the nature of God.

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<sup>3</sup> J. Phillips, "Doxologies of Light: The Hymnography of Ancient Egypt and Ambrose of Milan" Unpublished student paper, used with permission.

*“As doxologies of light, Ambrose’s “Splendor paternae gloriae” and the Egyptian “Hymn to Amon-Re” and Akhenaten’s “Hymn to the Aton” each extols the virtues of their God with common language and motifs that redound with radiant praise. Whereas Ambrose’s hymn is at once a prayer invoking Christ’s sustaining power and presence and praising Him as “light of light and fountain of illumination” and metaphorically likening him to the dawn and day, both Egyptian hymns are more declarative than invocatory in their intent. The language of the Egyptian hymnographers praise their deities thus: “Hail to thee, Amon-Re, / Lord of what is, enduring in all things, / ... The lord of rays, who makes brilliance ...” And, from the Amarnan hymn: “Thou appearest beautifully on the horizon of heaven, / Thou living Aton, the beginning of life! / When thou art risen on the eastern horizon, / Thou has filled every land with thy beauty. / Thou art gracious, great, glistening, and high over every land.” Ambrose and his Egyptian counterparts each envision a majestic God, who is the fountain of light and life for his people. Elsewhere, Ambrose like his Egyptian predecessors, also ascribes explicitly helical language to divinity.”*

The Old Testament speaks disparagingly of Egypt, equating Egypt with idolatry, materialism, and enslavement. At the same time though, the Bible also affords a kind of ambiguous honor to Egypt. From the time of Jacob, Egypt is a refuge during times of famine. Egypt continues to be a refuge in the time of Jeremiah from the political persecution of the Chaldeans. (II Kings 25:26) Even in the time of Jesus we find a deep memory associated with the idea of refuge in Egypt as Joseph takes the baby Jesus to Egypt to escape the wrath of King Herod. Matthew 2:14



quotes Hosea 11:1 in stating; *“Out of Egypt I called my Son.”* Another ambiguous reference to Egypt is found in Psalm 80:8 which states; *“Thou didst bring a vine out of Egypt; thou didst drive out the nations before it.”* So the Old Testament both loves and hates the idea of Egypt. Egypt is like our home, both a place of oppression to be escaped from and a place of refuge to be returned to. This ambiguous concept of Egypt might also be connected with the ambiguous and unusual origins of monotheistic faith. Somehow, regardless of how supremacist and violently exclusive Hebrew faith might become, they could never quite forget where they came from and how their faith came to be formed.

**Kepher: It all began with a bug rolling a ball of dung.**

In ancient Egyptian iconography the dung beetle is the primordial representation of the self-begetting creating creator which would develop in the history of Egyptian religion into Amen Ra, or Amun, the supreme father of all gods, the sun. Somewhere in their deepest history the Egyptians noticed that the dung beetle created a sphere and from that sphere her young emerged spontaneously. The ball of dung came into Egyptian iconography as the dark disk of the sun, and the beetle came to be understood as the force which drove the sun. The beetle came to represent the idea of formation, creation, or being in Hieroglyphic language. Later Gnostic interpreters would see a connection between the beetle and the “I AM” of Gnostic faith.

The evolution of the cult of Aten, the progressed form of true Egyptian monotheism can be traced by following the iconography of the disk. The disk changed from a dark disk being rolled by the beetle to the sun

disk of Amen Ra and then on to the white disk of Aten with its human hands bestowing blessings upon human kind.



(Image from Wikipedia, Egyptian Mythology)

### **The Egyptian high god Amun becomes the Hebrew word Amen**

The Egyptian god Amun was an early manifestation of Egyptian monotheistic trends as this god took the form of Amen Ra, the supreme sun god, the king of gods. Amun, or Amon also traveled when

necessary in a wooden Ark<sup>4</sup> which is illustrated above. This name is likely to be etymologically related to the Hebrew root AMN, a family of words for things being firmly established, real, or true. In common Biblical vocabulary, both in Hebrew and in Greek the word for “truly” is “amen.” Amen is likely to have been originally an Egyptian loan word which came into Hebrew in the time of the Exodus as part of a magical incantation. The earliest use of the word “amen” in the Bible is in a ritual curse in Numbers 5:16 to 22 where the two-fold amen is used to confirm the curse of the high priest. This linguistic connection between the earliest form of Egyptian monotheism and the Hebrew word for truth/existence (amen) is important because it shows a thread of connection between two monotheistic ideas emerging from the same place at roughly the same time. This word root indicates that there had to have been some connection, at least a linguistic connection between Egyptian and Hebrew monotheism.

### **What is the connection between Abraham, Moses, and Akhenaten?**

How might the intrigues of Egyptian politics, economy, and religion have been viewed by a wandering Aramean<sup>5</sup>? From the time of Abraham, on down to his great grandson Joseph, and on into subsequent generations, how was Egyptian culture viewed by Hebrews? These were nomadic herders who traveled fairly freely from what is now southern Turkey, through the future Iraq, through Palestine, Arabia, and on into Egypt. Is it possible that the culture of Abraham found its first inclination toward monotheistic belief by

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<sup>4</sup> Pritchard, Ancient Near Eastern Texts, p. 25. “The Journey of Wen-Amun to Phoenicia”

<sup>5</sup> See Deuteronomy 26:5.

encountering the progressed Heliopolitan<sup>6</sup> theology of the cult of Amun? If this happened, the Abrahamic culture could have spread these ideas northward into Chaldea. Once the monotheistic idea took hold, it stuck and it became culturally entrenched into local cultures which would later evolve into Samaritan, Jerusalemite, and Ishmaelite/Arab/Persian ideologies.

We should note here that there is no mention of the Hebrew Exodus narrative within the copious records of the Egyptians. The Egyptians kept detailed and rigorous records of all sorts of things, but we find no history of the Hebrew escape from slavery other than the Exodus story, a narrative with a distinctly Hebrew/Jerusalemite social bias. It may be that the Egyptians made no mention of these events because they took place so far down the social hierarchy as to be deemed irrelevant to the larger history of Egypt. It is plausible for us to suppose that the events depicted in the Exodus came to be inflated as they were used over the years to form what would become the national epic of Hebrew identity. While vital to the Hebrews, the same story at its origin did not figure into the Egyptian scheme of things and was not recorded.

The low social status of the Hebrew tribesmen could be significant if we ask what became of the cult of Aten, the One True God of Akhenaten after the pharaoh died and the kingdom reverted back to the older cult of Amun? Most Egyptian history simply assumes that Aten worship vanished entirely with the death of Akhenaten and the destruction of her monuments. Might Aten worship have continued at some lower social status, under the radar so to speak, once the power structure of

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<sup>6</sup> We use this term to describe both the grandiose cosmopolitan materialism of Egypt in the Middle Kingdom and the awesome impression of the city of the Sun, Heliopolis. What sort of impression might this progressed culture and its monotheistic belief system have had on a nomadic herder from Aramea/Haram?

Egypt returned to its focus on the traditions of Amun at Heliopolis? The idea here is that the Aten cult founded by Akhenaten might have continued underground for some time once it fell into disfavor. If so, Moses, the revolutionary Hebrew liberator, might have gathered motivation and direction from these earlier formulations of Akhenaten. Once he went into exile, Moses would then have come more under the influence of the patriarchal, Abrahamic- Aramean form of monotheism. The syncretistic result would have been the cult of *Yahweh Elohim*<sup>7</sup> which took shape at Sinai and later in Jerusalem.

### **Conclusion: How it all (might have) come together.**

In conclusion, this is a strange story of how some ancient Egyptians looked upon a dung beetle rolling a ball of dung and then conceived the idea of spontaneous creation and of the profound connection between a bug rolling a ball of dung and the force which drives the sun across the heavens. This beetle became the symbol of existence, of being itself. The beetle propelled the sun disk over the heavens. This sun disk was non-dualistic. It was both dark and light. Amen/Amon/Amun became the king of Gods. Later, a wandering Aramean named Abram came to Egypt. He also came to accept and to make some level of covenant with his own idea of this one supreme God. Abram would become Abraham, the father of nations and would spread various forms of his faith from the wilderness of Arabia all the way through Mesopotamia. Generations later, In Egypt in the 14<sup>th</sup> century BCE a secretly female devotee of Amun would become Pharaoh. He/She would focus on this faith to the exclusion of all others. This follower of Amun would re-name her God Aten. She would become Akhenaten,

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<sup>7</sup> These Hebrew words are usually translated as "LORD God."

the man-woman, queer leader of Egypt, the husband of Nefertiti, the father of Tutankhamen and the person who would change all of Western history from that point forward. While future generations of Egyptians would revile her and attempt to remove her from memory, the cult she would establish would endure near the bottom of Egyptian society among the enslaved descendants of Abraham. Around 1200 BCE a revolutionary liberator would rise who would find a way to get those enslaved descendants of Abraham out of Egypt. Moses began with the remnants of the cult of Aten which he would later syncretize with the remnants of the Abrahamic faith. This would lead him to crystalize a monotheistic faith of his own which would become Judaism. Along the way, the Egyptian word for truth “amen” would become a standard element of worship throughout all the Abrahamic faiths. Twelve centuries later, in the first century CE, another leader was “*called out of Egypt,*” and would initiate an offshoot of Judaism which would become Christianity. This is one huge legacy for a dung beetle and a female pharaoh who broke all the rules.

While the evidence for the scenario presented here might be fragmentary, this story has the advantage of being simple, highly plausible, and inclusive of the various competing and contradictory social narratives which seek to lay claim to the Biblical heritage of Abraham and Moses.

If we were to accept this strange narrative, this *queer* narrative of the origins of Western monotheism we might be able to do our part to begin to heal the damage done by the violent, hateful, misogynistic, homophobic and patriarchal history of our various Western religious cultures. I close this essay with a note about the one idea about which there has been common agreement recently between the leaders of

the fundamentalist Jews, Christians, and Muslims in Jerusalem. What is the one idea about which they can all agree? It is opposition to having a Gay Pride Parade.<sup>8</sup> Is that really the best we can do?

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<sup>8</sup> See: <http://www.cnsnews.com/news/article/jewish-christian-muslim-leaders-unite-against-homosexual-event>

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