



## Review

### AKHENATEN AND THE ORIGINS OF MONOTHEISM

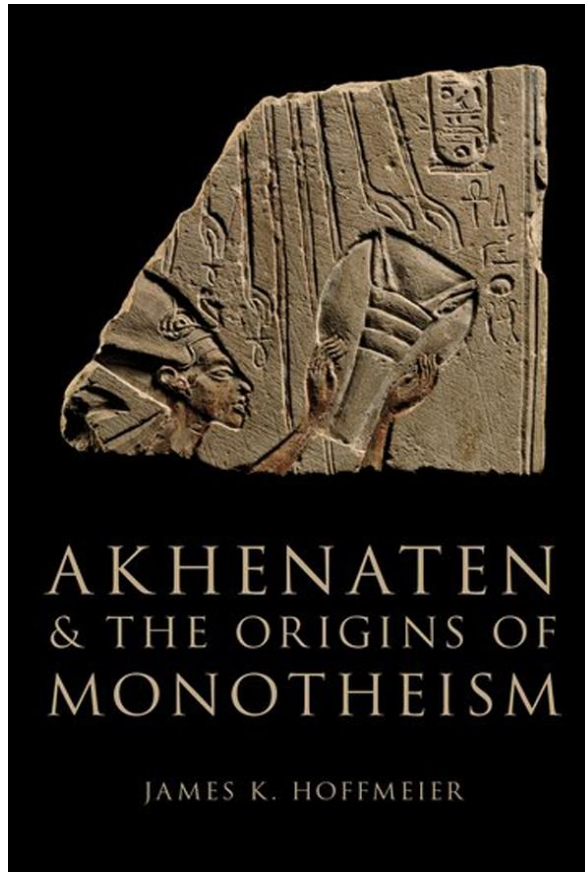
By James K. Hoffmeier

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James K. Hoffmeier's recent monograph on "Akhenaten and the Origins of Monotheism" in some ways is a challenging book to review. The author is well known in the field for his work *inter alia* on Egyptian-Levantine relations that resulted in a substantive number of thought-provoking papers, e.g. his revolutionary article on Egypt's involvement in the end of the Middle Bronze Age culture in Palestine<sup>1</sup> that instantly provoked replies from other leading scholars in the field.<sup>2</sup> James Hoffmeier is also well known for his work at Tell el-Borg, a New Kingdom site on north Sinai Peninsula, not far away from the Suez Canal and the New Kingdom border stronghold of Tell Hebua. The first volume of this excavation was just recently published and stands out as a very valuable high-quality excavation report that many scholars will frequently use.<sup>3</sup>

That said, his recent book on "Akhenaten and the Origins of Monotheism" published by Oxford University Press does not reach the standards of Hoffmeier's previous publications. It is not quite clear whether the book aims for a general audience or the interested layman who wants to read about a very popular part of Egyptian history,



whether the book wants to be a general introduction and reference book that students or scholars might consult, or whether the book aims to be a new in-depth study offering a new explanation of this truly exceptional period in Egyptian history that so many scholars have already discussed, as is pointed out in the preface: "With so much good literature on Akhenaten and his era, why would I even attempt to write another book on Akhenaten?" (p. x).

The volume is divided into nine chapters, roughly arranged in chronological order. The book does not primarily retell the history of the Amarna period but instead seems to aim to discuss some of the specifics of the Amarna religious system. This religious idea is being reviewed in the *longue durée*; in many parts the study proposes connections to the Old Kingdom and Middle Kingdom, the Pyramid and Coffin Texts. Also possible connections to the Hebrew Bible and the formation of Jewish Monotheism are discussed. The thematic focus of this book is thus very much the idea of Atenism, which we can only reconstruct through careful analysis of preserved textual and archaeological sources. In the words of the author, the "main thrust (of this book) is to try to tease out

the motivation for Akhenaten's religious reforms and the quick transition to what will be argued was a monotheistic faith" (p. xi).

The book starts with an overview of solar aspects of the Egyptian pantheon in the Old Kingdom (Chapter 1, pp. 1–31). Already on p. 4 the author simply states that "in order to understand fully the foundations of Atenism (...) one has to go back (...) to the Old Kingdom." While Hoffmeier summarizes several different solar aspects of Old Kingdom religious belief, the real connection between Atenism and the Heliopolitan religious system remains enigmatic and does apparently not go beyond the shared worship of the sun. As Hoffmeier later convincingly points out, one of the key elements of the Amarna period and Atenism is the monotheistic aspect of Atenism, something that is of course completely unknown before and seems to be inherent of the religious system that is discussed in this book. Therefore it is not very convincing trying to draw broad lines of development from the Old Kingdom down to the revolutionary introduction of Atenism more than 1000 years later.

Chapter 1 also discusses architectural forms with solar aspects, e.g., the pyramid and the obelisk. The shape of the pyramid is tentatively linked to the triangular shape of sun rays breaking through clouds (which is everything but convincing, highly speculative, and completely counter-intuitive, as the author himself argued that the sun played such a prominent role in Egypt due to "the piercing blue sky and dazzling sun [that] are the two most striking and inescapable forces of nature in the land of Egypt" [p. 5]). Why the obelisk is discussed in the chapter on solar aspects of the *Old Kingdom* remains a mystery, as does the fact that the sun-temples are not discussed together with other architectural buildings the author associates with the sun, but only after an interlude on "solar elements in Old Kingdom iconography," in which Hoffmeier lists the Sphinx (that is connected to solar aspects via the Pyramid Texts) and the sun-disc (which, however, is almost unknown in Old Kingdom iconography and only occurs from the 5<sup>th</sup> Dynasty onwards).

It is also in the first chapter that Hoffmeier states his main argument for this book: "It is the contention of this study that the 5<sup>th</sup> Dynasty represents the golden age of Egyptian history when the sun ruled Egypt, and it is this era that Akhenaten, a thousand years later, sought to revive, and then transform into a genuine monotheistic religion" (p. 31). This claim is reiterated several times throughout this book, yet without presenting any convincing evidence.

Chapter 2 (pp. 32–61) summarizes briefly the history of the Nile Valley from the end of the Old Kingdom down to the early New Kingdom. It is not entirely clear how this

chapter relates to the overall topic in this book, as the beginning has a more historical focus, while later on the rise of Amun and Thebes are discussed in more detail, which obviously is important for the Amarna period and its persecution of everything related to Amun.

The third chapter (pp. 62–90) is devoted to "The Dawn of the Amarna Period." Hoffmeier speculates about possible chariot rides of Amenhotep IV to Giza and lines of sight to On (Heliopolis) from there in order to explain how Amenhotep IV got into contact with solar aspects of Egyptian religion, which is, however, hardly convincing. It can be assumed that Amenhotep IV didn't need a ride to Giza to get in touch with an aspect that, as Hoffmeier himself argued in his first chapters, is already overtly present.

In general, Hoffmeier is eager to see Amenhotep IV himself being responsible for shaping Atenism (and as such the author is not very critical of the texts; the whole study lacks a rigorous *Quellenkritik*). Discussing the Gebel es-Silsileh inscription, Hoffmeier argues that Amenhotep IV "regarded himself as chief cleric of the new developing cult and it suggests that he likely had a direct hand in establishing it" (pp. 72–73). Hoffmeier also stresses his main argument again: "There is an intentional revival of solar religion that had dominated the religion and royal ideology of the 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> Dynasties" (p. 73). However, again no evidence is being presented that it was *this* period that Amenhotep IV wanted to revive. In fact, given the revolutionary aspect of Atenism it is doubtful that the organizers of the new religion had in mind anything such as a "revival."

Chapter 4 is especially devoted to the Aten temples at Karnak that were erected early in Amenhotep IV's reign. This chapter stands out as a detailed archaeological summary, first of the early French excavations at Karnak East, which were the first to discover fragments of the famous monumental statues of Amenhotep IV, then of the Akhenaten Temple Project (ATP). Again the proposed link between the 5<sup>th</sup> Dynasty and Atenism is stressed: "The Aten temples, with their open courts, resemble earlier solar sanctuaries, such as the 5<sup>th</sup> Dynasty Sun Temples" (p. 113). This resemblance is of course somewhat exaggerated, for surely one cannot link these two highly different buildings only because both feature an altar in an open court.

The chapter further discusses Amenhotep IV's *Sed* festival before his relocation of the capital to Amarna in year 6. Hoffmeier convincingly rejects a thesis of Hodge that this early festival had to take place to show the king's strength due to his physical deformations that were assumed based on the monumental statues. Hoffmeier also rejects the hypothesis of Johnson that this early *Sed* festival might have been issued in combination with Amenhotep

III's in his year 34 (assuming a co-regency). However, his arguments against Johnson (and a possible co-regency) are not very convincing: The author simply doubts that the Egyptians would have been able to arrange two *Sed* festivals at the same time, and he thinks that it is unlikely that the building program of the late reign of Amenhotep III could have been executed parallel to Amenhotep IV's building activity in Karnak East: "The logistical considerations alone militate against the long co-regency theory" (p. 125). This, however, is a very weak argument.

Chapter 5 outlines in more detail Hoffmeier's view of the development of Atenism and the founding of the new capital Akhetaten at present day Tell el-Amarna. Hoffmeier stresses that he does not wish to view Atenism in political terms, i.e., as antagonism against the "establishment (of the) Amun priesthood" (p. 140). This, however, severely limits the possibilities for providing potential answers for the Amarna phenomenon. Instead of exploring a potential political background of the Amarna period, Hoffmeier proposes that a theophany might have struck Amenhotep IV while sailing down the Nile that led to the founding of Akhetaten: "Aten's rays burst forth from the eastern cliffs, showering the plain of Amarna with morning light. Perhaps such a view greeted Akhenaten, and that was all the revelation he needed" (pp. 149–150). The reader is left bewildered to find such fabrications in a book published by Oxford University Press, a publishing house that claims to provide "excellence in research, scholarship, and education." Nevertheless, Hoffmeier places much emphasis on his theophany: "The Aten had, it is argued, revealed itself in some dramatic way to Amenhotep IV, and that revelation began the radical religious shift" (p. 157).

Chapter 6, entitled "Aten Alone" for several reasons stands out in this book. It is basically a catalogue of sites that feature architectural fragments that can be linked to buildings of the Amarna period. Hoffmeier starts in Nubia with Dokki Gel (Kerma) and Gebel Barkal and ventures through the Nile Valley, ending at his own site, Tell el-Borg, on Sinai, which is treated in great detail. This chapter is very imbalanced. While nowhere in this book can a detailed discussion of Amarna be found, fifteen pages in this chapter are devoted to Tell el-Borg and nine pages seem to suffice for the rest of Egypt.

Chapter 7 raises the question whether Atenism is Monotheism in its title, but first summarizes the persecution of Amun in Thebes and throughout Egypt. But although Hoffmeier himself stresses that persecution was first and foremost directed against Amun, he still rejects a political interpretation. Instead he points out: "It is maintained here that Akhenaten's iconoclasm was making a theological statement that points in the direction of Atenism being monotheistic" (p. 203). This is of course just

a claim that completely neglects potential political motivation(s) for this move. By doing this, the author deprives himself of the possibility of providing a broader historical interpretation.

Chapter 8 is devoted to the Aten Hymns, and here Hoffmeier further explores aspects of monotheism within Atenism. The author follows Jan Assmann in that Akhenaten was the first to formulate the principle of exclusive monotheism, again stressing the personal impact of Akhenaten himself and his individual contribution, something that can hardly be seriously assessed. Again his idea of a direct connection between Atenism and the Old Kingdom is brought up: "With Akhenaten (sic) solar religion (...) there was a revival of the old Heliopolitan theology (...)" (p. 236). Still, this claim remains unsubstantiated and Hoffmeier's detailed account of the revolutionary aspects of Atenism alone would suffice to render this statement as highly improbable.

Chapter 9, finally, discusses the influence of Atenism in Egypt and especially the Hebrew Bible. Although many scholars have for a long time stressed the similarities between the Great Aten Hymn and Psalm 104, Hoffmeier conclusively shows that these similarities are in fact superficial.

In general, the book has some strengths in terms of general introduction for the interested layman, but unfortunately several weaknesses, inconsistencies in the argument, and sometimes leaves a very patchy impression. A general conclusion is missing. Also missing is an account of the time of Akhenaten in Amarna. The dawn of the Amarna Age with Amenhotep IV's building program at Thebes is treated in detail, many buildings throughout Egypt are being discussed, but the new capital itself Amarna is treated very briefly. More emphasis is placed on Tell el-Borg, which might be understandable from the author's point of view, but is not helping in providing a balanced view.

It is unfortunate that Hoffmeier rejects political interpretations for the Amarna period. He stresses his theophany hypothesis and does not believe that Atenism could be explained as a political quarrel with the Amun priesthood in Thebes. At the same time, however, he states that, regarding the origin of Amen-Re, it is "conceivable that this religious union was motivated by political considerations" (p. 47). It is very dangerous to see a revolutionary act such as Atenism with all its consequences (iconoclasm) as being initiated by the sheer will of a single person, triggered by a theophany and being more or less detached from the political world. While it is difficult if not impossible to reconstruct the political circumstances that accompanied this revolution, one cannot assume that they did not play any part in it. Nobody would argue that the

current aggressive interpretation of Islam as practiced by the Islamic State in Syria and Iraq together with its iconoclasm came out of the blue. Instead, specific conditions such as the political vacuum created by the United States and their allies in Iraq and the Syrian civil war led to political circumstances where radical anti-western local political regime(s) could develop. A religious awakening of Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi is not a sufficient explanation for the rise of the Islamic State movement in modern day Syria and Iraq. Nor is an asserted theophany a

sufficient explanation for the religious system of the Amarna period, the relocation of the capital and the persecution of Amun.

In conclusion, this book might be interesting as an introduction for the layman, but scholars and students will only find few arguments that are well substantiated and backed with up-to-date literature. Unfortunately this volume does not stand up to the excellent scholarship that the field knows from James K. Hoffmeier as referenced in the beginning of this review.

### NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> James K. Hoffmeier, "Reconsidering Egypt's Part in the Termination of the Middle Bronze Age in Palestine," *Levant* 21 (1989): 181-193.
- <sup>2</sup> William G. Dever, "'Hyksos', Egyptian Destructions, and the End of the Palestinian Middle Bronze Age," *Levant* 22 (1990): 75-81; James Weinstein, "Egypt and the Middle Bronze IIC/Late Bronze IA Transition in Palestine," *Levant* 23 (1991): 105-115; see also Hoffmeier, "Some Thoughts on William G. Dever's "'Hyksos', Egyptian Destructions, and the End of the Palestinian Middle Bronze Age,'" *Levant* 22 (1990): 83-89; Hoffmeier, "James Weinstein's 'Egypt and the Middle Bronze IIC/Late Bronze IA Transition': A Rejoinder" *Levant* 23 (1991): 117-124.
- <sup>3</sup> James K. Hoffmeier (ed.), *Excavations in North Sinai: Tell el-Borg I* (Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 2014).