

scripts, the Bible was the chief fount of knowledge of human history from the creation of the world (which some scholars, using Biblical evidence, dated to exactly 4004 B.C.E.) to the rise of the Greeks.

The theory of evolution and the modern discoveries of historians and archaeologists have undermined the historical value of much of the Bible's narrative. Obviously, then, it is not in the accuracy of their historical accounts that the Hebrews have had their greatest influence on later civilization. Rather, their singular contribution lies in the unique perspective that dominated their sense of their own history: their special relationship with a divine being who chose them as His own people and established with them a covenant that promised them His support and protection. In return, they pledged to accept only Him as their exclusive deity and to govern their behavior, both cultic and social, in accordance with a body of explicitly defined regulations handed down by Him, and Him alone. The "working out" of this covenant in the historical experience of the Hebrew people provided the developmental context for concepts that became central to the tradition of Western civilization: divinely revealed law as the basis of the relationship between God and humankind, and a monotheism founded on humankind's exclusive acceptance of a single, universal Supreme Being and Creator who demands justice and righteousness but is also capable of mercy and compassion. These concepts today remain at the heart of the faiths of the "children of Abraham," the shared monotheistic tradition of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam.

## Akhenaton's Hymn to the Aton

The nature of the relationship between the king and the gods and the religious focus of the Egyptian royal court took on a significant (though short-lived) new direction during the reign of the New Kingdom pharaoh Amunhotep IV, better known to history by the name he assumed, Akhenaton ("Beloved of the Aton"). Referred to by some today as the heretic pharaoh, Akhenaton tried to redirect worship in the Egyptian royal court to an almost exclusive focus on the Aton, the personification of the sun's power as manifested in the sun disk. Many have seen in this an important precursor of the Hebrews' monotheism centered on their god, Yahweh; some, in fact, have claimed that the Hebrews derived their monotheism from learning of Akhenaton's reform during their captivity in Egypt (as described in the Hebrew Bible's

# Akhenaton's Hymn to the Aton

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*Book of Exodus*). The following hymn is generally ascribed to Akhenaton himself and shows some interesting parallels to Psalm 104 in the Hebrew Bible.

From *Hymns, Prayers, and Songs: An Anthology of Ancient Egyptian Lyric Poetry*, translated by John L. Foster, SBL Writings from the Ancient World Series, vol. 8 (Atlanta, Ga.: Scholars Press, 1995), pp. 154–58.

## New Kingdom Egypt

**I**n Praise of the living Horakhty who rejoices in the Horizon in his Name of the divine Light which is in the Sundisk, living eternally and forever, the living Aton, Great One who is in the Festival, Lord of all the sundisk circles, Lord of Heaven, Lord of Earth, Living on Maat, Lord of the Two Lands, Nefer-kheper-rê Wa-en-rê, Son of the Sun, Who lives on Maat, Lord of Appearances, Akhenaton, One Great in his Time; and the Great Royal Wife, whom he loves, Mistress of the Two Lands, Nefer-neferu-aten Nefertiti, living, healthy, flourishing forever and eternity. He says:

i

May you always appear thus gloriously in the horizon of the sky,  
O living Aton, origin of life!  
Arisen from the eastern horizon,  
you have filled all earth with your splendor;  
You are beautiful, great, dazzling, exalted above each land,  
yet your rays encompass the lands  
to the limits of all which you have created;  
There in the Sun, you reach to their boundaries,  
making them bow to your Son, whom you love;  
And though you are far, your rays are over the earth,  
and you are in the faces of those who watch your journeying.

ii

You go to rest in the western horizon,  
and earth is in a darkness like death,  
With the sleepers in bedchambers, heads covered—

the eye cannot discern its companion;  
All their goods might be carried off—  
though they are near—without their knowing.  
Every lion comes forth from his doorway,  
insects and snakes bite and sting;  
Darkness shrouds, earth is silent—  
he who created them is at rest in his tomb.

iii

Dawn rises shining on the horizon,  
gleams from the sundisk as day.  
You scatter the darkness, bestow your sunbeams,  
and the Two Lands offer thanksgiving.  
The Sunfolk awaken and stand on their feet,  
for you have raised them up;  
Their bodies are bathed, they put on their clothing,  
their arms raised in praise at your appearing.  
Throughout the land  
they take up their work.

iv

The herds are at peace in their meadows,  
trees and the vegetation grow green,  
Birds fly from their nests,  
their wings spread wide in praise of your Person;  
All the small beasts leap about on their feet,  
and all who fly up or settle to rest  
live because you have shone upon them.  
Ships go downstream or upstream as well,  
each path lies open because of your presence;  
The fish in the River dart about in your sight,  
and your beams are deep in the Great Green Sea.

v

It is you who  
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Make the  
soothe the  
Nurturer fr  
to bring  
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on the da  
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vi

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and you prov  
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and his lifetin  
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## v

It is you who create the seed in women,  
 shape the fluids into human beings,  
 Make the son alive in the womb of his mother,  
 soothe him, ending his tears,  
 Nurturer from the womb to those given breath  
 to bring into life all that he has created.  
 He descends from the womb to breathe  
 on the day of his birth,  
 And you open his mouth, determine his nature,  
 and minister to his needs.

## vi

The fledgling in the egg speaks in the shell,  
 so you give him breath within it to succor  
 him;  
 And you have given to him his allotted time  
 so that he might break out from the egg  
 To come forth peeping at that time  
 and move about upon his own two feet  
 when he emerges from it.

## vii

How various are the things you have created,  
 and they are all mysterious to the sight!  
 O sole God, without another of your kind,  
 you created the world according to your desire,  
 while you were alone,  
 With mankind and cattle and every sort of small  
 beast,  
 all those upon land, those who go upon feet,  
 Those who are on high soaring upon their  
 wings,  
 the foreign lands of Khor and Kush,  
 and all that belongs to Egypt.

## viii

You give each person his place in life,  
 and you provide for his needs;  
 Each one has his sustenance,  
 and his lifetime is reckoned for him.  
 Tongues are separated by words,

the natures of persons as well;  
 And their skins are made different  
 so you can distinguish the peoples.

## ix

You create Hapy, the Nile, in the Underworld  
 to bring him, at your desire, to nourish the  
 people,  
 Just as you create them for yourself,  
 Lord of them all, who is weary for them,  
 O Lord of all earth, who shines for them,  
 O Aton of day, awesome in majesty.  
 All the foreign lands are far away,  
 yet you make their lives possible,  
 For you have placed a Hapy in the sky  
 that he might come down upon them—  
 Making waves upon the mountains like those of  
 the Great Green Sea  
 to water the fields in their villages.

## x

How well ordered it is, your governing,  
 O Lord of Eternity, Hapy in heaven!  
 You belong to the foreign peoples,  
 to the small beasts of each land who go upon  
 feet.  
 And Hapy comes from Below to beloved Egypt as  
 well,  
 while your rays are nursing each meadow.  
 You shine, and they live,  
 they grow strong for you;  
 You fashion the seasons to make all your creation  
 flourish—  
 the winter for cooling  
 and the heat which ripens;  
 And you have made the sky far off  
 in order to shine down from it,  
 to watch over all you have created.

## xi

You are one alone,  
 shining forth in your visible Form as the living  
 Aton,

Glorious, giving light,  
 far-off yet approaching nearby.  
 You create the numberless visible forms from  
 yourself—  
 you who are one alone—  
 Cities, towns, fields, the road, the River;  
 and each eye looks to you as its shining  
 example:  
 You are in the sun-disk of day,  
 overseer of wherever you go and whatever  
 shall be;  
 For you fashion their sight so that you may be  
 complete—  
 as they celebrate with one voice your  
 creation.

## xii

And you are in my heart;  
 there is no other who knows you  
 Except for your son, Akhenaton,  
 Nefer-kheper-rê Wa-en-rê.  
 Let him be wise with your counsel, your  
 strength,  
 that the world may approach your condition  
 just as when you created it.  
 You have risen, and they are alive;  
 you go to rest, and they die.

For you are the measure of Time itself,  
 one lives by means of you.  
 Eyes shall be filled with beauty until your  
 setting;  
 all labor is set aside when you go to rest in the  
 West.  
 Then rise! Let the creatures of earth thrive for the  
 king!  
 And let me hasten on with every footstep  
 as I have since you founded the world.  
 And raise them up for your son  
 who came forth from your very body.

The King of Upper and Lower Egypt, who lives  
 on Truth, Lord of the Two Lands, Nefer-Kheper-  
 Rê Wa-en-rê, son of the Sun, who lives on Truth,  
 Lord of Appearances, Akhenaton, one exalted in  
 his own lifetime; and the Great Royal Wife, whom  
 he loves, Nefer-neferu-aton Nefertiti, who lives  
 and flourishes for eternity and everlasting.

## REVIEW QUESTIONS

1. What kinds of powers does this hymn ascribe to the Aton?
2. What is the king's relationship to his newly elevated god?

## A Letter from Tell el-Amarna

*Eager to establish firmly the supremacy of the Aton, Akhenaton decided to move his court to a virgin site. He built there a new capital that he named Akhetaton, the remains of which are located at Tell el-Amarna. In the early 1880s, Egyptian fellaheen (laborers) digging for decayed mud brick (an excellent fertilizer) in the tell came across a collection of clay tablets, inscribed in cuneiform, that turned out to be a portion of the diplomatic correspondence addressed to the Egyptian royal court. Written in the Akkadian language of Mesopotamia, most of these letters were from Egypt's vassals in Palestine and Syria, but many are letters from the kings of the other great powers of the ancient Near East during the mid-fourteenth century B.C.E. The following letter to pharaoh is from the king of Mittani, a Hurrian state in north-*

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 you, the king  
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