

Akhenaten: Child of the Sun
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Opening Words – (Akhenaten - paraphrased)

O fool, fool, the pains which you take to hide what you are, are far more than the pains it would take to make you what you want to be. And the children of wisdom shall mock your cunning when, in the midst of your security, your disguise is stripped off and the finger of derision is pointing right at you.

Anthem

“*Lord, How Great You Are! (Psalm 104)*” by Steven Pearson

Joyful Noise Singers

Lord, how great You are!
You are clothed in splendor and majesty!
Lord, how great You are!
You are clothed in splendor and majesty!

1. You stretch forth the canopy on high!
(Your) chambers, Lord, are vaulted in the sky.
The clouds are made Your chariots, O Lord.
The winds and lightning bear Your Word!

2. (The)firmament of earth was set by Thee,
covered by the garment of the sea.
But, then, at Thy rebuke and Thy command:
the waters fled, giving forth dry land!

3. Many are the wondrous works we see:
All that is, it has been made by Thee!
Your Spirit sent, all life is given birth;
Your breath withdrawn, all returns to earth!

4. Lord, Your glory will forever be!
May we ever sing our praise to Thee.
And may our meditations e'er be true,
as our lives rejoice in You!

Lord, how great You are!
You are clothed in splendor and majesty!
Lord, how great You are
throughout all eternity!

Sermon

Who was the very first Unitarian?

Ok, I may have given it away by the title of the sermon.

But *an ancient Egyptian Pharaoh? Really? Why Akhenaten?*

First of all, if I answer that Akhenaten is the first Unitarian in recorded history, we should realize that, like oh so many answers, this is only a provisional answer. A possible answer. A partial answer...and one that requires some explanation.

First: what do we mean by *Unitarian*?

If Unitarianism, historically speaking, has something to do with believing in the “one-ness” of all, Akhenaten may well qualify as, while not a Unitarian in any sort of strict sense, certainly heading in that direction.

Margaret Dulles Edwards made Akhenaten known to a whole generation of Unitarian children by writing a book published by Beacon Press in 1939 entitled, *Child of the Sun: A Pharaoh of Egypt*. In it, she imagines Akhenaten’s first announcement of this “new religion” amidst the celebration of his twentieth birthday.

Akhenaten, who was still Amenhotep IV at the time, rises and says to the chief priests who have gathered:

“You speak of gods. Let me never hear that word again. You have brought here the images of your gods. Let me never see their faces again...there is but one God, and that God is the life-giving spirit of the sun. Aten is his name, and he is life and power and love. He dawns glorious in the morning and fills every land with his beauty. He has made the world and all [the creatures within it]. Aten binds them all with his love.

“There is no other god but this God. Away with all your images and symbols. They must be destroyed. Strike their names from every temple. There will be but one sign of our worship—the simple circle of the sun whose rays reach down like loving hands with gifts for all people. This is our God—this is the God of the whole world...”

Now, how do you think that went over?

While he changed his name [from Amenhotep IV](#) (the name Amenhotep paying tribute to the Egyptian god, Amen) to Akhenaten (which means “He Who Is Of Service to Aten.”), his radical theological proposal earned him a name among many that was quite familiar to both our Unitarian and Universalist forebears: *Heretic*. His revelation had ramifications well beyond the name and number of deities that were worshipped.

For one thing, the style of worship was changed. Whereas people had traditionally worshipped outside the temples while the priests were the only ones allowed inside, performing their priestly functions in the dark, mysterious rooms within, Akhenaten believed that all people should worship Aten out in the open, together, under the sun’s life-giving rays. And at these services, [the Hymn of Aten](#), presumably written by Akhenaten, might have been read or sung. Here is a small excerpt:

You arise beautiful in the horizon of the heavens
Oh living Aten who creates life...

When you rise from the horizon the earth grows bright;
You shine as the Aten in the sky and drive away the darkness;
When your rays gleam forth, the whole of Egypt is festive.
People wake and stand on their feet
For you have lifted them up.
They wash their limbs and take up their clothes and dress;
They raise their arms to you in adoration.

When this hymn was discovered in the tomb of Ay, Akhenaten's chief courtier and later king of Egypt, Biblical scholars noticed the similarity to Psalm 104, written much later, which you heard a version of in the Anthem today. Not only were there similar themes, and the unique comparison of the Hebrew God to the sun that is found nowhere else in Hebrew Scripture, but some lines seemed to be Hebrew translations directly from the Egyptian poem. Scholars are still scratching their heads over how exactly to trace this apparent connection between the two.

And that is only one of the things scholars scratch their heads over when it comes to Akhenaten.

What was it, for instance, that led Akhenaten to establish this new religion; to bravely (many say recklessly) challenge the religious institutions that represented the beliefs of virtually the whole population; to move the capital city from Thebes to Akhetaten ("The Horizon of the Sun God")? Was it, simply, a revelation, a realization that he could not help but proclaim?

Scholars point out that Egypt was very stable and prosperous in the time that Akhenaten was growing up. In this type of secure environment, they say, people are more likely to engage in theological exploration. Akhenaten had the luxury, one might say, of religious innovation.

Others point out that his actions had political ramifications. By adopting the new religion, Akhenaten usurped the power of the priests who had acted as mediators between the people and their gods. He established himself as the primary servant of Aten, *the* mediator between the people and their god, and thus the focus of not only political power but religious power, too.

Still others believe that Akhenaten's very famous wife, Nefertiti, might have been the inspiration behind this religion of Aten, as it seems that she played a very prominent part in the worship services as well as Akhenaten's rule as a whole.

Indeed, there are many representations of Nefertiti in this period, some alone and some with Akhenaten. And the representations of this time are unique in and of themselves, as there are scenes of the Pharaoh's life that would have been considered far too intimate and "normal" in previous times: for example, a tender scene of Akhenaten and Nefertiti playing with and holding their small children. Not quite the image of the untouchable Pharaoh.

And scholars believe that Akhenaten asked the court artists to portray him more realistically, rather than idealistically as Pharaohs had been portrayed in the past.

Which leads to another mystery: Akhenaten's unusual appearance. He has an elongated face and jaw, long, spindly fingers, wide hips, a protruding belly, and breasts. In an article published in 1995, A. Burridge suggested that Akhenaten may have suffered from Marfan's syndrome, which is associated

with “a sunken chest, long curved spider-like fingers, a high curved or slightly cleft palate, among other symptoms. Marfan's sufferers tend towards being taller than average, with a long, thin face, and elongated skull, overgrown ribs, a funnel or pigeon chest, and larger pelvis, with enlarged thighs and spindly calves. Marfan's syndrome is a dominant characteristic, and sufferers have a 50% chance of passing it on to their children. All of these symptoms appear in depictions of Akhenaten and of his children. It is interesting that recent CT scans of TutanKHAMun, quite possibly a son of Akhenaten, report a cleft palate and a longer head than normal.

Yet other scholars look not to the medical world for an explanation of how Akhenaten is portrayed, but back to the religious world. Aten, the Sun God, is portrayed as male *and* female in the role of Creator and Sustainer of all. Akhenaten, they say, in identifying with Aten, wanted to see himself portrayed with androgynous characteristics to more closely match the deity he served, and to have himself associated with that deity by the people.

But nobody knows for sure.

And the questions don't stop there: In the twelfth year of their reign, Nefertiti disappears, drops out of the record completely, no more pictures of her, no more mentions of her...what happened? Possibly, she died in childbirth. Possibly, she was caught being “indiscreet” and Akhenaten had her removed. Others propose that, as the tide turned against Akhenaten's religion and Akhenaten himself may have compromised, she remained faithful to Aten and cloistered herself away among the faithful.

So much of Akhenaten's life seems to inspire wild speculation. Sigmund Freud suggested that Moses may have learned about monotheism from Akhenaten. Others propose the possibility that Akhenaten and Moses were one and the same! There is some evidence that Akhenaten had an intimate relationship with the male co-ruler he selected after Nefertiti's departure. It is possible he later married one or more of his daughters (which apparently was not unheard of for Pharaohs). And there is the possibility that Tutankhamen, the King Tut of Steve Martin fame, is Akhenaten's son.

For those who love the mystery in history, there is plenty to explore in the story of Akhenaten...but what significance does it have for us today? How do we interpret the enticing clues we have? How do we make a consistent story out of the variety of possible interpretations? And is it worth the effort?

While there is much I respect in the story of Akhenaten, I am aware that many in Egypt saw him as an utter failure. His reign was, purportedly, a disaster for the Egyptian empire, as he paid little attention to using military might in protecting interests on the outer edges of the kingdom. There is archaeological evidence to suggest that many people kept representations of the forbidden gods in their homes even during Akhenaten's time, and they quickly reverted back to their old habits of worship after his death. His name, along with that of Tutankhamen (originally TutanKHATen), was omitted from the list of kings inscribed on the walls of Apidos. There was a concerted effort to simply write him out of history.

Akhenaten may have said, as he shared with Nefertiti the heady power of ruling a nation and sought to transform the religion of a people toward what he knew in his heart was true: “Look on my works, ye mighty, and despair!”

But the results of his efforts seemed to end up like the great statue of Ozymandias:

Nothing beside remains. Round the decay

Of that colossal wreck, boundless and bare,
The lone and level sands stretch far away.

Unless...unless, perhaps, there is something that you and I can carry forward.

I don't want to romanticize or falsify, but I think, if we move carefully, there is something here for us. The book, *Child of the Sun*, unashamedly views Akhenaten as a liberal religious hero, but also has this note:

*Adults using this book with children should read carefully the author's comments on pages 109-111 (where she documents the sources used and details what she added) and keep in mind the controversial nature of **any** interpretation of Akhenaten at the present time. Therefore teach this book as one interpretation, not as final truth.*

That is the sort of intentional openness to context and changing interpretation and further revelation that makes me proud to be a Unitarian Universalist.

So with that in mind, let me tell you what impresses *me* at this time about the story of Akhenaten from what I know of it.

I've called Akhenaten the first Unitarian. He's been called the first monotheist. Most impressive, perhaps, he's been called the first *individual*. Amidst the lock-step of Egyptian empire, Akhenaten truly dared to be different. I think that he could not be otherwise. He saw the folly of trying to be other than who he was. Whatever the cost of being himself, it was less than the cost of living a lie.

I choose to believe that, whatever other motivations there might have been, Akhenaten and Nefertiti were propelled by a sincere belief in the religion they espoused. I do see it as a historic touchstone for our liberal religious tradition as they literally brought worship out into the light of day and made it accessible to all. What, after all, is more accessible than the sun itself?

And I think Akhenaten's call for a naturalistic foundation for religion is echoing today, as we seek to ground our spiritual understanding in our relationship with the interdependent web of all life and to honor the source of life.

Think of what you heard from the Hymn of Aten. Think of what the Joyful Noise Singers sang from Psalm 104. Now listen to this, written by contemporary cosmologist [Brian Swimme](#), and receive it if you choose as a Psalm, a Hymn, a song in the tradition of Akhenaten:

"Ninety-three million miles the light has to come, and already we're being warmed up by it...It's just this vast fire that enables all of life to take place here...Every second, four million tons of the sun is being transformed into this light...and if it weren't for that ongoing bestowal of energy, we wouldn't have any life on earth. So one way to think about the sun, every time you see it at dawn, is to think of it as an act of cosmic generosity. It's this vast giveaway of energy that enables us to survive, enables all of life to thrive. We are surfing around the source of ongoing cosmic generosity."

And in that, I like to believe that I hear the voices of Akhenaten and Nefertiti over the expanse of more than 3,000 years, praising Aten.

Closing Words (Akhenaten)

O living Aten, who creates life... . You stretch forth the canopy on high! (Your) chambers, Lord, are vaulted in the sky...we stand as grateful recipients of your cosmic generosity.