

## BOOK REVIEWS / BOEKRESENSIES

James K. Hoffmeier, *Akhenaten and the Origins of Monotheism*, Oxford: University Press, 2015. 392 pages. Hardcover. Price £37.49. ISBN 9780199792085.

James K. Hoffmeier is one of few scholars who are experts in the fields of both Egyptology and OT Studies. In two former books which are, like the present book, published in Oxford University Press (*Israel in Egypt* [1996] and *Ancient Israel in Sinai* [2005]), his focus was on Israel and the OT at its intersection with Egypt in the Exodus event. In his present book, however, the focus is on Egypt and only in the last chapter he turns to the OT and the question of the relationship between Akhenaten's and Israel's monotheism.

There has been written a lot about Akhenaten and his monotheism and one might wonder whether Hoffmeier has to give some new perspectives on the issue. According to Hoffmeier, “[t]he 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 two main theses in this regard are, first, the suggestion that Akhenaten sought to revive the solar cult of the 5th dynasty which represented the golden age of Egyptian history (p. 31) and, second, that the main impetus of Akhenaten’s reform was not merely political agenda but rather real religious belief, based probably on the experience of a solar theophany. It would have been helpful if Hoffmeier had added a conclusion at the end of each chapter because he presents many materials and it is not always clear what conclusions he exactly draws out of it. A summary of his arguments for the thesis that Akhenaten sought to revive the solar cult of the Old Kingdom would have been desirable, for example.

To justify the first thesis, Hoffmeier broadly discusses the solar aspects of Egyptian religion in the Old Kingdom (especially in the 4th and 5th dynasty) in ch. 1, the raise of Amun and Thebes in later times, and the unification of Amun and Re, Sky and Sun, in the Middle Kingdom in ch. 2. According to Hoffmeier, Amenhotep IV came “in contact with the solar religion of On [Heliopolis]” (p. 64) whereby his uncle, High Priest of Re at Heliopolis, might have played a major role (ch. 3). The Aten temples which Amenhotep IV erected at Karnak early in his reign (ch. 4) do “resemble earlier solar sanctuaries, such as the 5th Dynasty Sun Temples” (p. 113). While Re-Harakhty’s name is still present in Atenism, the name of Amun is absent in these temples amidst the Amun precinct at Karnak. The fact that it was primarily Amun who was persecuted by Akhenaten might indicate a rejection of Middle Kingdom religiosity with its centre at Thebes and its Amun worship, and point towards some inspiration by the Old Kingdom religiosity with its center at Heliopolis and its Re worship. However, whether these quite general suggestions are sufficient to

prove Akhenaten's aim of a "revival" of Old Kingdom solar religion remains doubtful. At least, the main difference between Old Kingdom solar religion and Atenism, namely that Old Kingdom religion was polytheistic while Atenism finally was monotheistic, as Hoffmeier convincingly argues in ch. 7, is not explained by this suggestion.

The second thesis is outlined in ch. 5. First, Hoffmeier confronts an evolutionary approach to the studies of religions that has its roots in the 19th century and can understand religion only in natural, non-religious (e.g. political, sociological) terms with a phenomenological approach that deals with religions in a more sympathetic way. Under the title "Did Aten find Akhenaten or did Akhenaten find Aten?" (p. 141), he advocates the position that it would be a shortcoming to understand the development of Atenism only in terms of political calculation apart from any real religious belief. This does not mean that there is no political agenda at all, but the development of Atenism as monotheism cannot sufficiently be explained by these terms alone: "Consequently, one will view Atenism not merely as a vehicle to serve a political agenda designed to diminish the power of the establishment (Amun) priesthood" (p. 140). Rather, Hoffmeier suggests, that Amenhotep IV experienced some kind of theophany, for example, while sailing down the Nile. I agree with Hoffmeier in criticising both that from a modern secular point of view religion often is studied exclusively in political and sociological terms, which underestimates the own power of religious belief and experience (that does not mean that religious belief would stand completely apart from political agenda which would be a modern shortcoming as well) and that the mere suggestion of a political agenda against the Amun priesthood in Thebes hardly is able to explain the religious earthquake of Atenism properly. Nevertheless, some kind of theophany might explain Amenhotep IV's "conversion" to Aten; yet, does it also explain the monotheistic exclusivity? There are many stories of theophanies in polytheistic religions but the mere fact that someone has some kind of encounter with a certain deity does in polytheistic thinking usually not lead to a turn to monotheism. Thus, on the basis of the sources we have, the monotheistic turn in Atenism remains a mystery.

Beside these two main theses, Hoffmeier's book provides many materials regarding the evidence of Atenism, for example in ch. 6, where he gives an overview of sites that witness the spread of Atenism, from Nubia in the south, through the Nile Valley, up to Tell el-Borg in North Sinai. Tell el-Borg gains more attention than the other sites, since it is Hoffmeier's own site of excavation and thus, these pages largely profit from his profound knowledge.

For OT scholars, the most interesting chapter might be the last one where Hoffmeier investigates the question of a possible influence of Atenism in ancient Israelite monotheism. This influence has mainly been argued due to several parallels between the Great Aten Hymn and Psalm 104. Hoffmeier

points on the one hand to several serious problems that arise by the suggestion of direct literary dependence: not only would the respective verses be randomly extracted and used in different order, but also would the time gap be a problem since “the decade-long capital of Akhenaten where the texts were recorded, was abandoned shortly after the king’s death” (p. 249). On the other hand, Hoffmeier gives a convincing alternative explanation for the similarities of Psalm 104 and the Great Aten Hymn by showing that solar hymns with traditional solar language and motifs continue after the Amarna period down to the Greco-Roman period: “This means that later Egyptian solar literature and hymns may have influenced the Hebrew Psalmist, but likely not the Aten hymns themselves” (p. 255). Apart from the relationship between these Egyptian and Israelite psalms, Hoffmeier concludes with regard to the development of Biblical monotheism that

Atenism does demonstrate that a long evolution from animism to monotheism, as early anthropologists of religion of the 19th century maintained and some biblical scholars still advocate, is not a viable model to explain the origins of monotheism (pp. 265-66).

In sum, this book gives a good overview on many aspects of Akhenaten’s Atenism and it provides stimulating suggestions about the historical and religious backgrounds of this outstanding epoch of ancient Egypt. Nevertheless, one remains with the insight that, after all, we still do not really understand why and how Atenism has emerged in this short period of ancient Egypt’s history.

Benjamin Kilchör, Staatsunabhängige Theologische Hochschule Basel (Switzerland) and Dept. of Ancient Languages at the University of Pretoria (South Africa), Strandbadstrasse 1, CH-8620 Wetzikon (Switzerland). *Email*: benjamin.kilchoer@sthbasel.ch.

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