

AKHENATEN, The Hymn to Aton (ca. 1350 B.c.E.)

This hymn is attributed to the pharaoh Akhenaten (ah-keh-NAH-tuhn) (r. ca. 1367-1350 s.u.). When he became pharaoh, Akhenaten abandoned the traditional Egyptian gods and replaced them with the worship of Aton, a single, universal god. The change, although deeply unpopular and rejected after Akhenaten's death, was not as dramatic as it first appears. Akhenaten's Aton performed by himself all the tasks that a host of gods had performed in the past. Thus, traditional Egyptian beliefs about the relationship between humans, nature, and the divine remained largely intact. The hymn offers praise to Aton for bringing order, balance, and abundance to the world. As you read it, consider what it tells us about the way that Egyptians saw their society and their land.

Your rising is beautiful in the horizon of heaven, O Aton, ordainer of life.
You rise in the eastern horizon, filling every land with your radiance.
You are beautiful, great, splendid, and raised up above every land.
Your rays, like those of Ra, 1 deck every land you have made,
You have taken [the lands], and have made them subject to your son [i.e., Akhenaten].
You are far away, but your beams are on the earth;
You are on [people's] faces, they [admire] your goings.
When you set in the west, the earth is dark as with death.
Men lie down in their cabins shrouded in wrappings;
One cannot see his companion, and if all the goods that are under their heads are carried off, they cannot see [the thief]
You rise up in the horizon at dawn
You shine in the disk in the day
You scatter the darkness
You send out your rays, the Two Lands² rejoice,
Men wake up and stand on their feet,
For you raise them.
All beasts and cattle turn into their pastures,
The grass and herbs flourish,
The waterfowl fly over their marshes, their feathers praising your Ka.³ ••• How many are the things which you have made! ...
O God, one who has no counterpart!
You, existing alone, did by your heart create the earth and everything that is thereon.

Men, cattle, beasts, and creatures of all kinds that move on feet,
All the creatures of the sky that fly with wings,
The deserts of Syria and Kush, and the land of Egypt
You have assigned to everyone his place,
Providing the daily food, each receiving his destined share;
You decree his span of life.
The speech and characteristics of men vary, as do their skins,
The dwellers in foreign lands having their distinguishing marks
O Lord of every land, you shine upon them,
O Aton of the day, you mighty one of majesty.
You create the life.
Of the foreign desert, and of all deserts, O Lord of the way
You create their life.
You have set a Nile in heaven, it descends upon them.
It makes on the mountains a flood like the great, green sea,

Study Questions:

1. What evidence did Aradmu present to the king? How did he use it to justify his conclusion that "war is brewing"?
2. On what basis did King Shulgi reject Aradmu's assessment of the situation in Subir? How did he explain Apillasha's actions?
3. What do the letters tell you about the difficulty of maintaining royal control over a large territory in ancient Mesopotamia? ·what strategies did King Shulgi employ in response to these difficulties?

1Ra: Traditional Egyptian god of the sun.

2Two Lands: Upper and Lower Egypt, which formed one united kingdom at this time.

3Ka: The soul or spirit.