Monotheism in Canaan and Egypt — Tolerance and Intolerance
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The Amarna period in Egypt was short lived, and few traces of the cultural and religious upheaval it introduced survived after the death of the revolutionary Pharaoh, Akhenaten. Nevertheless, a major component of his heretical and unprecedented theology — the worship of, and apparently belief in, only one god — eventually became pervasive in much of the world, as it remains today.

I would like to suggest that the mytho-historical approach to monotheism found in Psalm 82 is unique in all of the Bible and parallel to a remarkable Atenistic composition discovered in Karnak. This fragmentary composition was apparently attributed to Akhenaten himself and addressed the transition in Egypt from the worship of a multitude of gods to just one. In contrast to later Amarnan texts that fundamentally negated the existence of all gods but Aten, this composition spoke only of the “cessation” of the other deities. These two ancient texts suggested that the polytheistic beliefs and practices of prior generations were not mistaken, and it was only in the present day of the writers that a single god superseded all others. This exceptional explanation stands in stark contrast to the far less tolerant approaches to polytheism that ultimately pervaded both Amarna-era Egypt and ancient Israel.

Bibliography: