

## **Act of God by Graham Phillips**

### **Book Review, Sidgwick and Jackson, 1998**

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### **Pseudo-History**

Though Egyptologists will disagree, this book is a gripping read. It is pseudo-history, of which genre, Phillips is a past master—he has written several historical mysteries in the last couple of decades.

In *Act of God* Phillips seeks to persuade us that the Pharaoh, Akhnaten, the founder of monotheism, was not really the founder of monotheism because he got the idea from the Israelite slaves who were multiplying like rabbits in the Nile delta. We are, of course, in the fourteenth century BC. Now the Egyptians had the world's longest civilisation with well established religious practices, so Akhnaten must have had a good motive for changing, and a motive good enough to carry the bulk of the nation with him.

Phillips decides the reason was the eruption of the volcanic island of Thera about 1000 kilometres north west of Thebes, to the north east of Crete in the Aegean Sea. This eruption led to a crisis of confidence in the gods in Egypt. The Egyptians abandoned their host of gods with Amun-Ra as the Most High God for Aten-Ra, the kindly solar disc with the rays of light which touched everything in nature and kept them alive—the only god that existed!

Why should the eruption have led to the need for the change? Phillips conjectures that the pyroclastic cloud from the eruption of Thera had been blown to the south east over Egypt, darkening the skies, polluting the air and the river and causing lots of plagues as secondary phenomena—flies, frogs, locusts and eventually diseases.

Akhnaten could not help noticing that the only part of Egypt to escape the problems was the Land of Goshen in the east of the Nile Delta where lived most of the Israelites with their strange transcendental god. By chance the cloud of ash passed west of the Land of Goshen and ravaged the main river valley of the Nile. The pesky Hebrews must have been saved because their ineffable god was the true god. All the Egyptian gods had failed to save Egypt. However, it was in the region where the priests of the old solar god Ra still practised their arts. So the Hebrew god must have been the god Ra.

Evidently Akhnaten concluded that the true god was the power behind the sun and could only be shown as a solar disc with kindly rays emanating from it. The god had despaired from being linked with Amun and other forms when really all he had wanted was to be himself. In a depression he had nearly gone out, then in anger had sent lots of punishments. These are faithfully recorded in the Jewish scriptures, though in a mixed up order because the story tellers wanted to reserve the worst disasters for last.

Naturally Graham Phillips is a lot less flippant than I am in his description of all this. Indeed he tells such a good tale that it is hard to put the book down. Flippancy is a later reaction. Well, all right, it is a simultaneous reaction too but the art of the good storyteller is to get the reader to suspend judgement. Phillips essentially does so.

## **Eruption of Thera**

Naturally, there are problems with the story but the best *whodunnits* are about solving unlikely problems and the good pseudo-historian like Phillips can always find answers or ways to explain away problems.

Phillips explains away the belief that the eruption of Thera preceded the reign of Akhnaten and that the Exodus of the Israelites (if it happened at all) was after his reign. Nor does Phillips consider the truth of the Hebrew bible regarding the antiquity of the idea of a transcendental god by the Hebrews. He knows that the legends of the Hebrews were re-written by the priests of the Second temple but does not stop to consider how they might have transformed the Hebrew gods of their old myths in so doing. Perhaps it would cast too much doubt on the tale to partly chop off one of its main legs.

Even the scriptures which the Christians purloined from the Jews—edited as they were—still make it abundantly clear that the Israelites worshipped many gods. One of the names of God in Genesis is Elohim which is a Hebrew plural which should properly be translated as gods or even goddesses. The habitual practice of making it singular in translation is for no other reason than to keep up the pretence that the Israelites always worshipped one god alone.

The fact that various prophets are depicted as railing against the apostates who have chosen to worship Baal, Shamash, phallic objects or brazen serpents proves that Israelites worshipped those gods. These Israelites are pictured as apostates but it is plain that the practices were widespread. Phillips speaks of the incident during the Exodus when the Children of Israel make golden calves to worship. Aaron, the brother of Moses, the High Priest fashions the first calf and declares:

These be thy gods, O Israel, which brought thee up out of the land of Egypt. And when Aaron saw it, he built an altar before it; and Aaron made proclamation, and said, To morrow is a feast to the Lord.

For Phillips some of the Israelites were reverting to the Egyptian practices to which they had become accustomed. He never considers that they actually worshipped a Bull and the priestly editors had simply made out

that some only of the Hebrews had reverted to this practice. Even the scriptures say that 3000 idolaters were slain yet Aaron who made the first calf and set up an altar to the graven image was spared—nepotism!

Yehouah himself has the main attributes of a sun-god in the scriptures, perhaps supporting Phillips's idea that he was the Aten but he plainly began as a fertility god, the word Asher meaning a phallus or phallic symbol. The invaders of Canaan began by setting up standing stones or piles of stones which invariably are phallic in meaning. Of course the Egyptian religion also had a huge fertility element, so, if anything, the evidence points to the Children of Israel bringing with them from Egypt, the practices of the Egyptians rather than Akhnaten taking his inspiration from a tribe of slaves who subsequently go AWOL.

It seems unlikely that the invisible transcendental god beloved by Jews, Christians and Moslems was invented by a tribe of bricklaying shepherds some time before 1400 BC. It seems quite likely that those shepherds should have been greatly impressed by the wonders of their adopted land and taken them with them when they left.

## **One of Many Gods**

Whoever originated the concept of an invisible god, and it sounds like the Egyptian god, Amun, rejected by Akhnaten, it was evidently not the only god the Israelites worshipped but was, like Amun, one of many, even if he were the main one—the Most High—just as Amun was before his displacement by Aten. Many people believe the holy affirmation, Amen, in the scriptures was really the name of the god Amun used as an affirmation or blessing. If this is true then the Hebrew hidden god is actually Amun, the Egyptian hidden god and Christians end all their prayers by calling on the god Amun!

In any case, in what respect is the Jewish, Christian and Moslem god monotheistic even today? Jews, Christians and Moslems like to say they are monotheists but it is baloney as ever. Akhnaten believed that Aten was the *only* god and went so far as to proscribe the others. What Christian today believes in only one god? Phillips claims that Akhnaten's downfall was because of his rigid monotheism. One god there might be but just try to tell the punters that and they'll soon be looking for some heresy to believe. In the monotheistic religions, Judaism, Christianity and Islam, the old beardy fellow on the throne is surrounded by masses of lesser gods, forming his heavenly court. This is monotheism?

The Christians even added a new category of gods to the masses of angels, demons, and spirits already there—saints! Even though the beardy fellow is all powerful and has eyes and ears everywhere, many Christians do not believe he will listen and prefer to call up a specialist—all the saints specialised in some particular cure or type of person. Christian punters want a lesser god to catch the sleeve of the big fellow. Akhnaten banned all the intercessors.

Since saints, like demons, angels and genies, have superhuman powers, they too are gods. Anyone who believes all this is denying that there is only one god, surely. How can both be true? If the punters have to use intercessors then the Almighty is not almighty. If God is infinitely

powerful then the intercessors neither exist nor are needed. This was once the Protestant view but the power of angels to help charismatic preachers to make millions of bucks is not to be denied! Apparently 70 per cent of Americans believe in angels. Has anyone ever told them they are not monotheists?

## **Isn't Satan a God?**

Not only does the monotheistic God of the Jews, Christians and Moslems have all these courtiers, he also has an equally powerful enemy—Satan—another god! Admittedly, the ministers of these religions say that Satan is not as powerful as the fellow on the heavenly throne but it seems he is too powerful to be gotten rid of by a thunderbolt or a good thought from the Almighty Mind. If the Almighty really has the power to evaporate Satan then he is a sadist intent on causing us all a lot of grief for his own amusement. Why, otherwise does he not do it?

This Satan is blamed for all the evil that occurs in the world, so he is a powerful god by anyone's standards. Christians try to use some sort of heavenly taxonomy to discount all the gods except the Most High one, but all that does is put them lower in the heavenly order of precedence. It is not monotheism.

So, modern Jews, Christians and Moslems, contrary to Phillips's theory, have never been monotheists and the theory collapses. Indeed they are just like the Egyptians before Akhnaten who believed in many gods. They also had them arranged in a taxonomy with Amun-Ra at the top as the supreme god. The lesser gods all had special powers and were given offerings for special reasons just as Christians pray to particular saints before their lighted candles—a sweet savour for the god! Some of the Egyptian gods were aspects of the Supreme God just as the Supreme God of the Christians has three aspects, the Father, the Son and the Holy Ghost. In this respect, Jews and Moslems are more monotheistic than Christians.

What then is the subtle difference between modern believers and the ancient believers in Egypt?

Perhaps it is churlish to quibble over such matters. I do not want to spoil a good story with many more aspects to it than the ones I have mentioned. Moses was Tutmosis, not a Pharaoh but a local administrator over the Nile Delta. The Israelites followed the column of smoke and fire visible on the horizon, of the exploding island, even though it must have actually happened some time before the Exodus for all the disasters to have occurred. Similarly the dividing of the waters must have been caused by a tsunami, again long after the eruption. All of this is catalogued in Ian Wilson's book, *The Exodus Enigma*, but set at a different date!

I really do not want to spoil a good story. *Act of God* really is a good read. Phillips ties it all together with the mystery of Tomb 55, discovered in 1907 before the tomb of king Tut was found nearby a few years later. It contained a strange defaced mummy, a male mummified as a female and left with only one eye on its top mummy case to gaze from. Phillips identifies it as Smenkhare, Tutankhamun's and Akhnaten's half brother,

who reigned for a very short time after Akhnaten. The tomb, Phillips tells us was designed not like normal tombs, to keep grave robbers out, but to keep something in!

And there I shall stop. The book is largely conjecture, you will have noticed, woven into a factual base. That is what good pseudo history is. Its aim is to make you wonder and to think. Much of this depends on historical dating, and dating is still an inexact science. The essence of Graham Phillips' idea might yet prove to be true.

## From Joel F

Mike, I have the following comments on: Act of God. Graham Phillips. Book Review. Dr Michael Magee's Analogies and Conjectures. Askwhy! Publications.

1. Your review seems to flow only from the notion that Jews are a race, which they are not. Judaism is a religion which, in pluralistic societies, has engendered a cultural component. You would correct to call those ancients who believed in other gods Canaanites, Israelites or Hebrews, but those who worshipped other gods were no more Jews than modern day Israeli Arabs.

Well, it flows from the impression the bible seeks to give, and the impression modern Jews seek to confirm—that the Jews are a race, or at least a nation, whatever of their several names one choses to call them by. I agree with you that Jews are in fact members of a religion—the religion of those who worship the god Yehouah, but this change was made by the Persians around 420 BC, not by Moses, so I take the bible's own storyline, as Phillips does, to discuss the particular myth of Jewish origin, Moses and the Exodus.

2. Your statement that the Hebrew word 'elohim' is plural is only partly correct. The word is seemingly plural in construction but it is used syntactically and grammatically only in the singular—there is no singular form.

So we are told, but as the bible was written only after the other gods were rejected to establish monotheistic Judaism, and has been multiply edited since, it seems most likely that the gods in old texts were expunged by the simple artefact of making the plural 'gods' into a plural of majesty (God), as they call it. It seems quite possible to me that Elohim might have been a collective noun even in the Phoenician dialects, for the pantheon of Canaanite gods, referring to the gods collectively as the court (of El). News is a similar sort of word that we have, now used singularly when it was once the plural of a neologism now no longer in use, except in its plural form. Olympus was the court of the Greek pantheon—eastern gods originally—and it is a word that is remarkably similar to Elohim, allowing for transpositions and the different hearing of sounds in different languages. So perhaps we can meet half way in the Canaanite gods being spoken of collectively, and this word then transferring to the solitary god when monotheism became fashionable.



3. Jews don't believe in Satan, hell or, in many cases, even heaven. Torah and Talmud study include only inspecific mention of a general afterlife without any promise of reward or retribution. The Hebrew word "shaitan" that became the name Satan can be translated as "veil" or "illusion". Its anthropomorphization into a devil figure occurred among Christians long after the word's use in the Five Books of Moses. (See Pagels for more on this.)

You are making the error of thinking that modern Rabbinic Judaism is the Judaism that was established in the fifth century BC—that Judaism has not evolved or been deliberately altered. If Jesus was a Jew, as most people, even Christians, will concede, then some Jews at least believed in these things. The Dead Sea Scrolls show that whole sects of Jews did, and my guess is that the Essenes were far more important at the start of the era than Christians and Rabbis ever want to admit. As for Satan, he is pretty anthropomorphic as God's vizier in the scriptural book of Job. He seems not to be as independent of God as he later was, unless, of course, the Rabbis made him less independent to distinguish their beliefs from those of the Christians, or even the Hasmoneans did to make the National god they desired truly all mighty, with no opponent. The opponent of God of the Persian religion became God's assistant in opposing human beings for their wickedness, implied by Job. Early Judaism seems to have been much more Zoroastrian than the Rabbis made it, when they eliminated many of the apocalyptic features Christians had favoured, and that had caused so much trouble to the Jews trying to live in the Hellenistic world they were in.

You will have to read more of the pages to get the drift of all this.

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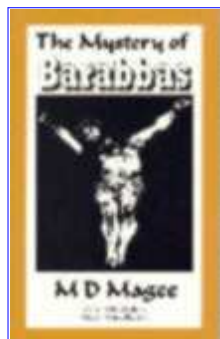
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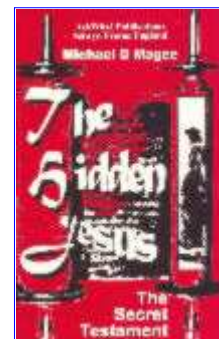
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