

THE SEA PEOPLES' POSSIBLE ROLE IN THE ISRAELITE CONQUEST OF CANAAN

This brief note will point out a rarely-mentioned fact: that the famous “Israel Stele” of Merneptah and the first textual mentions of the destruction wrought by the Sea Peoples in the Eastern Mediterranean all date to the fifth year of Merneptah’s reign (c. 1207 BCE). From this observation comes the tentative hypothesis that the chaos and destructions wrought by the Sea Peoples may have created a power vacuum which allowed the Israelites to take over the land of Canaan. This note is respectfully dedicated to my former professor and advisor, Spyros Iakovidis, who has himself written previously on the topic of the Sea Peoples.¹

It is universally accepted that at least some, if not all, of the Israelites were already in place in Canaan by c. 1207 BCE, because of the inscription known as Pharaoh Merneptah’s “Israel Stele” – which dates to the fifth year of his reign (c. 1207 BCE) and which is the first extra-biblical mention of Israel that we currently possess. However, it is a rarely-mentioned fact that this famous “Israel Stele” and the first textual mentions of the destruction wrought by the Sea Peoples in the Eastern Mediterranean all date to the same year – the fifth year of Merneptah’s reign. I will suggest below that perhaps more should be made of this fact and that these inscriptions, and the events which they record, should perhaps be linked together and associated with the biblical narratives of the Exodus and the Conquest of Canaan. At the very least, it is clear that the earliest record attesting to the existence of Israel and the first indications of the phenomenon known as the Sea Peoples are two processes which occurred simultaneously.

MERNEPTAH’S SEA PEOPLES INSCRIPTIONS

In four separate yet related inscriptions, Pharaoh Merneptah’s scribes recorded that in the tenth month of the fifth year of his reign (c. 1207 BCE), Egypt’s western Delta was invaded by a Libyan army. The Libyans were accompanied by allies – foreigners from across the sea – specifically the Eqwesh, Teresh, Lukka, Shardana, and Shekelesh. The identification of these various Sea Peoples has been debated for the past half-century and more, with

1. E.g. Sp. Iakovidis, *The Chronology of LH IIIC*, *AJA* 83, 1979, 454-462. I am grateful to the editors of this volume for the invitation to contribute to this *Festschrift* for my former professor and advisor and to

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no firm conclusions having yet been reached, though many connect these warriors with areas in the western Mediterranean and the Aegean (e.g. modern Sicily, Sardinia, Greece, and Turkey).²

Hastily gathering his troops together, Merneptah defeated the combined attack of the Libyans and the Sea Peoples less than a month later, on the third day of the eleventh month of that year (approximately 15 April 1207 BCE on our modern calendars, according to James Henry Breasted),³ and recorded the victory on several monuments. Unknown to him, a second wave of Sea Peoples would attack Canaan and Egypt yet again twenty years later, in approximately 1186 BCE, during the time of his successor Ramses III.

Merneptah's relevant inscriptions were engraved on a wall at the Temple of Karnak, on a granite stele erected at Athribis in the southern Delta, on a granite column currently in the Cairo Museum, and on another column erected at Heliopolis.⁴ The inscription preserved on the wall at the Temple of Karnak, usually referred to as the "Great Karnak Inscription," begins as follows: "[*Beginning of the victory that his majesty achieved in the land of Libya*]...*Eqwesh, Teresh, Lukka, Shardana, Shekelesh, Northerners coming from all lands.*" After some discussion of Merneptah's bravery and the preparation of defenses, as well as the Libyans' aggression, mention is then made of the fact that Libyans and their allies have begun their attack: "...*the third season, saying: "The wretched, fallen chief of Libya...has fallen upon the country of Tehenu with his bowmen – – – – Shardana, Shekelesh, Eqwesh, Lukka, Teresh, taking the best of every warrior and every man of war of his country..."*" The remainder of this long inscription presents a description of Merneptah's rallying speeches, the battle itself, and the Egyptian victory over the Libyans and the Sea Peoples, followed by a list of those captured and killed, a list of the spoils which were seized, and a final speech by Merneptah.⁵

The inscription on the column now in the Cairo Museum gives a firm date for the first report of the invasion by the Libyans and the Sea Peoples, in the tenth month of Merneptah's fifth regnal year: "*Year 5, second month of the third season [= the tenth month of the year]. One came to say to his majesty: "The wretched [chief] of Libya has invaded [with] –, being men and women, Shekelesh and every foreign country –."*"⁶

The column erected at Heliopolis begins with the same details, saying: "*Year 5, second month of the third season. One came to say to his majesty: "The wretched [chief] of Libya has invaded [with] –, being men and women, Shekelesh and every foreign country –."*"⁷

2. See now a full discussion in E. H. Cline and D. O'Connor, The Mystery of the 'Sea Peoples,' in D. O'Connor and S. Quirke (eds), *Mysterious Lands* (London, UCL Press 2003) 107-138.

3. J. H. Breasted, *Ancient Records of Egypt*, III (Univ. of Illinois Press 2001) 239.

4. *Ibid.* 241-256; H. Bakry, The Discovery of a Temple of Merneptah at On, *Aegyptus* 53, 1973, 3-21; E. Edel, Ein kairener Fragment mit einem Bericht über

den Libyerkrieg Merneptahs, *Zeitschrift für ägyptische Sprache und Altertumskunde* 86, 1961, 101-103.

5. Following Breasted 2001, III 240-252. See, with additional bibliography, A. R. Schulman, The Great Historical Inscription of Merneptah at Karnak: A Partial Reappraisal, *Journal of the American Research Center in Egypt* 24, 1987, 21-34.

6. Following Breasted 2001, III 252-253.

7. Following Bakry 1973, 3-21; Edel 1961, 101-103.

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The granite stele from Athribis in the southern Delta gives us the date of the actual battle fought in the western Delta – the third day of the third month of the third season in Merneptah's fifth regnal year (approximately 15 April 1207 BCE, as mentioned above). During this battle Merneptah's Egyptian forces defeated the Libyans and the Sea Peoples. The inscription begins: "*Year 5, third month of third season, third day, under the majesty of King [Merneptah]...Re himself has cursed the people since they crossed into [Egypt] with one accord. They are delivered to the sword in the hand of Merneptah-Hotepirma...The families of Libya are scattered upon the dykes like mice...*" The inscription then continues, on the other side of the stele, with a list of the enemies who were killed and captured plus the spoils that were taken during the victory. Included here are mentions of the numbers of Ekwesh, Shekelesh, Teresh, and Shardana warriors who were killed.⁸

MERNEPTAH'S "ISRAEL STELE" INSCRIPTION

The so-called "Israel Stele" of Merneptah was discovered by Sir William Matthew Flinders Petrie in February 1896 within Merneptah's mortuary temple, located near the Valley of the Kings across the Nile river from the modern town of Luxor.⁹ The inscription itself, a long hymn primarily concerned with Merneptah's victory over the Libyans, was carved on the back of a large black granite stele, measuring 10 feet 3 inches tall by 5 feet 4 inches wide and 13 inches thick. The stele had been taken by Merneptah from the nearby mortuary temple of Amenhotep III and has an inscription recording Amenhotep III's building program on the front side of the stele.¹⁰

On the more famous side of the stele, Merneptah's inscription is, as mentioned, primarily concerned with his victory over the Libyans. This inscription should undoubtedly be included among the other texts recording Merneptah's victory over the Sea Peoples, for those texts all note that the Sea Peoples were invading as allies of the Libyans – as has been seen above. However, this monument for some reason does not list the northern allies of the Libyans, i.e. the various Sea Peoples, but concerns itself only with the Libyans themselves, until the last section, when Canaan, Israel, Ashkelon, Gezer, and Yanoam are all mentioned.

The text of the inscription begins with the exact same date as given on the Athribis stele: "*Year 5, third month of the third season, third day, under the majesty of Horus...*" It then continues with a description of the rout of the Libyans and the fall of the Libyan chief, followed by various sections concerned with Merneptah's fame in Libya, the divine protection of Egypt and Merneptah's divine appointment, and the rejoicing of the Egyptians. Clearly, this account documents the same battle recorded on the stele at Athribis, and on the other three inscriptions as well, during which Merneptah defeated the Libyans and the Sea Peoples.

Finally, at the very end of the "Israel Stele," comes the most famous part of the inscription: "*The kings are overthrown, saying: "Salam!" Not one holds his head among the Nine Bows.*"

8. Following Breasted 2001, III 253-256.

9. *Ibid.* 256, note d.

10. Breasted 2001, II 353 and note a.

*Wasted is Tehenu, Kheta is pacified, plundered is Canaan with every evil, carried off is Ashkelon, seized upon is Gezer, Yanoam is made as a thing not existing. Israel is desolated, his seed is not; Palestine has become a widow for Egypt. All lands are united, they are pacified; everyone that is turbulent is bound by King Merneptah, given life like Re, every day”.*¹¹

DISCUSSION

It is clear that the “Israel Stele” should not be discussed in isolation, as it usually is, but instead must be included with the other four inscriptions more usually discussed in the context of Merneptah’s war against the Libyans and the Sea Peoples, for all five inscriptions are primarily concerned with that war. The principal differences of interest to us here are that the first four inscriptions mention the various Sea Peoples by name but do not mention Israel or cities in Canaan, while the “Israel Stele” contains a final section mentioning Israel and cities in Canaan but does not mention the individual Sea Peoples. Why the “Israel Stele” contains this last section, not present on the other inscriptions, and why it omits mention of the specific Sea Peoples, is not clear.

However, the references in the “Israel Stele” to the destruction wrought in Libya, Hatti, and Canaan, including Israel and specific cities, are unmistakable. It is usually thought that Merneptah is claiming credit for these actions, according to the last lines of the section – and indeed many scholars have assumed that he campaigned up in the area of Canaan during his reign. For instance, Breasted said: *“This inscription is not the only evidence of a campaign by him [Merneptah] in Palestine, although the fact seems to have been entirely overlooked in the discussion of the Israel passage. Merneptah was in Asia in his third year, as the journal of a border commandant shows...An invasion of Palestine by Merneptah is further evident from the epithet assumed by him among his titles: ‘Binder of Gezer’, which town he must have captured and punished after revolt...for the mention of a specific town, or even nation, in such an epithet, in a titulary must refer to some definite occurrence”.*¹²

Yet, it would seem, particularly from Ramses III’s inscriptions of twenty years later, that it was the Sea Peoples themselves, rather than Merneptah, who were directly responsible for most, if not all, of the destructions in the Levant at this time. We note, for instance, that at his temple at Medinet Habu in Egypt, Ramses III recorded the following in c. 1186 BCE: *“Year 8 under the majesty of (Ramses III). . .The foreign countries made a conspiracy in their*

11. Following Breasted 2001, III 256-264.

12. *Ibid.* 258-259. See also discussions, with additional bibliography, in I. Singer, Merneptah’s Campaign to Canaan and the Egyptian Occupation of the Southern Coastal Plain of Palestine in the Ramesside Period, *Bulletin of the American Schools of Oriental Research* 269, 1988, 1-10; M. G. Hasel, Israel in the Merneptah Stela, *Bulletin of the American Schools of Oriental Research* 296, 1994, 45-61; F. J. Yurco, Merneptah’s

Canaanite Campaign, *Journal of the American Research Center in Egypt* 23, 1986, 189-215; *idem*, Merneptah’s Wars, the Sea Peoples’ and Israel’s Origins, in Jacke Phillips, Lanny Bell, Bruce B. Williams, James Hoch, Ronald J. Leprohon (eds), *Ancient Egypt, the Aegean and the Near East: Studies in Honour of Martha Rhoads Bell*, vol. II, 497-506 (San Antonio, TX: Van Siclen Books, 1997).

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islands. All at once the lands were removed and scattered in the fray. No land could stand before their arms, from Khatte, Qode, Carchemish, Arzawa, and Alashiya on, being cut off at [one time]. A camp [was set up] in one place in Amor. They desolated its people, and its land was like that which has never come into being".¹³

Thus, I am led to wonder whether Merneptah was simply, in effect, usurping the deeds of the Sea Peoples for himself at the end of this "Israel Stele" and reaping the benefits of their destructions in Canaan. Breasted and others may well be correct that Merneptah campaigned in Canaan in his second or third year, as indicated by the journal entry by a border commander,¹⁴ but the final section on the "Israel Stele" is unlikely to be a reference to anything but the campaign against the Libyans and the Sea Peoples since the same dates are found on each of the above five inscriptions and since Merneptah would not yet have had the opportunity to campaign in Canaan between the time that he defeated the Sea Peoples and the time that the inscriptions of his great victory were recorded. In any event, if it were a subsequent, or even an earlier, campaign in which he subdued Canaan and "desolated" Israel, a different year and date would likely have been recorded for this final section – and it would probably have merited its own stele.

Indeed, if one rereads the final section of the "Israel Stele" carefully, it is clear that Merneptah does not actually say that he himself was responsible for what took place; he is simply taking credit for it. It is all written in the passive voice, without a named agent: *"The kings are overthrown, saying: 'Salam!' Not one holds his head among the Nine Bows. Wasted is Tehenu, Kheta is pacified, plundered is Canaan with every evil, carried off is Ashkelon, seized upon is Gezer, Yanoam is made as a thing not existing. Israel is desolated, his seed is not; Palestine has become a widow for Egypt. All lands are united, they are pacified; everyone that is turbulent is bound by King Merneptah, given life like Re, every day".*

It is generally assumed that the agent responsible for these activities was Merneptah, but I believe that it may have been the Sea Peoples who were responsible for wasting, plundering, carrying off, seizing upon, and desolating Tehenu, Kheta, Canaan, Ashkelon, Gezer, Yanoam, and Israel. However, in subsequently defeating the Sea Peoples, it was Merneptah who could ultimately claim to have once again united and pacified the above lands and who can claim credit for being the "binder of Gezer".

Yurco has suggested that the "Israel Stele" is a summation of Merneptah's activities and triumphs up through the fifth year of his reign, including a campaign which he fought in Canaan during his second or third year of rule.¹⁵ I would challenge this hypothesis, in part because of the date which is recorded on the stele. Merneptah may well have campaigned in Canaan during his Year 2 or 3, as has been mentioned above, but it is not this campaign which is being recorded on the "Israel Stele". The date on the "Israel Stele" is the exact same date as that given on the Athribis stele, again as noted above, which is generally

13. Following J. A. Wilson in J. B. Pritchard, *Ancient Near Eastern Texts Relating to the Old Testament*³ (Princeton University Press 1969) 262-263.

14. Breasted 2001, III 258, 272. See also references above, in n. 12.

15. Yurco 1997, 497, 501, 503.

assumed to be when the battle against the Sea Peoples was actually fought. It would not make sense to give the same date to a stele which is a summation of the events of his reign up until that point. More likely, I would suggest, is that the “Israel Stele” should be seen as yet another Sea Peoples inscription – one which marks the date on which the battle took place and which further describes the devastations wrought in Canaan, not by Merneptah, but by the Sea Peoples.

Moreover, the observation that the five inscriptions discussed above all date to the same year of Merneptah’s reign, and are all related to the same invasion – and defeat – of the Sea Peoples by the Egyptians, leads me to the following tentative suggestion, that the Sea Peoples, in connection with their alliance with the Libyans and their invasion of the Eastern Mediterranean regions, destroyed much of Canaan and numerous Canaanite cities (with Merneptah perhaps adding in additional blows against the region and specific cities before this date). However, the Israelites, whether fairly recent arrivals or inhabitants of longer standing – but still very much semi-nomads in the hill country – were able to survive, even if they had been temporarily “desolated” by the Sea Peoples (or Merneptah) as the “Israel Stele” claims.

The Israelites would then have taken advantage of the Sea Peoples’ destruction of the Canaanites and taken over the region – which they had been unable to do previously by themselves – much as the Mycenaeans may have taken advantage of an earthquake to take Troy VI and end the famous Trojan War. Indeed, the Israelites themselves may have taken some of the lesser cities, or even a few of the larger cities which had been weakened by the advances of the Sea Peoples. The later Biblical writers then co-opted the capture and destruction of the Canaanite cities and gave complete credit to the Israelites rather than to either the Sea Peoples or Merneptah.

Such a scenario, while admittedly hypothetical and speculative, satisfactorily explains the mentions of Israel and the Sea Peoples in the same year (the fifth year = c. 1207 BCE) of Merneptah’s reign and allows one to argue that the Sea Peoples, perhaps in combination with Merneptah, created a power vacuum in Canaan which the Israelites were able to exploit. This in turn allows one to explain how the Israelites were able to overcome the Canaanites – a much larger and more powerful group of people – and take over their land.

As an aside, one could mention in addition that such an explanation would also still allow the Exodus to have happened either about 1250 BCE, during Ramses II’s reign, or as a gradual process over two centuries. These are the two most popular explanations for the date of the Exodus by those archaeologists who do not trust the numbers given in the Hebrew Bible (which suggest a rather more unlikely date in the 15th century BCE, during the reign of the powerful Pharaoh Thutmose III) and yet who still wish to believe that an Exodus occurred.

Such a scenario also allows for any and all of the various explanations which have been suggested for the Israelite conquest of Canaan. These include the following: that the Israelites moved forcefully into the area – the “conquest model” proposed by W. F. Albright; that they were semi-nomads who gradually settled in the region – the “peaceful infiltration model” proposed by Albrecht Alt and Martin Noth; that they were already in Canaan and rose up to overthrow the Canaanites – the “revolting peasants model” proposed by George

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Mendenhall and Norman Gottwald; or that they were a semi-nomadic segment of the Canaanite population who simply inherited the land – the “Canaanites are Israelites model” as per Finkelstein and Silverman.¹⁶

In each and every one of the above cases, the only change to the proposed model and date would be the addition of the Sea Peoples into the equation, for their destructions of the Canaanite cities, as well as the chaos that they created, could have created the power vacuum that enabled the Israelites to finally take over the land from the Canaanites, a much-more powerful group whom they would otherwise have been unlikely to defeat either militarily or otherwise. Moreover, the Sea Peoples, even in losing to the Egyptians both during the reign of Merneptah and the reign of Ramses III, weakened Egypt so much that the Egyptians ultimately lost control over Canaan, which had been under their domination for the previous three centuries, and thus gave the Israelites valuable time to grow and develop as a new and independent power in the region, rather than being immediately vanquished by their much-larger neighbor.

Thus, we can suggest a historically-plausible scenario which fits with known textual information (Merneptah's inscriptions) for both the Sea Peoples and Israel and which might be seen as a kernel of truth underlying the story of the biblical Conquest of Canaan. It does mean that we have to postulate that the later biblical writers co-opted the Sea Peoples' destructions of Canaanite cities and attributed them to the Israelites instead, or, at the very least, “accidentally on purpose” neglected to mention the vital role played by the Sea Peoples which created a power vacuum and allowed the Israelites to claim the Promised Land for their own, but this does not seem too far-fetched, particularly given similar suggestions made recently concerning other portions of the biblical narrative.¹⁷

CONCLUSIONS

By way of concluding, let us simply restate the obvious, but frequently overlooked, observation that the earliest records attesting to the existence of Israel and the first indications of the phenomenon known as the Sea Peoples occurred simultaneously, in the fifth year of Merneptah's reign. It is possible that these are not independent events, although they are usually treated as such in published studies of ancient Israel, and instead were related processes.

To the legendary figures of Moses and Joshua associated with the biblical stories of the Exodus and the Conquest of Canaan, we might want to now add the far less legendary but still anonymous and mysterious warriors within the Sea Peoples – the Eqwesh, Teresh, Lukka, Shardana, and Shekelesh coming across the sea from Greece, Turkey, Sicily, and Sardinia –

16. See previous discussions summarized in I. Finkelstein and N. A. Silberman, *The Bible Unearthed: Archaeology's New Vision of Ancient Israel and the Origin of Its Sacred Texts* (New York, Simon and Schuster,

2001) 97-105, 329-339.

17. See for instance, Finkelstein and Silberman (2001) *passim*.

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for without the chaos and destructions that they wrought in the land of Canaan, and the power vacuum that they created in the area, the Israelites might never have taken over the region and the history of Western Civilization might have taken a radically different course.

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