

THE MERENPTAH STELE AND THE BIBLICAL ORIGINS OF ISRAEL

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Abstract: *The Merenptah (or Israel) stele is a fundamental and problematic datum affecting the biblical account of Israel's origins. The stele contains the first and only accepted reference to Israel in ancient Egyptian records and may suggest the location of Israel before ca. 1209 BC. Virtually all engaged scholars believe the stele intends to locate Israel in Canaan at the time of Pharaoh Merenptah. But the traditional arguments (linguistic and literary) supporting this view may also allow an Israel-in-Egypt interpretation, as this study will attempt to show. A problem with the traditional Israel-in-Canaan interpretation is that it renders the Bible's account of Israel's origins in the land of Canaan incoherent and irreconcilable with the archaeological evidence. An Israel-in-Egypt reading, in contrast, presumes an exodus after Merenptah's time (e.g., ca. 1175 BC) resulting in a chronology that aligns or accommodates the biblical events and the archaeological evidence at every clearly identified biblical site with data. The books of Genesis and Exodus support the Israel-in-Egypt interpretation. If the post-Merenptah exodus chronology is correct, the Bible's account of Israel's origins may be historically accurate in its present form.*

Key words: *Merenptah stele (stela), Israel stele, exodus, conquest, Israel in Canaan, Israel in Egypt, Libyans, Sea People, Ramesses II, Ramesses III, Goshen*

Sir William Flinders Petrie found a ten-foot-tall black granite slab (a stele or stela) in the ruins of the funerary temple of Pharaoh Merenptah in 1896.¹ He discovered that the hieroglyphic text on the stele contained the first and only known ancient Egyptian reference to the people of Israel.

While most of the text describes Merenptah's momentous victory over a coalition of Libyans and Sea People dated to his fifth year (ca. 1209 BC), the closing lines seem to describe an earlier campaign he conducted into Canaan. In these concluding lines is a now generally-accepted reference to Israel, a people Merenptah claims to have violently suppressed.²

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¹ The original stele was inscribed by Amenhotep III (1391–1353 BC). Merenptah (1213–1203 BC) appropriated the stone from the ruins of Amenhotep's funerary temple and engraved the reverse side with his own text.

² For a summation of evidence authenticating the Israel reference see Michael G. Hasel, "Israel in the Merneptah Stela," *BAOR* 296 (Nov. 1994): 45–61; idem, *Domination and Resistance: Egyptian Military Activity in the Southern Levant, ca. 1300–1185 B.C.* (Leiden: Brill, 1998), 194–204. See also Kenneth A. Kitchen, "The Physical Text of Merneptah's Victory Hymn (The 'Israel Stela')," *JSSEA* 24 (1997): 75; and Ralph K. Hawkins, *How Israel Became a People* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2013), 77–78. Compare Donald Redford's dates for Merenptah in "Merenptah," *ABD* 4:700–1.

The most interesting part of the stele's text are these concluding lines that serve as a summation of Merenptah's achievements in bringing peace to the land and people of Egypt. As a recap of his notable victory over the Libyans he adds a claim to have pacified towns in Canaan. Frank Yurco has translated the last two lines of the hieroglyphic text this way (*italics are his*):

The princes, prostrated, say "Shalom";

None raises his head among the Nine Bows.

Now that Tehenu has come to ruin, Hatti is pacified.

Canaan has been plundered into every sort of woe. Ashkelon has been overcome.

Gezer has been captured.

Yeno'am was made non-existent.

Israel is laid waste (and) his seed is not.

Hurru has become a widow because of Egypt.

All lands have united themselves in peace.

Anyone who was restless, he has been subdued by the King of Upper and Lower Egypt, Ba-en-Re-mery-Amun, son of Re, *Mer-en-Ptah* Hotep-her-Ma'at, granted life like Re, daily.³

Virtually all interested scholars believe the reference to the Israelites places them (or "proto-Israel") in Canaan sometime before ca. 1209 BC. The proposal that the stele may also accommodate an Israel-in-Egypt interpretation is not generally considered credible. However, that is the conclusion of this study.

To establish a case for this interpretation of the stele's reference to Israel it must be demonstrated that the traditional arguments for the Israel-in-Canaan interpretation of the stele are not definitive and that an Israel-in-Egypt (east delta) interpretation is equally possible.

I. ISRAEL IN THE MERENPTAH STELE: THE ARGUMENTS FOR LOCATION

It is the location of the people of Israel and the nature of the action taken by Merenptah against them that is a fundamental and problematic datum that must be addressed in any study of Israel's biblical origins. Scholars have employed two broad lines of reasoning to discern from the text the apparent location of the Israelites at the time of Merenptah's action.

These lines of reasoning are linguistic (focusing of the hieroglyphic classifiers associated with the Israel term in the text) and literary (which focuses on an apparent relationship between the several toponyms in the final lines of the stele that mention Israel).

A source of information rarely factored into the discussion of the stele is the biblical record. This is because few scholars outside the evangelical community

³Frank Yurco, "3,200-Year-Old Picture of Israelites Found in Egypt," *BAR* 16.5 (1990): 27. His "poetic versification" was accomplished with the advice of Dr. Edward F. Wente of the University of Chicago. Compare James Hoffmeier's translation in *COS* 2.6.41.

consider the relevant biblical texts to be a historically reliable account of Israel's origins in Canaan. One of the reasons for marginalizing the Bible's testimony is the apparent fact that its account of Israel's appearance in the land is contradicted by much archaeological evidence.

It will be suggested here that this contradiction between the biblical narrative of the exodus/conquest and the archaeological evidence is only apparent: it is the result of dating the biblical exodus/conquest to the wrong century.

The 13th- and 15th-century BC reconstructions of Israel's origins in Canaan assume the Israel-in-Canaan interpretation of Merenptah's stele. But both reconstructions encounter significant conflict with the archaeological evidence. A 12th-century BC exodus/conquest, on the other hand, proposes an Israel-in-Egypt interpretation of the stele; the resulting chronology consistently aligns the biblical text and the archaeological evidence at biblical sites.

With the reader's indulgence this article will examine the stele and the time of Merenptah by assuming (for argument's sake) that the Bible's accounts of the exodus/wandering/conquest are historically accurate and continuous—i.e. when these events are dated to the 12th century BC. (Evidence supporting this assumption can be highlighted only briefly.) This article will argue that if the narratives of Exodus through Joshua are accurate records, Israel was necessarily in Egypt in the time of Merenptah.

Before presenting a scenario employing the biblical witness, first consider the traditional scholarly arguments for locating Israel in Canaan, based on the text of Merenptah's stele.

1. *The linguistic argument: the throw stick.* Perhaps the chief argument in mainstream scholarship against a 12th-century BC exodus/conquest reconstruction (as proposed here) hinges upon the significance of the “throw stick,” a hieroglyphic classifier element modifying the term for Israel in Merenptah's stele.⁴ Other toponyms in the final lines of the stele are designated as foreign lands/city-states as indicated by the throw stick (foreign) along with the hill-country symbol (land/city-state) ($\overline{\text{W}}$).

The Israel classifiers depict a seated man and woman (a people) with three strokes below (thus plural), $\overline{\text{I}} \overline{\text{M}} \overline{\text{N}}$. The people classifier is prefaced with the throw stick ($\overline{\text{I}}$) which indicates that the Israelites were foreigners or non-Egyptian. The

⁴ See Michael G. Hasel, “Merneptah's Reference to Israel: Critical Issues for the Origin of Israel,” in *Critical Issues in Early Israelite History* (ed. Richard S. Hess, Gerald A. Klingbeil, and Paul J. Ray Jr.; BBRSup 3; Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2008), 53–54. He says the classifiers for Israel identify the Israelites as a socio-ethnic entity that says nothing concerning whether this people was settled or semi-nomadic. Some groups so cited in Egyptian texts were sedentary and others were not. This is an issue for Hasel who believes the reference to Israel's “seed” is literal grain, indicating they were sedentary with an agricultural base. (It should be noted that among some evangelical scholars the *chief* argument against a 12th-century exodus/conquest arises from the interpretation of several biblical passages [e.g. 1 Kgs 6:1; Judg 6:1–10:3; 1 Chr 6:31–37].) A divergence to address these passages would require a much larger study only to review issues that are well established at an impasse for the 1 Kgs 6:1 passage. The reader may wish to consult an exchange between B. Wood and J. Hoffmeier in *JETS* 50.2 (2007) and B. Woods, “The Rise and Fall of the 13th-Century Exodus-Conquest Theory,” *JETS* 48.3 (2005): 475–89.

absence of the hill country symbol means they were landless—i.e. did not lay claim to a homeland.

According to Egyptologist David Falk, if the Israelites had been resident within Egypt, the throw stick (the first element in the classifier) should have been absent.⁵ This is the primary argument advanced by Egyptologists that the Israelites were *not* in Egypt in the time of Merenptah. But, as will be argued here, the traditional enclave of the Israelites was in a region of the eastern Egyptian delta (Goshen/Wadi Tumilat) that Merenptah's scribes considered foreign.

Thomas Schneider says the Egyptian comprehensive term for “foreigners” (*ḥstjw*) was never used for peoples of foreign origin in an Egyptian socio-economic context. The term was reserved exclusively for foreigners *outside* of Egypt who were devoid of any opportunity of acculturation.⁶

Schneider believes people entering Egypt for permanent residence were no longer part of the world beyond its boundaries—which was seen as chaotic and potentially threatening. To enter Egypt was to adopt an Egyptian ideological perspective oriented to the divine pharaoh, such that the modern label of “foreigner” lost its applicability. He says, “absent vs. accomplished acculturation is the decisive pair of opposites that served as the Egyptian criterion for considering an individual a foreigner or an Egyptian.” Ethnic groups such as Nubians, Libyans, and Asiatics who assimilated into the Egyptian culture were not designated as “foreigners.” Any ethnic designation for these people referenced only their origins—not their citizenship.⁷ Schneider's emphasis on “acculturation” should be especially noted.

In contrast, the books of Genesis and Exodus describe irreconcilable cultural differences between the pastoral Israelites and the Egyptian population. Joseph counseled his father Jacob to say (when asked his occupation by the pharaoh), “Your servants have been keepers of livestock from our youth even until now, both we and our fathers,⁸ in order that you may dwell in the land of Goshen, for every shepherd is an abomination to the Egyptians” (Gen 46:34).

The Israelites were distinctive from the Egyptians not only in occupation and lifestyle but in other non-material cultural aspects (particularly theology). In the time of the plagues the exasperated pharaoh of the exodus offered a concession to

⁵ Personal communication 11/23/17.

⁶ This argument applies to *urban* Asiatics who settled in the delta (particularly before the expulsion of the Hyksos and the rise of the 18th Dynasty). However, there appears to be a distinction between urban Asiatics and *pastoralist* Asiatics (who sojourned in the Wadi Tumilat). Pastoralists arrived with no apparent intention or opportunity of melding into Egyptian society. See Bettina Bader, “Cultural Mixing in Egyptian Archaeology: The ‘Hyksos’ as a Case Study,” *Archaeological Review from Cambridge* 28 (2013): 263, 277. Studies like this focus on urban Asiatics, with little or no consideration of pastoralists east of the Pelusiac Nile. James Hoffmeier cites a mid-18th-century BC papyrus that lists the names of about 40 Semitic foreigners who worked on the estate of an Egyptian landowner. The classifiers associated with their names identify them as “Semitic foreigners”—see *The Immigration Crisis: Immigrants, Aliens, and the Bible* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2009), 42.

⁷ Thomas Schneider, “Foreigners in Egypt: Archaeological Evidence and Cultural Context,” in *Egyptian Archaeology* (ed. Willeke Wendrich; Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), 144. Cf. Stuart Tyson Smith, “Ethnicity and Culture,” in *The Egyptian World* (ed. Toby Wilkinson; Routledge Handbooks Online, 2013), 218, 239; doi:10.4324/9780203820933.

the Israelites: he gave them permission to sacrifice to Yahweh within the land. But Moses said, “It would not be right to do so, for the offerings we shall sacrifice to the LORD our God are an abomination to the Egyptians. If we sacrifice offerings abominable to the Egyptians before their eyes, will they not stone us?” (Exod 8:26).⁸ The Bible clearly specifies that the Israelites (with the qualified exceptions of Joseph and Moses) were not acculturated into the Egyptian worldview nor did they worship their gods.

The question must be posed again as to whether the throw-stick classifier defining Israel as “foreign” is consistent with the thesis of this study that Israel was “in Egypt” in the time of Merenptah. If “foreign” can also be understood as culturally “non-Egyptian,” an additional nuance may be suggested.

So, did Merenptah’s scribes correctly classify the Israelites on the stele as “foreign/non-Egyptian” because the Israelites were long established in a foreign land (Goshen) to which the Israelites could not lay claim (i.e. “landless”)? Were they not regarded also as non-Egyptian because they were culturally insoluble in the Egyptian culture (i.e. “foreign”)?

a. *The Israelites: foreigners in a foreign land.* It is evident from records of the second millennium BC that the Egyptians did not consider the land east of the Pelusiac Nile to be part of Egypt. This eastern land was considered a frontier area; it was covered with vast swamps and marshes. The region afforded good basic conditions for animal breeding but was not suitable for intensive cultivation—and thus not of primary economic interest to the Egyptians.

Just as they laid no sovereign claim to the Sinai Peninsula, so the Egyptians did not consider the area east of the Pelusiac to be part of the homeland.⁹ The only habitable geographic region of the delta east of the Pelusiac, apparently, was the Wadi Tumilat, a low-lying west-to-east drainage of an ancient Nile distributary.

⁸ All Bible quotations are from the ESV.

⁹ The location of *Pi-Ramesse* on the east bank of the Pelusiac from the time of Ramesses II was at the traditional periphery of Egypt featuring trans-boundary dynamics projecting an empire to the north, according to T. Schneider, “Foreigners in Egypt,” 146–47.

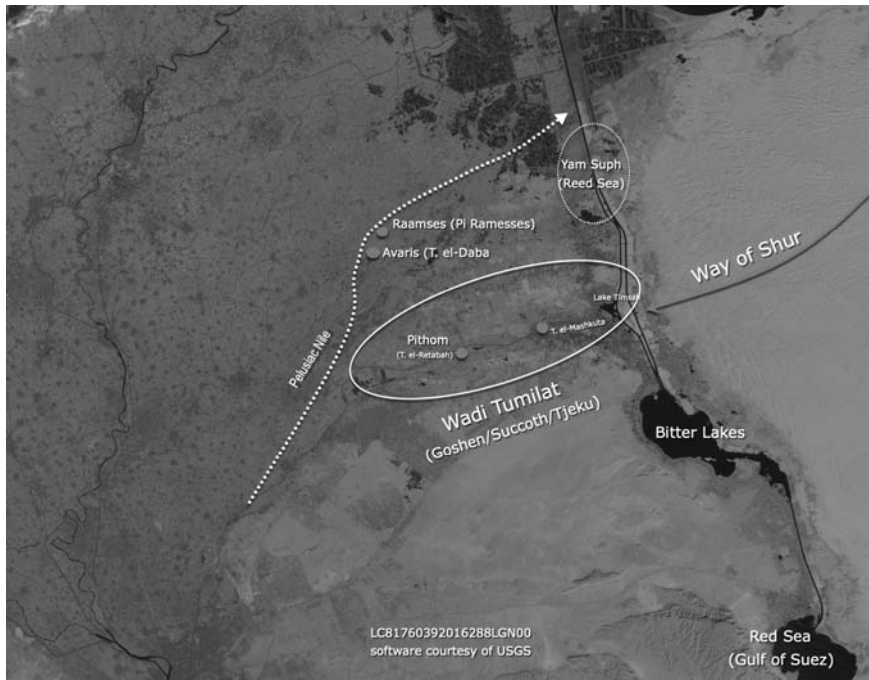


Fig. 1. The traditional enclave of the Israelites in the Wadi Tumilat, a “foreign land”

The wadi was a transportation corridor serving as the second (southern) route into Egypt from the east—via the Way of Shur. It served as a military buffer zone where few (if any) non-military Egyptians lived in the Middle and Late Bronze ages. The absence of an assertive territorial claim on this land may account for the attitude of neighboring non-Egyptians in the second millennium BC. Foreign pastoralists viewed this part of the delta as a transit zone and pasturage to which they felt they had right of access from earliest times. According to Herman Kees, the Egyptians considered this area to be a land of strangers during the Bronze Ages.¹⁰

However, these strangers often were a plague upon Egyptians in the delta who lived west of the Pelusiac Nile in the early second millennium BC. The depredations of these lawless pastoralists (“bedouin”) finally prompted the construction of the Walls of the Ruler. This apparently occurred during the reign of Amenemhat I (1973–1944 BC) of the 12th Dynasty.¹¹ The Wall(s) had several elements including

¹⁰ Hermann Kees, *Ancient Egypt: A Cultural Topography* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1961), 28–29. Rafael Giveon, *Les bédouïns Shosou des documents égyptiens* (DMOA 18; Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1971), 237, agrees.

¹¹ See Nili Shupak, “The Prophecies of Neferti (1.45),” *COS* 1.45.106–10. Egyptian dynastic dates in this paper are those of Kenneth Kitchen, “Regnal and Genealogical Data of Ancient Egypt,” in *The Synchronisation of Civilisations in the Eastern Mediterranean in the Second Millennium BC* (ed. Manfred Bietak; Vienna: Verlag der Österreichischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, 2000), 39–52.

canals, natural waterways, swamps, waterless desert, and key military installations. The objective was to control access to the eastern delta by foreigners.¹²

The biblical land of Goshen is identified with the Wadi Tumilat. This region is referred to as *Tjeku* in Papyrus Anastasi VI.¹³ The classifiers for *Tjeku* include the throw stick along with the “hill-country” element, thus designating this area as a foreign land/region.

Manfred Bietak believes *Tjeku* was a region characterized by the extended presence of (pastoral) Asiatics—as reflected in Semitic loanwords in Egyptian documents associated with the Wadi Tumilat. These adopted terms in Egyptian texts can be viewed as evidence that this “borderland” had been settled by a Semitic-speaking population.¹⁴

Given multiple lines of evidence, Bietak concludes that the Israelite sojourn in this region must date to the late Ramesside Period (i.e. the 20th Dynasty) and that the Wadi Tumilat fulfills in every respect the model of the biblical land of Goshen.¹⁵ The Israelites were identified with this area throughout their time in Egypt. This was the land in which they sojourned in the time of Abraham and the region in which they settled in the time of Jacob. It is also where they maintained ownership of their flocks and herds during their enslavement leading up to the time of the exodus.

The enslaved Israelites labored in the fields of their Egyptian masters and on construction projects in the service of the crown. According to the book of Exodus, the main body of Israelites gathered under Moses’s leadership at the capital (assuming here Rameses/Raamses/Pi-Ramesses) and proceeded south on the first leg of their journey to join up with Israel’s pastoral element which was maintaining their animals in their traditional enclave, about twenty miles south in the Wadi Tumilat (also referred to as Succoth).

¹² Construction of this system began more than two centuries before the time of Abraham (in the chronology proposed here). While the Walls of the Ruler was designed to restrict entry into the eastern delta, they also served (potentially) to imprison those who passed west through these defenses. The Egyptians readily accommodated pastoralist requests for entry, presumably because pastoralists provided a source of animal products, seasonal labor, and were customers for Egyptian markets. Other reasons may have included humanitarian concerns and the defusing of potential armed attack from desperate people. By accommodating these pastoralists in this way otherwise unusable land adjacent to the homeland produced a dividend for the Egyptians.

¹³ This document dates to the reign of Merenptah. It records the westward passage of Edomite “bedouin” past the “Merenptah fortress” into the lush Wadi Tumilat to keep their animals alive in time of drought. See James P. Allen, “A Report of Bedouin (3.5), (Papyrus Anastasi VI),” *COS* 3.5.16–17.

¹⁴ Manfred Bietak, “On the Historicity of the Exodus: What Egyptology Today Can Contribute to Assessing the Sojourn in Egypt,” in *Israel’s Exodus in Transdisciplinary Perspective: Text, Archaeology, Culture, and Geoscience* (ed. Thomas E. Levy, Thomas Schneider, and William H. C. Propp; Heidelberg: Springer International Publishing Switzerland, 2015), 21 n. 13. James K. Hoffmeier, *Israel in Egypt: The Evidence for the Authenticity of the Exodus Tradition* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 179, identifies *Tjeku* as a military zone on Egypt’s frontier.

¹⁵ Bietak, “Historicity of the Exodus,” 30.

b. *From resident aliens to state slaves.* Upon their initial entry into Egypt in the time of Jacob the several hundred Israelites were designated as “resident aliens.”¹⁶ In the present reconstruction Jacob’s entry into Goshen occurred in the time of the Hyksos, ca. 1600 BC. The Bible indicates that the Israelites were enslaved three decades after their entry (arguably ca. 1570 BC). Their legal status changed at that time. Their enslavement may have commenced as the Hyksos holdings south of the capital Avaris were progressively taken by the rising Theban 17th/18th Dynasties.

In the long era of their enslavement the Israelites remained culturally incubated as their population increased. Had they lived in Canaan for the period of the Egyptian captivity, their future history indicates they might have assimilated completely into the Amorite worldview and lost their unique devotion to Yahweh.¹⁷

Thomas Schneider says the throw stick linguistically categorizes Israel as non-Egyptian. While this is an important consideration to Egyptologists, Schneider believes the location of Israel was in Palestine, based primarily (it seems) not upon the throw-stick element but upon the placement of the Israel-term in Merenptah’s list of defeated enemies. Schneider (responding to my query to him) believes that *if* a group left Egypt in the 12th century BC (my contention), one must assume the group merged with others already present in Palestine whose name would be adopted by the entire population.¹⁸

This line of reasoning suggests that the linguistic argument alone (placing Israel “outside” of Egypt) is not conclusive evidence that the Israelites were in Canaan. However, heavy reliance on the linguistic issue seems to lead scholars to assume that the second line of reasoning (the literary) “confirms” this conclusion. But it does not.

¹⁶ According to James Hoffmeier, this status (identified by the Hebrew term *ger*) indicates that an individual so designated had adopted the land of his sojourning as a new home for a protracted period (*Immigration Crisis*, 50–51). This was a legal status conferred by the pharaoh insuring physical and legal protection. Such protection was not afforded “foreigners” or “strangers” (*nekehar* or *zar*)—terms in the biblical text that refer to those passing through or settling for a short time.

¹⁷ If the Israelites worshipped gods in Egypt in addition to Yahweh, the gods were surely not Egyptian. Judges 10:6 enumerates the gods the Israelites served in Canaan in the time of the judges. They included the gods of the Syrians, Sidonians, Moabites, Ammonites, and Philistines, but not gods of the Egyptians. (The worship of the golden calf at Mt. Sinai may represent a syncretism between Amorite Baalism and the worship of Yahweh.)

¹⁸ Personal communication 11/13/18. Yohanan Aharoni, *The Land of the Bible: A Historical Geography* (rev. and trans. A. F. Rainey; Philadelphia: Westminster, 1979), 205–6, claimed that the two different itineraries of the Israelite passage of the Transjordan to the Plains of Moab (Numbers 21 and 33) are evidence of two different Israelite journeys (in the 14th and the 13th centuries BC) to Canaan. He says this is “one of the conclusive evidences that the Israelite conquest was not carried out in one campaign or at one time but rather continued in several waves that were blended together in the tradition to a single campaign.” This complicated explanation for the disagreement between the itineraries seems unnecessary. The itinerary of Numbers 33 is likely the *requested* or *desired routing* up into the Transjordan (which was not sufficiently differentiated in the text) while other accounts (including Numbers 21) reflect the actual route. The key segment of the Numbers 33 route via the Wadi Faynan and Wadi Dana up onto the Transjordan plateau of Edom was an Egyptian route northward around the Dead Sea documented in records of Thutmose III, Amenhotep III, and Ramesses II—see G. I. Davies, “The Wilderness Itineraries: A Comparative Study,” *TynBul* 25.1 (1974): 46–63, 69, 76–81.

2. *The literary argument.* A second line of reasoning invites non-Egyptologists to weigh in on the question of Israel's location implied in the Merenptah stele. The logical arrangement of the toponyms in the last few lines of the stele implies a geographically contrasted relationship between pairs of toponyms—suggesting a near-far and south-to-north relationship between paired toponyms.

Repeated applications of this logic (attempting to locate Israel in Canaan) have not established a consensus.¹⁹ The same literary logic can also support an *Israel-in-Egypt* interpretation.

a. *Geography and the couplets.* A succession of couplets of geographically contrasted toponyms trending from south to north appear in the final summary lines of the stele. Again employing Frank Yurco's translation:

None raises his head among the Nine Bows.

Now that Tehenu has come to ruin, Hatti is pacified.

[the] *Canaan has been plundered into every sort of woe. Ashkelon has been overcome. Gezer has been captured.*

Yeno'am was made non-existent.

Israel is laid waste (and) his seed is not.

Hurru has become a widow because of Egypt.

All lands have united themselves in peace.²⁰

Intentional geographic contrasts seem evident between certain couplets. They include Tehenu and Hatti; less obvious are "*the Canaan*" (assuming Gaza) and Ashkelon; Gezer and Yenoam; Israel and Hurru. Of principal interest are toponyms in Canaan, comprised arguably of two sets of towns.

b. *Three towns or four?* The only documentary source for Merenptah's supposed early campaign into Canaan are these summary lines of the stele. Given that Israel is not a "town/land" (city-state), the question is how many *towns* did Merenptah assault within Canaan? Are there three or four? There is disagreement.

Those who believe there are four towns claim "*the Canaan*" (Egyptian *Pa-Canaan*), refers to the town of Gaza.²¹ The remaining towns are Ashkelon, Gezer, and Yenoam. These are listed from south to north.

But Michael Hasel counts three towns. He believes "*Pa Canaan*" is not (in this context) to be understood as the town of Gaza but a reference to the entire Egyptian province of Canaan. (Note that the classifiers do not distinguish whether *Pa Canaan* refers to a city-state or a region.) Because Hasel discounts the identification

¹⁹ Hasel, "Israel in the Merenptah Stela"; idem, *Domination and Resistance*, 260–70.

²⁰ Yurco, "3,200-Year-Old Picture," 27 (emphasis his). Brackets around "the" before Canaan are added.

²¹ According to a number of scholars, "*the Canaan*" (*Pa-Canaan*) refers to the town of Gaza during the time of Merenptah. For various views see H. J. Katzenstein, "Gaza in the Egyptian Texts of the New Kingdom," *JAOIS* 102.1 (1982): 112; Hoffmeier, *Israel in Egypt*, 29; M. Hasel, "Pa-Canaan in the Egyptian New Kingdom: Canaan or Gaza?," *Journal of Ancient Egyptian Interconnections* 1.1 (2009): 8–17; Wolfgang Zwickel, "The Change from Egyptian to Philistine Hegemony in Southwestern Palestine during the Time of Ramesses III or IV," in *The Ancient Near East in the 12th–10th Centuries BCE: Culture and History* (ed. Gershon Galil et al.; AOAT 392; Münster: Ugarit, 2012), 595.

Pa Canaan with Gaza he is left with four military targets that include Ashkelon, Gezer, Yenoam, and Israel—three towns and the landless people Israel.²² The number four is important and seems necessary to establish the logical symmetry of the text.

c. *The Karnak glyptic scenes.* What indicates that Merenptah's military victories in Canaan were four in number are a series of four glyptic scenes in the Karnak temple's *Cour de la Cachette* interpreted by Frank Yurco as a depiction of Merenptah's campaign into Canaan.²³ Each scene represents an engagement between the Egyptians and a foreign enemy. Three scenes clearly depict assaults on walled towns. One fragmentary scene may or may not involve a walled town; Yurco and Hasel believe it represents an open-ground battle against the people Israel.²⁴ Only one of the towns (lower right in the grouping) is identified; it is Ashkelon.

²² M. Hasel, *Domination and Resistance*, 270; see also idem, "The Structure of the Final Hymnic-Poetic Unit on the Merenptah Stela," *ZAW* 116.1 (2004): 28–29, 50–53; and "Merenptah's Reference to Israel," 50–53.

²³ Frank Yurco, "Merenptah's Canaanite Campaign and Israel's Origins," in *Exodus: The Egyptian Evidence* (ed. Ernest S. Frerichs et al.; Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1997), 27–55. Peter J. Brand agrees with Yurco's assessment of Merenptah's authorship of the Karnak depictions. See his "The Date of Battle Reliefs on the South Wall of the Great Hypostyle Hall and the West Wall of the *Cour de la Cachette* at Karnak and the History of the Later Nineteenth Dynasty," in *Ramesseid Studies in Honour of K. A. Kitchen* (ed. M. Collier and S. Snape; Bolton: Rutherford, 2011), 49–84.

²⁴ A. Rainey says the "open terrain" depiction does not reference Israel (see "Israel in Merenptah's Inscription and Reliefs," *IEJ* 51.1 [2001]: 69–72).



Fig. 2. Merenptah's expedition into Canaan

If Hasel is correct (that *Pa-Canaan* is a designated region rather than a town), then the fourth depiction may represent Merenptah's destruction of the landless people Israel. But if there are four towns (to include Gaza), the sequence of the depictions should begin in the lower left at Gaza, move to the lower right (Ashkelon), then upper right (Gezer), then upper left ending with Yenoam. If this is the correct interpretation of the scenes at Karnak, Israel is not depicted. That is the conclusion of this study.

d. *Merenptah's claims and the location of Israel.* In these few lines summarizing his achievements, Merenptah says that peace prevails among the Nine Bows (the traditional potential enemies of Egypt). He claims to have brought the Libyans (Tehenu) to ruin—his most significant achievement. He also claims to have assaulted a number of towns in Canaan, devastated a people called Israel, and generally neutralized

all threats in the land of Hurru.²⁵ Several of these terms need to be defined to evaluate his claims.

Hatti is the land of the Hittites in far north Syria and Anatolia. Merenptah is noting that peace continues with Hatti (probably as a result of the treaty his father Ramesses II concluded many years earlier with the Hittites). Merenptah is surely not claiming that he has pacified his ally Hatti, but that momentarily all is quiet in the far north. Perhaps behind the observation is his belief that he helped ensure that state of affairs by his shipments of grain to then-beleaguered Hatti.²⁶

In addition to specific military action against the town of Gaza (assuming this understanding of *Pa Canaan*), Merenptah next assaulted Ashkelon, apparently as a punitive action. He claims to have captured the prominent town of Gezer. These three towns in southern Canaan commanded strategic commercial nodes on the routes leading along the coast and inland into the highlands of southern Canaan.

But Yenoam is further afield (arguably in the Transjordan where it may have dominated the King's Highway). Merenptah claims especially strong action against this town. He claims the town no longer existed.

These four toponyms, Gaza (arguably), Ashkelon, Gezer, and Yenoam, have hieroglyphic classifiers of city-states.²⁷ But the reference to Israel is different, as noted. Merenptah says he laid waste to Israel, figuratively claiming to have killed the young men ("seed") of that people.²⁸ Consider how "Israel" might appear paired in some logical fashion with the final toponym citation, Hurru.

Hurru is evidently a regional designator, in contrast to other terms in the closing lines of the stele. At the end of the Late Bronze Age the Egyptians sometimes referred to Canaan and Syria as Khor, Kharu, or Khurri-land, apparently acknowledging that the land was prominently occupied by Hurrians who had been such a fierce enemy during the time of Mitanni's ascendancy. Anson Rainey says the geographical name Hurru was used as a synonym for Canaan, which extended to Damascus and Byblos.²⁹ This seems to be the term's meaning in the stele.

²⁵ The summary lines of the stele read, "Anyone who was restless, he has been subdued by the King of Upper and Lower Egypt, Ba-en-Re-mery-Amun, son of Re, *Mer-en-Ptah* Hotep-her-Ma'at, granted life like Re, daily." (Yurco's translation above.) Merenptah thus claims responsibility for the devastation of Israel. (It may also be possible [as a divine being] that in his period of stewardship he is taking credit for all events that promoted *maat*—the furtherance of Egypt's wellbeing, whether he was directly responsible or not.)

²⁶ A record of shipments of grain to Hatti appears in a long inscription at Karnak between the Seventh Pylon and the central part of the temple. See Jacobus van Dijk, "The Amarna Period and the Later New Kingdom (c. 1352–1069 BC)," in *The Oxford History of Ancient Egypt* (ed. Ian Shaw; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 295.

²⁷ As noted, Hasel (*Domination and Resistance*, 258) contends that *Pa-Canaan* in this context refers to a region rather than a city-state (the hill country classifier accommodates both).

²⁸ Hasel ("*Israel* in the Merenptah Stela," 52) argues that Israel's "seed" refers to literal grain and not offspring. This suggests an agrarian economy for the Israelite people.

²⁹ Anson Rainey, "P³-Hurru, Commissioner of 'Ora (Including a new Edition of EA 131)," in *Pax Hethitica: Studies on the Hittites and their Neighbours in Honour of Itamar Singer* (ed. Yoram Cohen, Amir Gilan, and Jared L. Miller; StBoT 51; Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2010), 290. See also Hasel's (*Domination and Resistance*, 259–260) assessment of the Hurru term and its likely equivalence with all Egyptian territory in

Given these definitions of the terms consider the geographical logic of the last lines of the stele that may explain the literary structure of the sequence. It seems possible that Israel was located in the south, in counterpoint to *Hurru* in the north. The logic reduces to these pairs:

Far South: Tehenu (Libya)	Far North: Hatti (the Hittite Kingdom/Anatolia)
South: Gaza (<i>Pa Canaan</i>)	North: Ashkelon
South: Gezer	North: Yenoam
Far South: Israel (a people in the east delta)	Far North: Hurru (Canaan)

Though a literary argument (based upon geographically related toponyms) and a linguistic argument (allowing the Israelites to be foreigners in the eastern delta) seem a tenuous basis for locating Israel in Egypt in the time of Merenptah, what looms large is the radical implication for the biblical narrative and its relationship to the archaeological evidence of Israel's origins if Israel was in Canaan in the time of this pharaoh.

Either interpretation (whether Israel was in Canaan or in the east delta) has enormous implications for the place of the Hebrew Bible in the scholarly discussion of Israel's origins. Consider the contrasting consequences for the biblical record of the two alternatives.

II. HOW THE TWO DIFFERENT INTERPRETATIONS OF THE MERENPTAH STELE AFFECT THE BIBLE'S ACCOUNT OF THE EXODUS/CONQUEST

1. *The consequences of the Israel-in-Canaan interpretation for the biblical account of Israel's origins.* This interpretation generates negative effects for the theological and historical integrity of the text:

If Israel was in Canaan in the time of Merenptah, the biblical narrative cannot be a continuous, uninterrupted account of the exodus through the conquest and period of the judges, as it appears to be. This is because the narrative has failed to record a disastrous military encounter with Egyptian forces subsequent to the exodus. Failure to mention such a defeat contradicts the persistent principle of the "Deuteronomic theology" (Deuteronomy 27–28) which correlates Israel's fortunes/misfortunes with obedience/disobedience to the Sinai covenant.

The Israel-in-Canaan interpretation cannot accommodate a historical Israelite encounter with the king of Edom; the encounter must be fictional. The same is true of battles at Transjordan towns built by the Amorite Sihon.

An Israel-in-Canaan interpretation must presume the Israelites were in Canaan while it was dominated by Egypt's powerful 18th and 19th Dynasties. It does not seem conceivable that the Israelites could have overturned the balance of pow-

the southern Levant during the 19th and 20th Dynasties; and Kenneth A. Kitchen, "The Victories of Merenptah, and the Nature of their Record," *JSTOT* 28.3 (2004): 259–72.

er in the highlands of Canaan, launched forays into the Coastal Plain, Jezreel Plain, and Galilee and not triggered a recorded Egyptian military response. The Bible makes no mention of paying tribute to the Egyptian overlord or of supplying troops and support for his military adventures. There is not one single reference to an encounter with the Egyptians after the Israelite departure from Egypt.

Very importantly, commitment to the Israel-in-Canaan interpretation renders the biblical narrative and the archaeological evidence incompatible at virtually every significant biblical site in the Arabah, Transjordan, and Canaan from the exodus event through the time of the judges.

Because of the archaeological disconnects resulting from the Israel-in-Canaan interpretation for all proposed reconstructions of Israel's biblical origins (except for the 12th-century BC exodus/conquest proposed here), it has been necessary for conservatives to moderate their expectations regarding the literal accuracy of the present biblical text and adopt a skeptical attitude regarding the archaeological evidence.

2. *However, if Israel was in Egypt during the time of Merenptah ...* Reconstructions in the past have established dates for key events and then found it necessary to qualify, ignore, or force hard evidence to fit those dates. The result is incoherence. But when the dates of key biblical events are aligned with the archaeological evidence, an exodus in the time of Ramesses III (ca. 1175 BC) becomes an evident anchor point. From this all other dates can be derived internally from the biblical text with a remarkable result: the two records align.³⁰ This approach requires Israel to have been in Egypt in the time of Merenptah.

Gary Rendsburg proposed an Israel-in-Egypt interpretation of Merenptah's stele in 1992.³¹ Though his proposal was not well received it is the only interpretation that allows a reconciliation of the biblical text with the archaeological record.

Space allows for only a few illustrations (and limited citation) of the coherence between this biblical chronology and the archaeological evidence.

a. *The pharaoh of the exodus was a successor of Ramesses II (i.e. after 1213 BC).* Advocates of a 13th-century BC exodus cite the archaeological evidence synchronous with Exod 1:11. This passage specifies the names of two cities (Pithom and Rameses) upon which the Israelites labored under the pharaoh of the oppression. There seems little doubt that Ramesses II (1279–1213 BC) was the builder of these cities.

The 13th-century BC reconstruction also requires the Israelites to have been in Canaan *before* the time of Merenptah, the son and successor of Ramesses II. It follows that the exodus must have occurred in the time of Ramesses II (builder of the store cities), making him the pharaoh of both the oppression and of the exodus.

³⁰ The larger study of which this article is a part has identified 88 datable biblical sites or defined eras associated with events mentioned in Genesis 12 through 1 Samuel 10. Each of these is compatible with a chronology built on a 12th-century BC exodus/conquest. Of these, 58 are synchronous—in some cases allowing a time no-earlier-than, or no-later-than, dating pegs in the reconstruction of this study.

³¹ Gary A. Rendsburg, "The Date of the Exodus and the Conquest/Settlement: The Case for the 1100s," *VT* 42 (1992): 510–27. See negative critiques of Rendsburg's thesis by M. Hasel (*Domination and Resistance*, 198 n. 1) and J. Hoffmeier (*Israel in Egypt*, 126). See also Alessandra Nibbi, "Some Remarks on the Merenptah Stela and the So-Called Name of Israel," *Discussions in Egyptology* 36 (1996): 79–102.

However, Exod 2:23 specifies that the pharaoh of the oppression died while Moses was in Midian. If this passage is accurate and Ramesses II was indeed the pharaoh of the oppression, the pharaoh of the exodus must have been one of Ramesses's successors. For a number of reasons Ramesses III (1184–1153 BC) is the most likely candidate.

b. *Evidence in the northeast Egyptian delta and northern Sinai brackets the exodus date to the 13th–12th centuries BC.* Exodus toponyms (including Rameses, the *yam suph* [Re(ed) Sea], and Migdol), the configuration of Egypt's northeastern fortifications, and the geography of the northeast delta all narrow the time of the exodus events to the 13th and 12th centuries BC.³² Exodus 13:17 refers to the northern route out Egypt at the time of the exodus as the “Way of the Land of the Philistines.” There are reasons for believing this reference is not anachronous but synchronous with an exodus in the reign of Ramesses III (i.e. sometime after ca. 1177 BC when the Philistine appellation became valid).

c. *Evidence of the 12th-century BC rise of the Negev and Arabah tribal polities.* The tribal polities of the Amalekites in the Negev and the lowland Edomites in the east Arabah (Wadi Faynan) appeared in the 12th century BC. They arose to fill the power vacuum left as the Egyptians withdrew from the region in the 12th century BC (notably at Timna). The Israelite encounter with these ascendant polities (the Amalekites and the Edomites) could have occurred no earlier than the mid- to latter-12th century BC.³³

³² Representative of J. Hoffmeier's and S. Mosier's studies detailing discoveries in north Sinai/northeast delta is “‘The Ways of Horus’: Reconstructing Egypt's East Frontier Defense Network and the Military Road to Canaan in New Kingdom Times,” in *Tell el-Borg I: Excavations in North Sinai* (ed. James K. Hoffmeier; Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2014), 34–61. See also J. Hoffmeier, “What is the Biblical Date for the Exodus? A Response to Bryant Wood,” *JETS* 50.2 (2007): 235, where Hoffmeier demonstrates that the name of the store city Rameses points to no earlier than the 19th Dynasty and that the names Pithom and Migdol are not attested before the 13th century BC. These names have survived in the biblical text; they cannot be explained as “updates” by later copyists since these names appear to have been unknown after the Ramesside period.

³³ Multiple articles by T. Levy and others have documented the appearance of industrial scale copper production in the Wadi Faynan as early as the end of the 13th century BC. The magnitude of the production indicates the emergence of what Levy calls the “Lowland Edom” polity. See Thomas E. Levy, Mohammad Najjar, Johannes van der Plicht, Thomas Higham, and Hendrik J. Bruins, “Lowland Edom and the High and Low Chronologies: Edomite State Formation, the Bible and Recent Archaeological Research in Southern Jordan,” in *The Bible and Radiocarbon Dating: Archaeology, Text and Science* (ed. Thomas E. Levy and Thomas Higham; Sheffield, UK: Equinox, 2005), 129–63. I. Finkelstein identifies the rise of the Amalekite polity as the “Tel Masos Chiefdom” (based at Tel Masos), which emerged in the Iron I period (after ca. 1200 BC). This tribal entity was the chief player in the movement of copper and caravan commerce across the Negev. Their interests in the Negev (as well as those of Lowland Edom in the Arabah) constrained the Israelites to the Sinai Peninsula. See Israel Finkelstein, *Living on the Fringe: The Archaeology and History of the Negev, Sinai and Neighbouring Regions in the Bronze and Iron Ages* (Monographs in Mediterranean Archaeology 6; Sheffield, UK: Sheffield Academic Press, 1995); and Naama Yahalom-Mack, “Metal Production and Trade at the Turn of the First Millennium BCE: Some Answers, New Questions,” in *Rethinking Israel: Studies in the History and Archaeology of Ancient Israel in Honor of Israel Finkelstein* (ed. Oded Lipschits, Yuval Gadot, and Matthew J. Adams; Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2017), 451–62.

d. *The 12th-century BC walled towns of Canaan.* The Israelite spies sent up into Canaan from Kadesh-Barnea reported imposing walls at Hebron (apparently). Hebron had been destroyed and abandoned ca. 1550 BC and lay fallow until the Iron I, according to the excavators. If the dating of the reconstruction at Hebron is correct, the Israelites could not have encountered a walled town there before the early to mid-12th century BC.³⁴ The appearance of other towns being fortified further north seems implied in the text, reflecting new construction by the “Settlement” people (defined below).

e. *The Amorite kingdoms in the Transjordan arose in the 12th century BC.* The Israelite encounter with the Amorite king Sihon could have happened no earlier than the mid- to latter-12th century BC. This dating is based on archaeological findings at several Transjordan biblical sites that are associated with Sihon in Num 21:26. Numbers 21:23–30 describes the war with Sihon in which he was defeated by the Israelites at Jahaz. Subsequently all of Sihon’s towns and lands were taken, including his town of Heshbon (Tell Hesban). Excavations at Heshbon (Tell Hesban) found no remains earlier than ca. 1200 BC.³⁵

According to the Numbers (21) narrative, Sihon had recently captured Dibon (Dhiban/Dibon-gad) from the Moabites, a town less than two miles north of the Arnon Canyon. The Israelites in turn captured the site from Sihon. Excavations at the site identified EB II–IV but “absolutely no evidence for the Middle Bronze or Late Bronze Ages.” Settlement resumed on the site in the early Iron Age.³⁶

The war with Sihon resulted in Israelite destruction extending from Dibon to Medeba. The evidence at these and at most archaeological sites in the central Transjordan includes virtually no indication of sedentary occupation before the 12th century BC.³⁷

Of six possible sites for Jahaz the most promising may be Khirbet Medeiniyeh along the Wadi eth-Themed. This site shows surface indications of wall lines and a possible moat. The size of the ruin and the surface pottery indicate that it is the largest predominantly Iron Age settlement along the eastern edge of the settled plateau.³⁸

There are several additional sites that also suggest a 12th-century BC context for the appearance of the Amorites and Israelites. These include sites from south of the Arnon northward through the Transjordan.

f. *The “Settlement” in Canaan was complete before the Israelite arrival in the latter 12th century BC.* Refugees from the collapsing Late Bronze Age kingdoms in the Levant north of Canaan began arriving in great numbers in the highlands of Canaan in the latter 13th through the mid-12th centuries BC. These were the settled people (arguably) that Israel encountered during the conquest. While not a monolithic ethnic population the embracing *non-material culture* of the Settlement people (like those

³⁴ Avi Ofer, “Hebron,” *NEAEHL* 2:606–9.

³⁵ Lawrence T. Geraty, “Heshbon (Place),” *ABD* 3:181–84.

³⁶ A. D. Tushingham, “Dibon (Place),” *ABD* 2:194–96.

³⁷ Larry G. Herr, “The Early Periods in Central Jordan,” *NEAEHL* 5:1840–51.

³⁸ J. Andrew Dearman, “Jahaz (Place),” *ABD* 3:612.

being displaced) was apparently Amorite; this term is essentially equivalent to the term “Canaanite.”

The population of the highlands tripled during the period of the Settlement influx. This development can be reconciled archaeologically with the biblical conquest account only if the Israelites appeared toward the end of this demographic phenomenon (in the latter 12th century BC), when the population of Canaan had stabilized. There is no indication in Joshua or Judges of a continuing influx of new peoples subsequent to the Israelite arrival.

g. *The conquest of Jericho arguably occurred in the latter 12th century BC.* While the site of Jericho (Tell es-Sultan) is archaeologically problematic for the Israelite conquest, seldom-noted Iron I material found at Jericho allows for an Israelite destruction of a short-lived settlement there in the 12th century BC. According to the book of Joshua, the ruins of Jericho were cursed and lay fallow until the reign of Ahab (in the 9th century BC).³⁹ This reference provides a biblical “stratigraphy” that can be tested in the archaeological record.

There is evidence of a brief occupation of the mound in the 12th century BC (Iron I). The termination of this occupation (arguably) may be associated with an outer fallen wall depicted by Kathleen Kenyon in her Trench I. The next evidence of occupation is indicated by pottery sherds in a fallow stratum above this fallen wall that dates to the 10th/9th century BC. This sequence matches the biblical sequence.⁴⁰

h. *Evidence at Ai, Bethel, and Mt. Ebal point to a biblical conquest in the 12th century BC.* The site of Ai (assuming et-Tell) was destroyed ca. 1135 BC. This appears to represent the date of the Israelite conquest, according to the excavator. Et-Tell had lain fallow for one thousand years before it was reoccupied ca. 1200 BC (by “Settlement” people). Only a 12th-century BC conquest reconstruction fits the evidence at this generally accepted site of Ai.

Evidence at this site contradicts both the 13th- and 15th-century BC reconstructions. Proposed alternative sites for Ai have not been endorsed by mainstream scholarship.⁴¹

³⁹ See 1 Kgs 16:34 where violation of the ban against reoccupation occurs—with attendant consequences. The city of palms (associated with Jericho in Deut 34:3 and Judg 3:12–14) probably does not refer to a settlement on the mound of Tell es-Sultan but to a site somewhere in the vicinity of the mound within the oasis. Toponyms and tribal boundaries in the Deut passage (including reference to the city of palms) were evidently supplied by a later copyist no earlier than the judges period (after allotments were defined).

⁴⁰ The detailed evidence of this sequence in K. Kenyon’s Trench I is examined in an unpublished study by the author. He may be contacted for more information.

⁴¹ William Albright was challenged by the evidence at et-Tell, since it conflicted with his 13th-century BC reconstruction. He found it necessary to question the biblical author’s location of Ai and Bethel. More recent efforts to find another site for Ai have been undertaken by David Livingston at Kh. Nisya and by Bryant Wood (and subsequently by S. Striping) at Kh. el-Maqatir. Their efforts have sought evidence to prove a late 1400s BC destruction date consistent with a 1 Kgs 6:1 chronology. For a detailed analysis of the Ai issue see the four-part article by Peter Briggs, “Testing the Factuality of the Conquest of Ai Narrative in the Book of Joshua: Part One” (2013), biblearchaeology.org; see also parts 2, 3, and 4). Briggs argues in support of Kh. el-Maqatir as the site of Ai. (Interested readers should

Adjacent to Ai was Bethel (assuming Beitin). Its ruined Middle Bronze Age walls were rebuilt in the late 13th or early 12th centuries BC.⁴² This rebuild would have occurred (in the present reconstruction) before the arrival of the Israelites. This town was allied with Ai against the Israelites (Josh 8:17). The existence of these walls account for why the Israelites did not (and could not) attack the town when they took Ai. Because of these walls the town could not be taken by the Israelites except by guile in the time of the judges.

An altar discovered on Mt. Ebal has been dated by the excavator to ca. 1140 BC. He contended that this was the very altar Joshua built (Josh 8:28–31).⁴³ No other archaeological site has been discovered on Mt. Ebal, according to Ralph Hawkins.⁴⁴

i. *Evidence at the Hivite towns and other sites in Joshua's southern and northern campaigns fit a 12th-century BC conquest.* The Joshua conquest narrative mentions a number of towns by name. The location of several of these have been identified. Not all of them have been excavated nor have they yielded archaeological evidence that might illuminate the period of the conquest. However, there is evidence at two of the towns of the Hivite league that narrows the time of their construction to the 12th century BC, arguably some generations before the Israelites arrived.

The walls of Gibeon (el-Jib) and the impressive water system date to the early Iron Age (1200–900 BC). Though eight nearby shaft tombs contained Late Bronze Age pottery, indications are that this impressive town and fortification was built in the 12th century BC since no Late Bronze Age material was found in the town's

search the website for articles by Livingston, Briggs, Wood, Petrovich, and others). The key issue is the dating at Maqatir. For Wood's thesis to hold, the pottery must be Late Bronze Age. However, what he claims is Late Bronze Age material is contradicted in mainstream scholarship. According to Robert Mullins (personal communications 2018, 2019), Kh. el-Maqatir is a Middle Bronze II site, not Late Bronze Age. This assessment is based on Wood's limited publication of pottery forms. Israeli archaeologists (with whom Mullins has conferred) agree the pottery is MB II, not Late Bronze Age. (Wood's Late Bronze Age dating of Jericho pottery is likewise judged to be Middle Bronze Age by Mullins.)

⁴² Israel Finkelstein and L. Singer-Avitz, "Reevaluating Bethel," *ZDPV* 125.1 (2009): 33–48. See also Oded Lipschits, "Bethel Revisited," in *Rethinking Israel*, 235. The relationship of Ai to Bethel requires that if Ai is located at Kh. el-Maqatir (as proposed by Wood), then Bethel would have been located further south also. D. Livingston ("Location of Biblical Bethel and Ai Reconsidered," biblearchaeology.org [2009]) proposed a location for Bethel at el-Bireh (unexcavated). It lies 2.5 miles south of Beitin. However, this is the likely site of Beeroth (one of the Hivite towns, discussed below).

⁴³ See Adam Zertal, "Has Joshua's Altar Been Found on Mt. Ebal?," *BAR* 11.1 (1985): 26–35, 38–41, 43. See also Ralph Hawkins, *The Iron Age I Structure on Mt. Ebal: Excavation and Interpretation* (BBRSup 6; Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2012), 22; and "Propositions for Evangelical Acceptance of a Late-Date Exodus-Conquest: Biblical Data and the Royal Scarabs from Mt. Ebal," *JETS* 50.1 (2007): 31–46. The dating, location, and size of Zertal's "Israelite" altar has been contested by R. C. Young and B. G. Wood, "A Critical Analysis of the Evidence from Ralph Hawkins for a Late-Date Exodus Conquest," *JETS* 51.2 (2008): 240–43.

⁴⁴ Ralph Hawkins ("Propositions," 37 n. 36). He notes (pp. 42–43) that two scarabs found at the site date no earlier than the 13th century BC. However, these may be provenanced to the earliest (pre-Israelite) stratum. Built over this stratum was the later construction dated to the 12th century BC. This second/upper stratum may be associated with the Israelites. (It was an ancient practice to build a "holy" site upon a pre-existing hallowed installation, regardless of the deity that was honored there. This explains the Israelite reuse of Shiloh, a former religious temenos or holy compound.)

excavation.⁴⁵ If this site is correctly identified and dated, the Israelites could not have encountered the town of Gibeon before the late 12th century BC. It did not exist prior to that time.

The location of the site of Beeroth, another of the Hivite towns, may be located at the unexcavated site of el-Birih.⁴⁶ A survey of the site discovered Early and Middle Bronze Age material along with Iron I and II but no Late Bronze Age material.

Evidence at several towns of the Amorite coalition (southern campaign) may also bear on the date of the conquest. The town of Hebron was strongly fortified in the MB II (ca. 1800 BC). The excavators believe the site was destroyed at the end of the Middle Bronze Age (ca. 1550 BC), abandoned throughout the Late Bronze, then reoccupied in the Iron I.⁴⁷ If this is correct, the conquest could have occurred no earlier than the 12th century BC.

Excavators of Lachish date a destruction of the town to ca. 1130 or 1140 BC. This may be associated with the account in Josh 10:31–32.

Joshua's northern campaign was conducted against a Canaanite coalition cobbled together by Jabin, "hereditary" king of Hazor. Towns mentioned in this coalition are Hazor, Madon, Shimron, Achshaph, and Naphoth-Dor. From a list of 31 defeated kings in Josh 12:7–24 other members of the northern coalition can be deduced. They likely included Taanach, Megiddo, Kedesh, Jokneam (in Carmel), Goyim (in Galilee), and Tirzah (likely Tell el-Farah, N.). Only a few of these have been excavated yielding evidence pertinent to the Late Bronze/Iron I periods of interest here.

Taanach (Tell Ti'innik) was walled in the Middle Bronze II and into the Late Bronze Age. There appears to have been a partial abandonment of the site following Thutmose III's famous battle of Megiddo ca. 1479 BC, though there is some indication of habitation into the 14th century BC. The site was resettled ca. 1200 BC. At that time a 14-foot-thick wall was constructed.⁴⁸ Joshua's defeat of the king of Taanach best fits the period sometime after this resettlement.

Jokneam was occupied and unfortified in the Late Bronze Age. It was destroyed in the second half of the 13th century BC and reoccupied in the 12th (or early 11th) century BC.⁴⁹ (The present thesis identifies the destruction of the late 13th century BC with the Settlement people who were occupying the site at the time of the Israelite arrival.)

⁴⁵ See J. B. Pritchard, "Gibeon," *NEAEHL* 2:511–14; and P. Arnold, "Gibeon (Place)," *ABD* 2:1010–13. Arnold synthesizes the conundrum this present study resolves. He says, "The present literary placement of these traditions in the account of Joshua's invasion of Canaan is problematic for biblical historians, since archaeologists have found no occupational remains at Gibeon in the Late Bronze Age." He believes this famous story probably preserves etiological traditions explaining the historical subservient relationship of the Hivite citizens of Gibeon to the Israelites. However, no such qualifications of the text are necessary in the chronology of the present thesis.

⁴⁶ D. A. Dorsey, "Beeroth (Place)," *ABD* 1:646–47; and "Chephirah (Place)," *ABD* 1:898.

⁴⁷ Avi Ofer, "Hebron."

⁴⁸ A. E. Glock, "Taanach (Place)," *ABD* 6:287–90.

⁴⁹ A. Ben-Tor, "Jokneam (Place)," *ABD* 3:933–35.

The Iron I fortified town of Tirzah (believed to be Tell el-Farah, North) was built upon the ruins of an unfortified Late Bronze Age settlement. The walls were built at the beginning of the Iron I (ca. 1200 BC) along the lines of the Middle Bronze fortifications.⁵⁰ This sequence is best explained by the present thesis: The construction of the fortifications ca. 1200 BC was the work of the Settlement people whom the Israelites confronted in the latter 12th century BC.

Megiddo (it is now believed) may have been destroyed in the first decades of the 12th century BC.⁵¹ The evidence of destruction marking the end of the Late Bronze Age at this and other sites in the north (as in the south of Canaan) suggests the arrival of the Settlement people. There is no indication in the Joshua and Judges narratives that the Israelites destroyed Megiddo or that they had the capability of assaulting walled towns.

j. *Joshua's destruction of Hazor in the late 12th century BC.* An admittedly weak point of the 12th-century BC conquest reconstruction is the dearth of evidence at the site of Hazor. It is not so much the evidence for a 12th-century conquest that is weak at Hazor as its failure to satisfy the impressions of generations of readers who have imagined towering flames rising from a vast city being laid waste by the Israelites. If Joshua's assault against Hazor occurred in the late 12th century, the reality of the action fails to meet common expectations.⁵²

Hazor in the time of Joshua may have been a meager occupation, or an encampment, or an assembly point to which the hereditary kings of Hazor held the deed. Jabin (apparently a name held by several kings of Hazor) may not have lived on the mound. This is, of course, speculation but it relieves the biblical text of a great burden that would otherwise rest upon it if Joshua had destroyed Hazor ca. 1230 BC.

The excavators of Hazor have identified the Israelites as the destroyers of Greater Hazor ca. 1230 BC. They have cited the Israelites for want of any other potential perpetrator. But for all the reasons noted above (and more) a reduction of Hazor ca. 1230 BC by the Israelites seems improbable. The city of that date was the most powerful city in northern Canaan. The king of Hazor would likely have been acknowledged as preeminent among the Canaanite kingdoms of the region. The

⁵⁰ D. Manor, "Tirzah (Place)," *ABD* 6:573–77.

⁵¹ Mario A. S. Martin, "The Fate of Megiddo at the End of the Late Bronze IIB," in *Rethinking Israel*, 267–69, 282–83.

⁵² Advocates of the 1 Kgs 6:1 reconstruction date Joshua's destruction of Hazor to the late 1400s BC. See D. Petrovich, "The Dating of Hazor's Destruction in Joshua 11 by Way of Biblical, Archaeological, and Epigraphical Evidence," *JETS* 51.3 (2008): 489–512. He associates a LB I destruction at the site to Joshua and the 1230 BC destruction to Deborah/Barak—despite the fact that Judges never suggests an assault on Hazor by Deborah/Barak. Like the 13th-century BC conquest, this reconstruction does not account for why the books of Joshua and Judges never acknowledge the presence and demands of the Egyptian overlord of Canaan during the period from 1400 BC (the conquest) to the final Egyptian withdrawal from Beth-Shean. It is unrealistic to ignore or discount Egyptian claims and presence in Canaan from the time of Thutmose III (1479–1425 BC) to the mid-12th century BC when the Egyptians withdrew from their last stronghold in Canaan.

king of Hazor may have been the titular head of all the kingdoms listed in the Joshua account.

But the king of Hazor's position in the latter 13th century BC would likely have been at the good pleasure of Ramesses II, the overlord of Canaan. It is difficult to imagine the king of Hazor in the time of Ramesses the Great assembling a military coalition (as described in Joshua) while Ramesses held claim to the region. This claim was represented by a military garrison at nearby Beth-Shean. Much of the produce of the Jezreel Plain was appropriated for the Egyptian crown and temple estates; and the main commercial arteries of Egyptian commerce passed through this region.

Though the foreign policy of Ramesses II (1279–1213 BC) may have been quiescent in his latter years, it is questionable whether he would have tolerated an Israelite invasion. Joshua overthrew the balance of power in the highlands, attacked towns on the Coastal Plain, and launched a major expedition into the Jezreel and Huleh Valleys, destroying the military and economic capability of the existing population. How could this have happened ca. 1230 BC without some military response from Ramesses's garrisons or the launch of a major expedition from Sile?

There are no apparent Egyptian records citing any upset in the balance of power in Canaan during this period. Nor does the Bible mention Egyptian presence in Canaan at any time after the exodus. The answer to who destroyed Greater Hazor ("the head of all those kingdoms") ca. 1230 BC is unknown, but it was surely not the Israelites.⁵³

The Hazor Joshua destroyed was "*formerly* the head of all those kingdoms" (Josh 11:10). This singular emphasis (usually overlooked) suggests that Joshua's Hazor was a town whose glory days had faded. The fact that Jabin could persuade so many towns to ally in common cause against the Israelites may rest with his hereditary title and the influence his forebears once held.

Though often claimed for the Joshua account, the text does not actually claim that Joshua's Hazor was imposing or militarily challenging. The impression that it was may derive from the wide publicity given to Greater Hazor in the excavations of Yigael Yadin in the 1950s and the resumption of excavations in 1990 by Amnon Ben-tor.

⁵³ How could any perpetrator have destroyed Hazor in the time of Ramesses? Why is there no Egyptian record of this event? One might imagine warlords out of Amurru conducting a lightning raid, a foretaste of the coming collapse of the balance of power in the eastern Levant and the appearance of Sihon and Og in the Transjordan. Perhaps the reduction of Hazor was not considered a threat to Egyptian interests. Some have claimed the destruction of Greater Hazor ca. 1230 BC must have been the work of the Israelites because of the deliberate destruction/desecration of idols and statuary in the upper city. Some have claimed this is evidence of a uniquely Israelite policy. But according to K. Lawson Younger (*Judges and Ruth* [NIVAC; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2002], 28–29, 47), this was not an uncommon practice among nations of the ancient Near East, all of whom viewed wars as holy wars. War was undertaken for the glorification of a people's deity and the extension of his lands. In cases where a conquered town's gods were not carried off, the god/s were forced to abandon the town when their image was beheaded or hammered into rubble.

A careful reading of the biblical text will find no basis for assuming the site was fortified or offered a challenging response to the Israelite attack. The Israelites clearly were neither equipped nor competent to assault walled towns.

k. *The absence of Egyptians in the Joshua/Judges accounts indicates a conquest in the latter 12th century BC.* As noted above, it is highly significant that the Bible makes no mention of Israelite encounters with the Egyptians at any time after the exodus. If the Bible's account of the conquest and the period of the judges is a continuous and authentic historical record (as it appears to be), the Israelite entry into Canaan could have occurred no earlier than the latter 12th century BC. This dating coincides with the Egyptian abandonment of their last base at Beth-Shean (1136 BC at the latest).⁵⁴ This could have been a matter of years to several decades before the Israelite invasion of Canaan.

l. *The Israelite occupation of Shiloh occurred in the latter 12th century BC.* Israel Finkelstein's excavations at Shiloh have established that the site lay fallow for two centuries before the Israelites rebuilt the cultic temenos at the beginning of the period of the judges. He believes the Israelite reoccupation of the site occurred toward the end of the 12th century BC.⁵⁵ After several decades of use, the site was destroyed (likely by the Philistines). Convergence of the archaeological evidence with the Joshua narrative at this site (as proposed in this study) points to a biblical conquest date and commencement of the period of the judges in the latter 12th century BC.

m. *The rise of the Philistines in the time of Joshua occurred in the latter 12th and early 11th centuries BC.* While not mentioned as an enemy in Joshua's southern campaign and forays, the Philistines emerged on the southern Coastal Plain as a source to be reckoned with in Joshua's late lifetime (Josh 13:1–3). When the Danites first attempted to descend to the Coastal Plain to occupy their allotted land, it was the

⁵⁴ See Amihai Mazar, "Beth-Shean," *NEAEHL* 5:1620–21. He says the final blow to the Egyptian empire was marked by a destruction of Stratum S3 at Beth-Shean sometime in the days of Ramesses IV, V, or VI. Dates for these pharaohs range from 1153 BC to 1136 BC.

⁵⁵ Israel Finkelstein, "Shiloh," *NEAEHL* 4:1364–70. According to Finkelstein, the site began as a small unwallled village in the Middle Bronze II (1750–1650 BC). In the Middle Bronze III (1650–1550 BC) the four-acre site was surrounded by an elaborate defense system consisting of a solid wall as much as 18 feet thick, reinforced by an earthen rampart. There is no evidence of residential dwellings in this period. The site was destroyed at the end of the Middle Bronze III (1550 BC). Following this is evidence of some renewed activity in the Late Bronze Age. Material from this period (LB I, 1550–1400 BC) indicates to Finkelstein that the ruin was a cult site. He believes pottery vessels were brought to the site containing offerings; they were broken after use (since they were holy and could not be reused) and buried in a *favissa* together with numerous bones that remained from animal sacrifices. Renewed excavations began under Scott Stripling in 2017 at Shiloh under the auspices of the Associates of Biblical Research. See his article: "The Israelite Tabernacle at Shiloh," *Bible and Spade*, 29.3 (Fall 2016), 89 (https://biblearchaeology.org/images/archive/App_Data/files/2017/1/Tabernacle%20Stripling%20B&S%20Fall%202016.pdf). Stripling says the Israelites erected the tabernacle immediately following the conquest (which he dates to ca. 1400 BC. He acknowledges a destruction of Shiloh at the end of the MB III and believes it was quickly resettled as a cultic center in the Late Bronze Age (which he dates ca. 1485–1173 BC). He is evidently claiming that the site was continuously in use by the Israelites from shortly after ca. 1400 BC until it was destroyed by the Philistines ca. 1050 BC. Evidence for this claim of continuous occupation is not yet documented for evaluation in mainstream scholarship. This assertion contradicts Finkelstein's meticulous sequence that includes a 200-year fallow period immediately before the Israelite appearance in the latter 12th century BC.

Amorites who drove them back (Judg 1:34). Judah, likewise, was initially constrained by Amorites along the coast, not Philistines.

The Philistines appeared on the Coastal Plain in the time of Ramesses III (after ca. 1177 BC). By the end of the 12th century the Philistines had become the dominant political and military presence on the southern coast and would figure prominently in the time of Samson and Samuel (and thereafter in the 11th century BC). The rise of the Philistines appears to provide a synchronism for the date of the conquest, the lifetime of Joshua, and the period of the judges.

n. *The period of the judges spanned approximately one hundred years.* Some will challenge the chronology of this study based upon a presumed span of time required to accommodate the period of the judges.⁵⁶ The average reader interprets the book of Judges as a linear succession of events that apparently required hundreds of years to unfold.

Based on recent scholarship, it now appears that Judges is a theological or ideological treatise in which the author has arbitrarily arranged the events to illustrate a theme, quite independently of historical concerns.⁵⁷ He has styled the transition between the events as though they were contingent and sequential. But apparently these episodes are not necessarily related to one another, nor are they necessarily sequential.

The recent application of literary analysis to the book of Judges has established an important insight: the text appears to be a holistic literary composition. Though the fine points of the author's agenda are still contested, it is safe to say that he intended to demonstrate the consequences of Israel's disobedience to God's clear directive to destroy and displace the Amorite culture within the land and under no circumstances to adopt their ways.

⁵⁶ This usually involves a citation of Jephthah's claim that Israel had occupied the former lands of Moab for three hundred years (Judg 11:26), thus extending the duration of the judges back to the late 15th century BC. But this claim by Jephthah appears to be hyperbole and bluster; it is contradicted in the archaeological record—including the fact that Heshbon was not founded before the 12th century BC. See Kenneth Kitchen, *On the Reliability of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), 209, who dismisses Jephthah's claim.

⁵⁷ See Barry J. Webb, *The Book of Judges* (NICOT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2012), 35–53, for a review of recent scholarly works on Judges. Webb concludes that Judges is a prophetic book, not historical narrative. He notes that this is supported by interpreters from antiquity—as indicated by the book's inclusion in the *Former Prophets* section of the Hebrew Bible. Daniel Block (*Judges, Ruth* [NAC 6; Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1999], 51–54) believes the book of Judges is an extended sermon (or a series of sermons) in which the preacher selects his material to illustrate his thesis of a progressive moral decline within Israel. By recognizing this thematic emphasis, Block says, the reader is prepared to "resist the fallacy of misplaced literalism" which would incline the reader to expect an accurate historical narrative in Judges when that is not the objective of the writer. K. L. Younger (*Judges and Ruth* [NIV Application Commentary; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2002], 22) believes each judge may symbolize an aspect of Israel's experience. Thus, Younger says, the text illustrates the relevance of local events as though they were applicable all of Israel. He notes that each succeeding story gets longer and contains fewer of the cyclical features of the early judges (i.e. sin, suffering, supplication, and salvation). In this way, the steady drift of all of Israel from its mandate is graphically illustrated.

To develop this theme, the author has arranged the events in Judges in such a way as to dramatize an ever-deepening moral crisis in the life of Israel and the means God used to address this. The writer's problematic use of a literary device to segue between episodes of the twelve judges does *not* require the death of one judge before the coming of the next, despite the implication.⁵⁸

While aptly demonstrating his thesis, the author of Judges has introduced confusion for the modern reader who believes he is reading an unfolding historical narrative. For the writer, historical accuracy/sequence is incidental to the theme. There are clues within the text, however, that do provide some historical details that can contribute to a coherent chronology.

Without digressing into the rationale, the thesis of this study proposes a period for the judges extending from ca. 1130 BC (end of the conquest) to the anointing of Saul as king (ca. 1032 BC).⁵⁹

III. THE BIBLE AS HISTORY: A RETROGRADE VIEW

Archaeologists today typically qualify (i.e. *dis*qualify) the potential contribution of the Hebrew Bible to their work by marginalizing its historicity. An archaeologist may acknowledge that the Bible evolved through a long and complex process of compilation and editing before reaching its present form. But after a cursory nod, the text is typically ignored by many as a potential source of historical information that might illuminate their archaeological findings.

The "biblical archaeology" of William F. Albright (1891–1971), through the 1960s and 1970s, was like an Indian summer for those with a high view of Scripture. For Albright the simple idea that history was a record of man's past seemed intuitive. Because of Albright's stature his conviction that one should excavate with the Bible in one hand convinced many that the Bible's account of Israel's origins in the land would be progressively validated in the archaeological record. But the evidence proved otherwise, and a cold front of skepticism set in.

For many observers the credibility of the biblical narrative (as history) was chained to the fortunes of a 13th-century BC conquest. When that reconstruction failed, the baby was thrown out with the bathwater.

William Dever penned a devastating critique of Albright's legacy focusing on what Dever regarded as Albright's naivety.⁶⁰ Though he tends to demur, Dever is

⁵⁸ For example, "And the people of Israel again did what was evil in the sight of the LORD after Ehud died" (Judg 4:1). A careful reading of the main body of Judges reveals that each of the twelve judges-events occurred within localized tribal areas. These episodes are descriptions of regional conflicts. These conflicts typically involved one or only a few neighboring tribes in common cause. "All of Israel" was *never* involved in any of the judges cycles. The expression "all Israel" is best understood as a *synecdoche*, a figure of speech in which a part represents the whole, as in "Boston won by two runs."

⁵⁹ Compare the duration of the Judges era in Kitchen, *Reliability of the Old Testament*, 206–7. He dates the conquest to no later than 1210 BC (in order to find Israel within the land by the 5th year of Merenptah, ca. 1209 BC). He dates the beginning of the Judges period to ca. 1200 BC and the end at ca. 1042 BC (his date for the coronation of Saul); this gives a total duration of about 160 years. (Note that his reconstruction is not based on sequentially dating the judges-cycles.) The date used in the present study for Saul is that of D. V. Edelman, "Saul (Person)," *ABD* 5:989–99.

frequently cited as a chief architect of the death of Albright's "biblical archaeology" (i.e. Albright's belief in a complementary historical relationship between the Bible and the archaeological evidence of the conquest). Dever claims there is now not a single "reputable" professional archaeologist in the world who espouses the conquest model. He also believes that most biblical scholars, likewise, do not believe Joshua's account of the conquest—the Bible's defining explanation for Israel's appearance in the land of Canaan.⁶¹ Much blame for this state of skepticism must be laid at the feet of the presently entrenched interpretation of the Merenptah stele.

The Israel-in-Canaan interpretation of the stele (assumed by the surviving chronologies in the literature) is a significant stumbling block to a reconstruction of biblical Israel's origins in Canaan. The biblical text and the associated archaeological evidence from Abraham to Saul are consistently coherent only if the exodus/conquest occurred in the 12th century BC. That would mean Israel was in Egypt in the time of Merenptah. It may have happened in the way which the next section describes.

IV. ISRAEL IN EGYPT IN THE TIME OF MERENPTAH (1213–1203 BC)

1. *Merenptah's early acts.* Though advanced in age, Merenptah seems to have been an effective and seasoned ruler when he stepped into his father Ramesses II's sandals. Sometime between years two and five, Merenptah mobilized the army and marched into Canaan to deal with recalcitrant vassals and to extend direct control of southern Canaan. According to Kenneth Kitchen it had been half a century since this had been done.⁶²

a. *Merenptah's crossing of the highlands.* Several scholars have taken note of a supposed "garbled reference" to Merenptah's campaign into Canaan embedded within the Joshua account of the allotment of the land to the tribes of Judah and Benjamin.⁶³ One of the boundary markers between the allotments of these tribes is the

⁶⁰ William G. Dever, "What Remains of the House That Albright Built?," *BA* 56.1 (1993): 25–35.

⁶¹ William G. Dever, "How to Tell a Canaanite from an Israelite," in *The Rise of Ancient Israel* (Washington: Biblical Archaeology Society, 1992), Kindle edition loc. 458. The "conquest model" assumes that the Israelites (as a discrete population) entered Canaan and established themselves in the land through force of arms, as described in the book of Joshua.

⁶² Kenneth Kitchen, *Pharaoh Triumphant: The Life and Times of Ramesses II, King of Egypt* (Warminster, UK: Aris & Phillips, 1982), 215. Not all Egyptologists believe Merenptah campaigned in Canaan (see, e.g., C. R. Higginbotham, *Egyptianization and Elite Emulation in Ramesside Palestine: Governance and Accommodation on the Imperial Periphery* [CHANE 2; Leiden: Brill, 2000], 46–50). Some might argue that Ramesses was so inactive in the affairs of Canaan in the later years of his reign that he did not vigorously oppose the Israelite incursion into the land (assuming it occurred in the 13th century BC). By this argument, Merenptah would have set affairs in order in Canaan by exacting retribution against the Israelites (as his father Ramesses had failed to do). However, it does not seem likely that the Israelites could have run riot over the highlands and the coast and the valleys and threatened the Egyptian commercial lifelines with impunity in the time of Ramesses without a response from the Egyptian military and administrative presence in Canaan. The main argument against this view is the ringing silence of the biblical text.

⁶³ Frank J. Yurco, "3,200-Year-Old Picture," 37.

spring or “waters of Nephtoah,” still identifiable in a northwest suburb of modern Jerusalem.⁶⁴

This place name should be translated as the “spring of Merenptah,” according to Gary Rendsburg. This name suggests the passage of Merenptah’s forces during his only “known” campaign into Canaan.⁶⁵

If the “spring of Merenptah” in the Jerusalem environs was a waypoint en route to Yenoam, it clarifies the route the Egyptian forces followed through the highlands. After taking Gezer, Merenptah would have proceeded east via the Jerusalem corridor up into the highlands, skirting Jerusalem to the north, and continuing down into the Jordan Valley. Reaching the Jordan Valley, he may have ascended the Transjordan plateau to follow the King’s Highway north to Yenoam—or he may have proceeded north up the Jordan Valley.

If the “waters of Nephtoah” is an authentic toponym referencing Merenptah, the existence of this named location in the time of Joshua indicates that Merenptah’s passage had occurred in the biblical chronology *before* the tribal allotments were defined—and therefore before the conquest. If correct, this is an important synchronism supporting an Israelite conquest *after* the time of Merenptah.

b. *The location of Yenoam.* Though the location of Yenoam has been debated, there is reason to believe it was located at Tell esh-Shihab east of the Galilee Lake.⁶⁶ This site was in a likely position to dominate the King’s Highway and affect Egyptian economic interests. If Tell esh-Shihab is not Yenoam, then the site is the ruin of an otherwise unknown (and significant) ancient town that was destroyed at the end of the Late Bronze Age and was not reinhabited. In the stele Merenptah says of Yenoam, it was “made non-existent” (Yurco’s translation above).

c. *Israel was in Egypt in the time of Merenptah.* If the above assessment of the stele’s reference is correct, there appears to be no compelling archaeological evidence to locate the Israelites in Canaan in the time of Merenptah’s early campaign.

⁶⁴ Josh 15:9; 18:15. These passages probably refer to the well or spring at Lifta.

⁶⁵ G. Rendsburg, “Merneptah in Canaan,” *JSEEA* 11.3 (1981): 171–72 (with corrigenda printed as supplement to *JSEEA* 12 [1982]). See also Dan’el Kahn, “A Geo-Political and Historical Perspective of Merneptah’s Policy in Canaan,” in *The Ancient Near East in the 12th–10th Centuries BCE*, 259–60.

⁶⁶ Y. Aharoni, *Land of the Bible*, 177, believed Yenoam was at T. el Ubeidiya. But Nadav Na’aman (“Yeno’am,” *TA* 4 [1977]: 168–69) believes a site further east in the Transjordan (at Tell esh-Shihab) uniquely fits several earlier Egyptian references. M. Hasel, “Merneptah’s Reference to Israel,” 51, lists and supports opposing arguments.

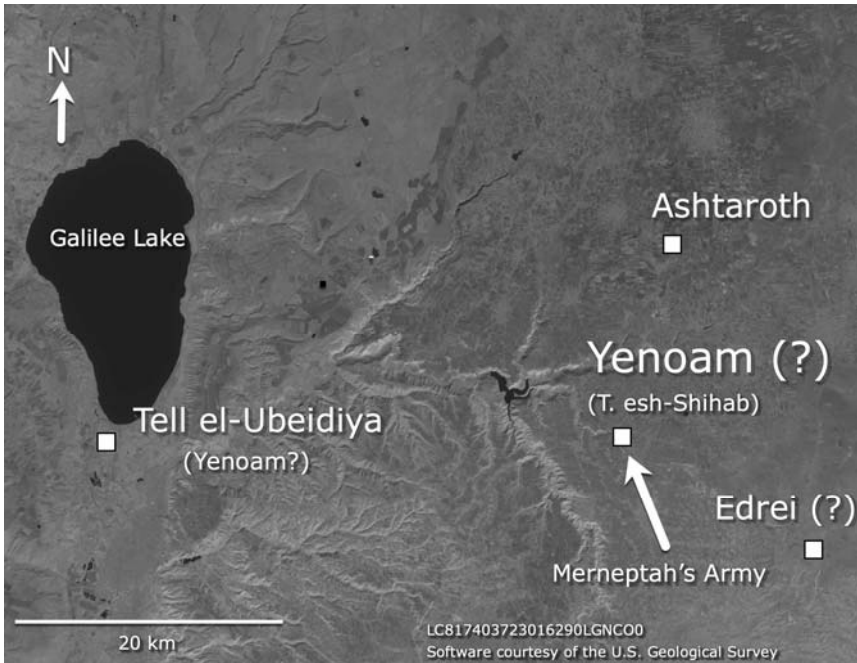


Fig. 3. Possible location of Yenoam at Tell esh-Shihab.

2. *Merenptah's Libyan war (1209 BC)*. Several years may have passed after Merneptah's expedition to Canaan before his war with the Libyans. A threat to Egypt from the Sea Peoples began to materialize when emigrants from the Aegean/Eastern Mediterranean began appearing on the north coast of Africa at the Libyan harbor of Mersa Matruh and points west. This was happening by Merneptah's year five—though sporadic raids had been occurring throughout the Aegean and eastern Mediterranean for nearly a century.

The challenge posed to Merneptah's control of the delta by the western coalition of Libyans and Sea Peoples in 1209 BC represents one of the greatest historic threats to ancient Egypt's sovereignty. The outcome of the conflict may have appeared uncertain from the beginning of the Egyptian troop build-up.

Assuming the Israelites were in the eastern delta, the gravity of the circumstances would have been evident to them as they watched from the fields and the brickyards as column after column of troops emptied the garrisons heading west.

By the time of the battle the Libyans had already penetrated the more northerly of the western oases (as far south as Farafra). As they laid their plans, they may have conspired with the Nubians south of the first cataract to launch a simul-

taneous attack on Egypt's southern fortresses in hopes of splitting the Egyptian forces.⁶⁷

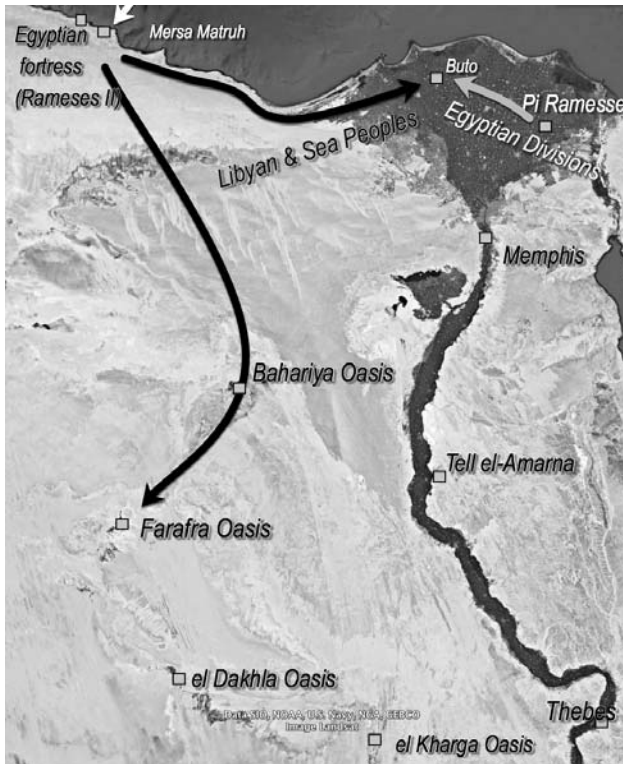


Fig. 4. The Battle near Buto ca. 1209 BC

In early April the report came that the Libyans were mobilizing. Merenptah responded by marshaling his troops, a process that required two weeks or more.⁶⁸ Rather than marching to intercept the Libyan force, Merenptah concentrated his troops in the northwestern delta and waited to be attacked. News of the Nubian revolt breaking out to the south appears to have reached Merenptah, but he did not respond by dividing his forces.⁶⁹

a. *Clash of armies.* The Libyan coalition, estimated at 16,000 men-at-arms, entered the fertile fields of the northwestern delta intending to attack the Egyptian position at Par-Yeru near Buto. The Egyptians had chosen the ground, presumably

⁶⁷ See Kitchen, *Pharaoh Triumphant*, 215. Though this is a postulation, it seems to explain the facts. Merenptah's stele does not mention such an alliance. See Kahn, "Geo-Political and Historical Perspective," 262.

⁶⁸ Kahn, "Geo-Political and Historical Perspective," 261 n. 55.

⁶⁹ Anthony J. Spalinger, *War in Ancient Egypt: The New Kingdom* (Malden, MA: Blackwell 2005), 236–39; cf. Kitchen, *Pharaoh Triumphant*, 215.

where their chariots could dominate the battlefield on firm ground. Their position was manned by an estimated 20,000–25,000 troops.⁷⁰

The armies collided, contending for six bloody hours before the Libyans quit the field with massive losses. When the engagement ended, the Egyptians stood victorious on a field of slaughter. Over 9,000 enemies were reported killed; Egyptian losses are unknown.⁷¹ Many enemy troops were taken captive to be settled in military colonies.

Anthony Spalinger believes that the sheer numbers of combatants testify to the immensity of the threat to Egypt. He believes the economic capabilities of Egypt were stretched to the limit to finance this war.⁷²

b. *Suppression of the Nubian revolt.* Immediately following victory over the Libyans, Merenptah's focus turned south to deal with the Nubian revolt occurring between the first and second cataracts. The enormous second cataract fortresses with their granaries were probably targeted by the enemy. The suppression of the Nubian rebels by Merenptah's viceroy was quick and brutal; the rebel leaders were burned to death to deny them the afterlife.⁷³

But what of the Israelites? If they were in the delta at the time, the stele's reference to them has a particularly meaningful context. The occasion of the Libyan war would have been Israel's one chance to escape their enslavement.

3. *Revolt of the Israelites.* If the people of Israel were in the eastern delta when the Libyan war broke out, they surely would have seen Egypt's military involvement on successive fronts as a unique and perhaps providential opportunity to escape slavery, particularly if the outcome of the war seemed uncertain. Troops guarding the capital (*Pi Ramesse*) and those stationed in the fortresses in the Wadi Tumilat must have marched out to join with other commands converging at Buto, 70 miles west-northwest of the capital. The scale of this deployment would have left minimal security in the capital region south to the Wadi Tumilat.

These conditions were ripe for an Israelite uprising. The pharaoh of the oppression had envisioned just such a scenario. He said to his people,

Behold, the people of Israel are too many and too mighty for us. Come, let us deal shrewdly with them, lest they multiply, and, if war breaks out, they join our enemies and fight against us and escape from the land (Exod 1:9–10).

⁷⁰ The size of the Egyptian army compares with the forces of Ramesses II at Kadesh in his famous battle against the Hittites where he commanded four divisions totaling about 20,000 men. See Donald B. Redford, *Egypt, Canaan, and Israel in Ancient Times* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1992), 249. Spalinger, *War in Ancient Egypt*, 239, notes that Merenptah (probably in personal command) had held his position in the pastureland with his supply lines short and well protected. Spalinger believes the chariot was the deciding factor in the victory over the Libyan foot soldiers. One estimate of the total enemy force (Libyan coalition) is 30,500 including soldiers and dependents (*ibid.*, 240).

⁷¹ van Dijk, "Amarna Period," 294; Redford, *Egypt, Canaan, and Israel*, 249.

⁷² Spalinger, *War in Ancient Egypt*, 246–47 n. 11.

⁷³ Kahn, "Geo-Political and Historical Perspective," 262. Compare the similar fate of those judged guilty of Ramesses III's murder—see Susan Redford, *The Harem Conspiracy: The Murder of Ramesses III* (DeKalb, IL: Northern Illinois University Press, 2008).

The primary context of this passage, no doubt, establishes Ramesses II as the first pharaoh of reference. But the tension caused by the large concentrated population of Israelites in Ramesses's time was not resolved. It probably continued into the reign of his son Merenptah, when this prophetic passage has a second application and possible fulfillment.

If the Israelites attempted to escape Egypt in the time of the Libyan war this would explain Merenptah's reprisal recorded in the stele: "Israel is laid waste; his seed is not."

a. *Where was Moses?* In this scenario the role of Moses has to be accounted for in the events leading up to the exodus. Assuming Moses grew up as a relatively obscure but privileged personality in the "house" of Ramesses II, his flight to Midian after killing an Egyptian taskmaster would have placed him far from events developing in Egypt.

In this present reconstruction, Moses would have been in Midian when the failed Israelite revolt occurred ca. 1209 BC. Moses would remain in the Midian grazing grounds another three decades before returning to Egypt in the days of Ramesses III (1184–1153 BC) to lead the exodus ca. 1175 BC.⁷⁴

It was during the time Moses was in Midian that the Israelite revolt could have occurred. The fact that Merenptah's action against the Israelites was unrecorded in the Bible may be explained by the Point of View (POV) of the text. In this period the POV is that of Moses.

During "those many days the king of Egypt died and the people of Israel groaned because of their slavery. And God heard their groaning" (Exod 2:23–25). This text indicates the Israelites suffered ongoing affliction *after* the death of Ramesses II—the pharaoh of the oppression.

In the generation before Moses returned to Egypt the decimated male population of Israel could have recovered from Merenptah's carnage. And despite Merenptah's hyperbole, he would not have destroyed the entire population of the Israelites (for economic reasons).

b. *A window of time.* The only *biblical* period in which Merenptah could have inflicted slaughter on the Israelites is in the period *before* the exodus—assuming the post-exodus biblical record is comprehensive and theologically consistent. From the time the Israelites departed Egypt, the narrative POV follows very closely successive details in Israel's life by providing interpretive significance to events according to the principles of Deuteronomy 27–28. Again, it should be noted that there is no biblical record of contact with Egyptian forces after the Israelites left Egypt.

⁷⁴ There appear to be three different pharaohs in the book of Exodus. The pharaoh who knew not Joseph (Exod 1:8) was likely Kamose or Ahmose who enslaved the small population of Israelites ca. 1570 BC; this arguably occurred some years before expelling the Hyksos from Avaris. The pharaoh of the oppression was apparently Ramesses II (sometime after 1279 BC, per Exod 1:9). And the pharaoh of the exodus was likely Ramesses III (ca. 1175 BC).

V. CONCLUSIONS

The linguistic argument for the Israel-in-Canaan interpretation of the Merenptah stele's reference to Israel originates with those competent in the Egyptian materials. Egyptologists have presumed that the Israelites could not have been in Egypt in the time of Merenptah because they were "foreign" (to Egypt). But in examining the "foreign" concept it seems the Egyptologists have not addressed the special case of Asiatic pastoralists east of the Pelusiac, foreigners living in a foreign land.

Recognition that the lands east of the Pelusiac Nile (the traditional enclave of the Israelites in the Wadi Tumilat) was "foreign" to Egypt seems to offer the possibility that the Israelites could have been correctly identified by Merneptah's scribes as a "foreign landless people" in the eastern delta. The Bible strongly emphasizes that the Israelites were not acculturated into the Egyptian worldview; these facts may explain the classifiers of the Israel term in the hieroglyphic text.

The secondary argument (the literary approach) has focused on identifying the logic implicit in the relationship of toponym couplets in the closing lines of the stele that mention Israel. Here, too, it seems possible to find Israel in Egypt, in counterpoint to Hurru (Canaan).

What has been missing in the traditional arguments surrounding the stele is an examination of the qualifying testimony of the biblical narrative. Among other insights, the text reveals that the Egyptians feared (for a century or more) that the Israelites would revolt in a time of external military crisis. This prescient fear of earlier administrations may have been actualized in the time of Merenptah.

Merenptah's review of his major achievements in the closing lines of the stele reads like a "state-of-the union" address, a report to the gods and to his people that he has brought peace to the empire by subduing all enemies. He testifies that he has sustained the requirements of *maat* and fulfilled his divine mandate to insure the interests, prosperity, and tranquility of the people of Egypt. He has restored peace and harmony, which was his prime directive from the gods.

If an actual Israelite revolt occurred during his reign (which would have been widely known by the Egyptian people), citation of his actions in repressing this revolt (it would seem) should constitute an additional basis for commendation at the weighing of his heart before the gods.

If Israel was in Egypt's eastern delta in the time of Merenptah, the uniform coherence between subsequent biblical events and substantial archaeological evidence suggests that the biblical account of Israel's origins (in its present form) may be historically accurate.