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RICHARD S. HESS, GERALD A. KLINGBEIL,  
AND PAUL J. RAY JR.

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# Merenptah's Reference to Israel: Critical Issues for the Origin of Israel

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## *Abstract*

Merenptah's reference to Israel continues to be a focal point in recent studies on the origin of Israel. This essay provides a state-of-the-art analysis focusing on four major areas of debate concerning the Merenptah stela and Karnak reliefs: (1) The meaning of the name *Israel*; (2) the nature of Israel; (3) the location of Israel; and (4) the chronological implications of the stela for Israel's origins. The study ends with some of the sociological and anthropological implications for associating Merneptah's Israel with the archaeological data from the central hill country.

## *Introduction*

Over a dozen new histories of Israel or collected works, as well as specialized studies on Israelite religion, ethnicity, and others dealing directly with Merenptah's campaign<sup>1</sup> testify not only to the fact that the task of writing Israel's history is vital and alive today but that "every reconstruction of ancient Israel is inevitably faced with the widely discussed single mention of the entity Israel in the Merneptah stela" (Hasel 1994: 45). Yet despite the vigorous discussion by biblical scholars, archaeologists, philologists, and historians of the

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1. *Histories and Collected Works*: Fritz (1996: 73–75); Lemche (1996: 81–82; 1998a: 37–38); Stager (1998: 124–27); Isserlin (1998: 56); Kaiser (1998: 107–8); Kamm (1999: 12); McNutt (1999: 39–40); Malamat (2001: 60); Soggin (2001: 15); Noll (2001: 124–26); Matthews (2002: 28–30); Dever (2001: 118–21; 2003: 201–8); Provan, Long, and Longman (2003: 169–70); Liverani (2005: 25–26); Miller (2005: 93–96); Williamson (2007: 3–14).

*Israelite Religion*: Zevit (2001: 113 n. 47); M. S. Smith (2002: 25–27); Hess (2007: 18).

*Ethnicity*: Dever (1995a: 200–213); Faust (2006); Finkelstein (1996: 198–212); Edelman (2002: 25–55); Sparks (1998: 95–97); Grosby (2002: 92); Bloch-Smith (2003: 401–25); Killebrew (2005: 56–57, 154–55).

*Merenptah's Campaign*: Nibbi (1994: 74–89; 1996: 79–102); Kruchten (1994: 37–48); Niccacci (1997); Yurco (1997); Kitchen (1997: 71–76); Whitelam (2000); Görg (2001); Rainey (2001; 2003); Lurson (2003); Hjelm and Thompson (2002); Hasel (2003a; 2004); Kitchen (2004); Morenz (2008).

ancient Near East and Egypt, divergent opinions continue. Four major areas have contributed to this impasse—questions about (1) the meaning of the name *Israel*; (2) the nature of Israel; (3) the location of Israel; and (4) the chronological implications of the stela for Israel's origin. This essay explores these areas as they impinge on the first extrabiblical mention of Israel and how we relate to this historical reference.

### *The Name Israel*

The oldest mention of Israel as a collective entity appears on the Merenptah stela.<sup>2</sup> The issue of the interpretation of the name *ysryʒr/l* based on Egyptian orthography and Semitic parallels continues in recent publications.

*Non-Israel.* Alessandra Nibbi has argued again recently that the entity *ysryʒr/l* in the Merenptah stela is not to be equated with the region of Canaan and biblical Israel at all (Nibbi 1994; 1996). She argues that *ysryʒr/l* could be interpreted as “the wearers of the sidelock” (1989: 101). Her suggestion has been virtually ignored, and she admits that it is based on an argument from silence. She maintains that all entities mentioned on the stela are to be found in Egypt. “The names of *Jasqrn* and *Qdr* which also appear in these last two lines cannot be accepted as *Askelon* and *Gezer*” (Nibbi 1996: 93–94). This drastic reinterpretation has met with little acceptance, being based largely on her assumption of scribal errors in a number of instances. The Karnak reliefs redated by Yurco to the reign of Merenptah also provide a serious difficulty for Nibbi's hypothesis (Yurco 1986; Hasel 1994: 46). Here, Ashkelon appears with the identical syllabic orthography found in the stela (*KRI* IV:19,5; *RITA* IV:166,2; Ahituv 1984: 70) and is clearly a location in western Asia as is evident from the iconography of the inhabitants defending the city who are depicted as Asiatics (Wreszinski 1935: taf. 1; Helck 1971: 333–35; Hasel 2003a: 34–36).

*Israel/Isarel.* The view that the term *ysryʒr/l* is a possible territory within Canaan but not associated with biblical Israel was proposed by Othniel Margalith (1990). His conclusions are based on the suggestion by G. R. Driver (1948: 135) that the Egyptian *s* could also represent Hebrew *zayin*. Accordingly, the name *ysryʒr/l* could be translated as *lezreel* “which might be an inexperienced way of rendering Yezreel, the valley to the north of the country” (Margalith 1990: 229). As others have pointed out elsewhere, Margalith's attempts to identify the entity *ysryʒr/l* with *Isarel* or *Jezeel* through Ugaritic vocalizations and a Sumerian title of a king are not convincing for an Egyptian inscription with a clear context for this entity in Canaan (Hasel 1994: 46; 1998a: 196–97; compare Kitchen 1966a: 91).

2. For histories of the name and its possible use at Ebla and as a personal name in Ugarit, see Albertz (1987: 369); Vogt (1957: 375); and discussion in Hasel (1998a: 195–96).

*Jezeel.* The suggestion of equating the *ysryʒr/l* of the stela with Jezeel has now been taken up anew by I. Hjelm and Thomas L. Thompson (2002: 14) without any reference to earlier discussions. The identification is rife with difficulties. First, the Egyptian signs for “bolt” (Gardiner 1957: 507, O34) and “folded cloth” (Gardiner 1957: 507, S29) in Old Egyptian represented the sound *s*. In the New Kingdom, Hebrew *zayin* is rendered *ḏ* or *ṯ* in Egyptian and not *s* (Kitchen 1966a: 91, 1966b 59; Helck 1971: 18, 554, 589). Second, *ysryʒr/l* does not include the Egyptian equivalent of *ayin* needed for the reading *yzrʿl*. Third, the reading “Jezeel” must assume that the determinative for people used with *ysryʒr/l* was a scribal error, because it does not fit the designation of a geographical location. The orthographic and philological reasons mitigate the reading of *ysryʒr/l* as Jezeel (see also Kitchen 2004).

*Sharon/Yesharun/ʿAsher.* Hjelm and Thompson maintain that “the regional name *Sharon* and the biblical *Yesharon* cannot be excluded” (2002: 13) without making an argument to explain why this toponym should be considered. For one thing, there remains the problem of the determinative for *ysryʒr/l* that clearly designates a people and not a geographical entity. Moreover, from an orthographic perspective, once again the “folded cloth” (Gardiner 1957: 507, S29) in Old, Middle, and Late Egyptian represented the sound *s*, not *š*. The sound for Hebrew *shin* was produced with the “garden pool” (Gardiner 1957: 491, N37) or, more appropriately in this case, the “pool with lotus flowers” (Gardiner 1957: 480, M8), as is evident in the designation *ššw*, “Shasu.” The same reasons mitigate Hjelm and Thompson’s revival of Rowley’s theory that *ysryʒr/l* may be equated with *ʿAsher* “the biblical tribe and son of Jacob” (Hjelm and Thompson 2002: 13; compare Rowley 1950: 3, 33–35). In addition, the determinative for people ( $\text{𓂏𓂏}$ ) is a man and woman seated over three strokes for the plural, indicating that this cannot refer to a person such as the son of Jacob. This essay serves as a caution and reminder that a knowledge of the Egyptian language and syllabic orthography is essential when assessing Egyptian texts (see critique by Kitchen 2004).

*Israel.* In fact, Egyptologists have almost exclusively identified the entity *ysryʒr/l* as Israel based on the syllabic orthography of the name and the wider context of the final hymnic-poetic unit of the stela.<sup>3</sup> In this identification, the weight of both philology and contextual considerations are important.

3. The majority of Egyptologists over the years have supported this interpretation, including Spiegelberg (1896: 23; 1908: 404 n. 5); Steindorff (1896: 331–33); Breasted (1897: 62–68; 1906: 4:256–59); Williams (1958: 140); Kitchen (1966a: 63–97; 1966b: 59–60); Wilson (1969: 378); Lichtheim (1976: 77); Ebach (1978: 205); Hornung (1983: 232); Kaplony-Heckel (1985: 552); Goedicke (1985: 273–78); Yurco (1986: 189–215; 1990: 20–38); Murnane (1992: 348–53); Redford (1986: 188–200; 1992b: 700–701); Hoffmeier (1997: 30); Hasel (1994, 1998a: 194–203); Niccacci (1997: 100–107); Yurco (1997: 27–55); Kitchen (1997: 71–76); Bietak (2000: 184); Görg (2001: 21–27); Rainey (2001: 57–75; 2003: 181); for the most recent discussion, see Hasel (2003a); Kitchen (2004).

### *The Location of Israel*

Merenptah's Israel has been located in various areas geographically within and outside Canaan. Some have surmized that Israel was still located in Egypt (Nibbi 1989, 1994, 1996; Rendsburg 1992; see critique in Hasel 1994: 56 n. 11), a view that can now be discarded based on recent, structural studies of the final hymnic-poetic unit (Hasel 1994: 47–51; 1998a; 2003a; 2004; for a consensus on the structure of the hymnic-poetic unit, see Rainey 2001: 63; Yurco 1986: 189–90; Kitchen 1997: 74). Those who recognize that the structure of geographical sequences requires Israel to be located in Canaan have tried to identify it more specifically (1) as a territory in the hill country opposite coastal Canaan; (2) as a socioethnic group in Transjordan; or (3) as a socioethnic group in the central hill country. Others insist that it is not possible to know where Israel is located within Canaan.

*Territory/People Opposite Coastal Canaan.* In 1985, Gösta Ahlström and Diana Edelman argued, based on a proposed ring-structure, that Merenptah's Israel stood in parallel with Canaan, which thus represent two subregions that together comprised the narrower area of Cisjordan. The area of Israel specifically denoted the central hill country, whereas Canaan represented the adjacent coastal plain and lowland area. This view was later expanded in Ahlström's *Who Were the Israelites?* (1986) and his magnum opus published after his death (1993: 282–88). Here Ahlström states, “Canaan’ refers to the cultural and urban areas, but the name Israel—which in the poem has the determinative for people and which must be older than the time of Merneptah—refers to the wooded highlands where almost no cities of military importance existed.” Ahlström and Edelman’s original suggestion, however, received vigorous opposition, causing a modified ring-structure published in 1991. Both proposals have been critiqued, with the results having left too many inconsistencies and unresolved questions (Hasel 1994: 47–49). Their supposition that scribal inconsistencies are to blame for the unfortunate use of the determinative for people,  $\text{𓂏}$ , is not based on the data that indicate the remarkable scribal reliability of the stela specifically and the usage of Egyptian determinatives in the New Kingdom generally.<sup>4</sup>

*Socioethnic Group in Transjordan.* Nadav Na’aman conducted a study on the location Yeno’am and suggested that Israel be located in the Bashan region based on the mention of the site in (1) an Amarna letter (EA 197) indicating a

4. Kitchen (1997: 75), who has painstakingly studied the stela for any grammatical errors, concludes that “only 28 out of 3,300 hieroglyphs are open to any kind of question, of which only 7 or 8 can possibly be regarded as serious scribal slips affecting the understanding of the text in any significant way.” The preliminary results of studies on the use of determinatives in the Egyptian New Kingdom have shown remarkable consistency; see Hasel 2000; 2003b; 2004; forthcoming a; forthcoming b.



location in Jordan; (2) a listing among Syrian toponyms by Amenhotep III; and (3) another listing from Ramesses II, in which it appears after Qatna and Tahshi. Based on this evidence, he identifies Yeno'am with Tell eš-Shihab, situated west of Edrei on the Yarmuk River (Na'aman 1977; 1994: 248). He believes that "if we follow the order of the toponyms in the passage, it should be sought in the same area" (Na'aman 1994: 248).

Larry Herr (1997b; 1998; 1999b; 2000) expands Na'aman's conclusions in a series of articles reporting on the Late Bronze–Iron Age transition at Tall al-ʿUmayri, Jordan. Herr reports on the excavation of a four-room house, collared-rim store jars, and a diverse ceramic repertoire resembling the pottery from the Shechem area. The site suffered a major destruction and displays evidence of conflagration. This leads him to suggest that "we should look east rather than to the west" for Merenptah's Israel. He believes that the "much discussed determinative before 'Israel' indicating a 'people' rather than a 'city' could apply to a group of settlements the Egyptians knew primarily as a tribal entity or alliance rather than a city state in the Canaanite fashion" (1998: 260). Herr's attempt to link the material culture of Transjordan with the material cultures of Cisjordan and early Israel seems warranted based on the material culture and architectural data at ʿUmayri. Nevertheless, his historical conclusions stem from the hypothesis of Frank Moore Cross, who envisioned the tribe of Reuben as the first to settle, as early as the 13th century B.C.E., followed sometime later by the Israelite tribes (1988), a theory that has received limited support. Indeed, the archaeological evidence may be important for extending the territory attributed to early Israel by archaeologists to Transjordan (Dever 1998b: 223 n. 29), yet it remains to be seen whether it is to be associated directly with Merenptah's Israel based on Na'aman's suggestion.

First, Na'aman's identification of Yeno'am in the Bashan has not received a wide following because most scholars have identified Yeno'am with Tell en-Na'am (Tel Yin'am) in the eastern lower Galilee (Saarisalo 1927: 112–18; Alt 1928: 53; Jirku 1937: 33 n. 3; Noth 1937: 217; Gardiner 1947: 146; Helck 1968–69: 28; Fritz 1973: 137; see discussion in Hasel 1998b: 148–50). Second, as Na'aman himself admits, "it is equally possible . . . that the author mentioned the cities first and the people next, and that there is no sequential order of listing" based on geography (1994: 248). Third, the structure of the final hymnic-poetic unit with the cities and Israel placed within Canaan and Kharu (*Hʾrw*) suggest that all entities are to be sought in Cisjordan. In other words, even though further archaeological evidence may yet show that early Israel extended into the Transjordanian plateau as early as the 13th century B.C.E., the Egyptians, as described in the Merenptah stela, may have in fact encountered them only in Cisjordan. Even the presence of Shasu prisoners may indicate an extension of the campaign in Transjordan, but, significantly, these prisoners are specifically identified as "foes of Shasu" and not Israelites (Yurco 1986, 1991; Hasel 2003a:

### Chart 1. Verse Structure of the Merenptah Stela

Binding of enemies	A	The princes are prostrate, saying "Peace!" Not one raises his head among the Nine Bows
Lands/Nations	B	Desolation for Tehenu; Hatti is pacified ( <i>hṭp</i> )
Region	C	Plundered is Pa-Canaan with every evil Carried off is Ashkelon
Cities/People	D	Captured is Gezer Yenoam is made nonexistent Israel is laid waste, his seed is not
Region	C'	Kharu is become a widow because of Egypt
Lands/Nations	B'	All lands together, they are pacified ( <i>hṭp</i> )
Binding of enemies	A'	Everyone who was restless has been bound

32–33). Future archaeological investigation in this region will undoubtedly be a significant addition to the growing data for the Late Bronze Age in Jordan (see provisionally Younker 1997a; 1999; 2003a).

*Socioethnic Group in Central Hill Country.* The central hill country is where most scholars prefer to place Merenptah's Israel. Roland de Vaux based his conclusions on the order of the final hymnic-poetic unit. He correctly surmised that the entities Canaan and Kharu were synonymous and that the cities and Israel lay between them (see Chart 1; Hasel 1994: 48; 2004: 80). He then paired Ashkelon and Gezer as "places situated in the south of the country and Yenoam in the north, so that Israel must be in the north or in the centre" (de Vaux 1978: 391–92). James K. Hoffmeier has recently reconstructed the Merenptah stela on a geographical sequence from south to north. In his new structure, "The cities of Gaza, Ashkelon, and Gezer represent a nice geographical unit within a limited area of what would later be known as Philistia. . . . The tribes of Israel appear to have been located primarily in the central Hill Country and Upper Galilee" (Hoffmeier 1997: 29). This suggestion certainly has merits even though the structure proposed leaves some open questions (see the evaluation in Hasel 2004). Kitchen wrote, in his recent book *On the Reliability of the Old Testament*, that Merenptah's Israel is "west [*sic*] of Ascalon and Gezer, and south of Yenoam, and hence in the central Canaanite hill country" (2003c: 460). William G. Dever (1992b; 1995a; 1998a; 2001b; 2003) has been the most outspoken proponent identifying Merenptah's Israel with his "proto-Israelites" of the hill country. Most recently, he has argued that "there does exist in Canaan a people calling themselves 'Israel,' and thus called 'Israel' by

the Egyptians—who, after all, are hardly biblically biased, and they cannot have invented such a specific and unique people as 'Israel' for their own propaganda purposes. . . . What is left in Canaan ca. 1200 as an 'Israelite' enclave except the hill country? If Merneptah's 'Israel' was not here, where was it?" (2001b: 118–19). This last question is perhaps the most important, for it suggests a deeper assumption based not so much on the stela, which clearly locates Israel in the Canaan/Kharu territory, but on geographical information known from other Egyptian texts, the Amarna letters, and the Hebrew Bible.

### *The Nature of Israel*

In the current discussion, the nature of Merenptah's Israel also remains a crucial issue. Martin Noth's pronouncement that it is "impossible to say with any certainty what the 'Israel' here referred to actually was" (1960b: 3) ignores the indications that we do have from the Egyptian texts and reliefs. Israel Finkelstein (1988b: 28) goes further, stating that "the problem, of course, is that we cannot identify their location, nor do we have any clue for the size or socio-political organization of this group." But he cites not one Egyptologist or any Egyptological data in support of his statement. For the sake of brevity, I will simply summarize the evidence that we do have. The critical distinction of the determinatives indicates that Israel is a socioethnic entity. The determinative, a man and woman seated over three strokes indicating the plural, says nothing concerning whether this people is settled or seminomadic.<sup>5</sup> Groups that had this designation included those who were sedentary and those who were not. The interpretation that Israel's seed was grain, as Spiegelberg, Steindorff, and Breasted suggested long ago,<sup>6</sup> may suggest that Israel was agriculturally living off the land and was enjoying a sedentary lifestyle by 1209 B.C.E. (contra Rainey; see Hasel 2003a: 20–26). Certainly, Israel's depictions on the reliefs correspond to portray Israel as a people not tied to a city-state system (Hasel 2003: 27–37).<sup>7</sup> Despite these distinctions, Israel remains significant enough to

5. Albright stated that Merenptah's Israel was "not yet settled, as proved by the determinative for 'people'" (1939: 22), a view that was followed by his student G. Ernest Wright (1962: 71). Those who follow the Alt-Noth school likewise suggest that Israel here refers to a nomadic group. However, the simple fact that Israel is not identified as a territory or city-state does not imply that they were pastoral or nomadic (Whitelam 1994: 72).

6. Spiegelberg originally translated *pṛt* as "Saaten" (seed for planting; 1896: 65), based on the same contextual references later cited and augmented by Breasted. In the same year, Steindorff (p. 331) translated the noun as "Frucht" (fruit), followed by Breasted, who affirmed the translation as "grain" (1897: 66). By the turn of the century, this was the accepted translation.

7. The assignment of these reliefs to Merenptah, advocated by Yurco (1986; 1990; 1991) but disputed by Redford (1986), has now been conclusively resolved by Brand (forthcoming a; forthcoming b) as belonging to Merenptah.

be listed with major walled cities such as Ashkelon and Gezer, as well as the northern city of Yeno'am. The current skepticism regarding the nature of Israel and its connection with later monarchical Israel is not due to the ambiguity of the information contained in the Merenptah stela but may in fact be the result of the 13th-century date of Merenptah's campaign and the apparent lack of archaeological correlates showing this continuity in the minds of some interpreters.<sup>8</sup> If the evidence of the Merenptah stela does indeed refer to an "agriculturally settled people," in the words of Spiegelberg (1896: 65), then questions must be readdressed to the chronological and archaeological evidence of hill country settlement.<sup>9</sup>

### *The Chronology of Israel's Settlement*

The chronological implications of Merenptah's reference to Israel became a serious matter of discussion shortly after Sir William Flinders Petrie made his discovery of the stela in 1896.<sup>10</sup> The Merenptah stela has chronological implications in relationship to (1) exodus and conquest; (2) peaceful infiltration; (3) indigenous origin; and (4) revisionist theories.

*Exodus and Conquest Theories.* Major proponents of the late date for the exodus had earlier cited Merenptah as the pharaoh of the exodus (Rowley 1938, 1942: 28; Droiton 1955: 45; de Wit 1960: 10) or believed that Israel came into the land just before that time (Albright 1939: 21–22, 1951: 10–11; Wright 1962: 58–60, 70–71; Bright 1972: 114; Finegan 1959: 106–7). However, many minimized or failed to recognize the chronological implications of the stela for the biblical details involved in the exodus. Roland K. Harrison (1969: 176) wrote, "It would seem from the available evidence that a date in the middle of

8. Finkelstein (1994; 1996b: 198–212); compare the recent discussion by Bloch-Smith (2003: 405), who sees a "widespread abandonment of 'Israelite' highland rural settlements in the eleventh to tenth century B.C.E. and discontinuities in material culture," which necessitates "greater latitude in moving from Merneptah's Israel to premonarchic and monarchic ethnic Israel" because "textually and archaeologically attested traits from Iron Age II need not have pertained in Iron Age I."

9. The tendency of biblical scholars to emphasize that there was no mention of Israel between the time of the Merenptah stela and the time of Shalmaneser III implies that the two entities should not be related. This ignores the problem of surviving archaeological evidence. Kitchen points out that, if we look to Assyrian sources for references to Egypt, we find one attestation of Musri from the reign of Assur-bel-kala, ca. 1070 B.C.E., then a 220-year gap until soldiers of Musri are reported by Shalmaneser III in 853 B.C.E., and then another 130 years pass before Egypt reappears in the texts of Sargon II (722, 720 B.C.E.). He concludes, "If we did not have the massive stone monuments in the Nile Valley (on a scale that never existed in Israel) we might be 'justified' in asking the same inane question: are these 'Musris' all the same, with a common history?" (Kitchen 2003b: 115 n. 5).

10. The stela was published by Petrie (1897: 13), but the hieroglyphic text was published and translated by Spiegelberg (1896) in the year that it was discovered.

the thirteenth century B.C. is required for the crossing of the Jordan. This conclusion is supported by the evidence of the Merneptah stele, the nature of which demands the presence of Israel in Canaan about 1200 B.C.” But, in actuality, the Merneptah stela does not support a particular date *per se*; it simply serves as a *terminus ante quem* for Israel in Canaan: Israel must have been located in Canaan by 1209 B.C.E. (or earlier if one follows the middle or high chronologies).

J. P. Hyatt (1971: 43–44) recognized the problem that the Merneptah stela presented for identifying either Merneptah or Ramesses II as the pharaoh of the exodus. Exodus 2:23 states that pharaoh died during Moses’ 40-year sojourn. But despite the stated length of the sojourn, there is no pharaoh who would have died in the middle of the 67-year reign of Ramesses II. Hyatt opts for either an exodus during the reign of Ramesses II (in which case, Exod 2:23 must be discounted), or Merneptah as the pharaoh of the exodus (in which case, the 40 years of Israel’s wandering would be impossible).<sup>11</sup>

J. W. Jack (1898: 41) wrote, just two years after the stela was found and published, that the stela “has been a serious difficulty to the upholders of the later-date theory of the Exodus, for it is clear that, if the Israelites left Egypt . . . in Merneptah’s own reign and wandered in the desert for forty years or more, they could not have been settled in Palestine by the fifth year of his reign.” Recognizing this problem, Kenneth Kitchen (1966b: 60–61; 1998; 2003c: 307–8) prefers dating the exodus early in the reign of Ramesses II. But Kitchen likewise does not account for Exod 2:23, which indicates the death of the pharaoh of the oppression while Moses was in exile, or Exod 7:7, which states that Moses was 80 when he first spoke to Pharaoh. Several questions remain unresolved. Who was the pharaoh who ordered all male children killed? Who was the pharaoh of the oppression, and if he died while Moses was in exile, who was the pharaoh of the exodus? For these and other reasons, Egyptologists and biblical scholars such as C. R. Conder (1896: 255–58), Georg Steindorff (1896: 330–33), Kurt Sethe (1904: 933), H. T. Obbink (1909: 238–58), and others insisted that the Merneptah stela supported only a 15th-century date.<sup>12</sup> James Orr went even further, stating that the Merneptah stela dealt a “death blow” to

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11. Merneptah was about 66 years of age when he became king and reigned for a mere 10 years (Hornung 1964; Hayes 1959, 1970; Rowton 1959, 1960, 1966; Redford 1966, 1973; Bierbrier 1975, 1978; Wente and van Siclen 1976; Helck 1987; Casperson 1988; Krauss 1989; Kitchen 1987, 1989, 1992a; Ward 1992b).

12. Biblical scholars who currently favor a 15th-century date for the exodus include Waltke (1972: 33–47), Archer (1974), Aling (1979: 97–101; 1981), Merrill (1982: 107–21; 1995), Shea (1982: 23), Dyer (1983: 225–43), Kaiser (1998: 104–9), and Walton (2003: 258–72). Archaeologists and Egyptologists include Bimson and Livingston (1987), Bimson (1991), Ray (1986, 1997), Hoerth (1998: 179), Chavalas and Adamthwaite (1999), Habachi (2001: 119–22), Livingston (2003), Zuhdi (1993; 2003–4), Aling (2004), and B. G. Wood (1990; 2005a; 2005b; 2007).

the hypothesis of an exodus during the reign of Ramesses II or Merenptah: "Both from above and below, therefore, the theory which puts the exodus in the 19th dynasty breaks down chronologically" (1897: 161–77; see also Peet 1922: 121; Garstang 1931: 146; Robinson 1931: 80; and discussion in Engel 1979: 373–99). A century later, Mark Chavalas and Murray Adamthwaite (1999: 86) state: "There is simply not enough time for Israel to depart from Egypt, spend forty years in the wilderness, conquer the land, and then, either during or just after the conquest, engage a well-equipped Egyptian army under Merenptah in his fifth year."<sup>13</sup>

One must admit that if the biblical data are taken at face value—the death of a king while Moses was in exile and 40 years of wandering in the wilderness following an exodus from Egypt—the late date cannot easily be accommodated. Of course, these arguments assume that the Israel of the stela is to be equated with biblical Israel. These issues can be partially sidestepped if one takes John Bright's (1981: 114) position that "unfortunately, we cannot be sure that this Israel is part of the group that had come from Egypt, for it is possible (although there is no evidence for it) that a tribal group named Israel had already lived in Palestine." Reinterpretations of Israel in the stela lead to several alternative explanations that either envision multiple groups that may be described as "Israel" or multiple conquests (for example, Meek 1936; Rowley 1942; Malamat 1998).

*Peaceful Infiltration Models.* The model proposed by Albrecht Alt (1953) and Martin Noth (1960b; compare Weippert 1971) argued that Israel emerged from nomadic and seminomadic clans that migrated from Transjordan and peacefully settled in Canaan over a period of centuries. The chronological implications of the Merenptah stela were minimized by arguing that it was not possible to know whether there was any relationship between Merenptah's Israel and the Israel of the Old Testament (Noth 1960b: 3). A later development of this hypothesis equates Israel with the seminomadic inhabitants of Shasu who are said to have migrated from Transjordan into the central hill country (Giveon 1971; Weippert 1974, 1979; Redford 1992a; Rainey 2001; but see Ward 1972; Lorton 1971–72). The toponym *tš Ššsw ybrw* is a crucial element as it is equated with the divine name, *YHWH*, and the origin of Israelite monotheism (Görg 1976, 2000; Weinfeld 1987; Mettinger 1990; Hess 1991; Goedicke 1994). But the Midianite-Kenite hypothesis is not conclusive. Can it be said with any certainty whether the toponym *tš Ššsw ybrw* refers to a region, city, or mountain (Axelsson 1987: 60)? Is it possible to conclusively establish a direct linguistic connection between Egyptian *ybrw* and Hebrew *ybrwb*? Yet this remains a key element for those who associate the foes of Shasu with Israel (Giveon 1971; Fensham 1964; de Moor 1990; Rainey 2001; but see de Vaux 1969b).

13. See now the discussion by B. G. Wood 2005b; Hoffmeier 2007; B. G. Wood 2007.

Rainey (1991a; 1992a; 2001a; 2003) has recently advocated that the connection between Israel and the Shasu can be established based on the data in Merenptah's stela and reliefs. His serious consideration of these two important sources is to be commended, but six points mitigate the equation of Israel with Shasu (for full documentation on these points, see Hasel 2003a: 27–36; Yurco 1991). First, the stela depicts Israel in Canaan, but the Shasu originated in southern Transjordan and Edom. Second, scene 4 on the “Cour de la Cachette” at Karnak, which Rainey identifies with Canaan, depicts people not associated with a city-state system. He hypothesizes that a city may have been depicted on the missing blocks above, but this is pure speculation, and the blocks may likely have contained an inscription describing Israel in more detail. Third, if scene 4 is identified as Canaan, there is a major break in the sequence of reliefs. This is a serious consideration in light of several new and important studies on the narrative sequence of Egyptian reliefs (Müller 2001; Heinz 2001). Fourth, the stela describes military action against the four entities of Ashkelon, Gezer, Yenoam, and Israel. But the “foes of Shasu” are not shown in battle on the reliefs. They are depicted bound and returning to Egypt in the return scenes. The first four scenes are the only battle scenes that correspond to the stela. Fifth, there is a distinction in names. Israel is not called Shasu and the “foes of Shasu” are in no text identified as Israel. Sixth, Israel is designated as a people with the use of the “people” determinative, but Shasu is depicted with the “hill country” sign most frequently in New Kingdom texts and specifically on the Karnak reliefs. This indicates a geographical entity rather than a people (Lorton 1971–72). These distinctions make the equation of Israel with Shasu difficult. Although it may be possible that Israel absorbed some “foes of Shasu” in their mixed-multitude ranks, the current evidence from Egyptian texts and reliefs do not allow for a direct connection between the two entities. In the end, Merenptah's stela and reliefs say nothing of migrating nomads but clearly establish Israel as a socioethnic people already living in the land of Canaan by Merenptah's fifth year.<sup>14</sup>

*Indigenous Origin Theories.* Theories of indigenous origin have included a variety of models influenced by archaeological, anthropological, sociological, and political disciplines. George Mendenhall (1962, 1973, 1983) reconstructed Israel's emergence as an alliance of rural Canaanite groups, one of which was a group of slaves who brought with them the myth of deliverance. Their bond was their common belief in Yahweh and the covenant relationship with this deity. In this view, there is no conquest of Canaan but rather a peasant revolt

14. Volkmar Fritz (1987: 84–100) pushes Israel's arrival back to the 15th and 14th centuries B.C.E., but there is still a migration from south to north with little conflict or conquest. In terms of time, the “symbiosis” theory would allow nomadic Israel to become sedentary over a longer period.

focusing on a common ideology, more a “cultural and ideological revolution than a political one” (Mendenhall 1983: 92). Norman Gottwald (1979; see essays in Boer 2002) builds on Mendenhall’s idea, with a major difference. Rather than basing Israel’s origin on religion and a covenant with Yahweh, Gottwald understands it as a political revolution in Marxist terms. Both of these theories have major caveats from biblical, anthropological, and archaeological perspectives (Hauser 1978a, 1978b; Lemche 1985; Halpern 1992; Younger 1990, 1999; Dever 2001b: 182–88; 2003). Since then, a plethora of new approaches have argued for an indigenous emergence as early as the 13th century, others in the 12th century or later (for the most recent assessment of views, see Provan, Long, and Longman 2003: 138–92; Dever 2003: 129–66). Merenptah’s reference to Israel has little bearing on the arguments of these theories, other than to establish that Israel was indeed in the land of Canaan at this time.

*Revisionist Theories.* Revisionists such as Neils-Peter Lemche, Philip R. Davies, Keith Whitelam, and Thomas L. Thompson, suggest that ancient Israel is a social construct with little or no basis in the reality of the Late Bronze Age. Lemche (1998a) is the most cautious advocate but still minimizes the mention of Israel and its identification with Merenptah. For Lemche, the Merenptah stela attests to “some sort of ethnic unity, which was identifiable as far as it had its own name, Israel” (pp. 37–38). Little can be said about this Israel, and Lemche concludes, “The Israel of the Iron Age proved to be most elusive, in historical documents as well as material remains, where hardly anything carries an ethnic tag that helps the modern investigator to decide what is Israelite and what is not” (p. 160). Davies (1992: 61–63) declares that “the determinative is not unambiguous” so that we cannot be certain what Merenptah’s Israel really was. Whitelam (1996: 209–10) asserts that “the Stele represents a particular perception of the past embodying important ideological and political claims on behalf of the Egyptian Pharaoh.” Thompson (1992a: 404) states that “to begin with the origins of biblical Israel with Merenptah . . . on the grounds that we have extra-biblical rather than biblical attestation is willful.” In his popular book, he declares categorically that Merenptah’s Israel “does not correspond to the highland Israel or any biblical Israel” (1999: 79). And, most recently, he states with Hjelm (Hjelm and Thompson 2002: 17), “The stele gives us our earliest evidence of the use of the name ‘Israel’ as an eponym: as a literary reality. It does not refer to a specific people in history, but metaphorically as an eponym for the population of Hurru.” But this argument lacks any basis in the objective Egyptological evidence at hand.

The Merenptah stela is not merely a literary document. It is, in fact, a campaign account found in a clear archaeological context with a known geophysical reality behind the text (on the historicity of the campaign, see Hasel 1994: 54 n. 3; 1998b: 178–79). To argue that Israel is merely an eponym has no basis in comparison with the other known entities on the stela. Are Gezer, Ashkelon,



and Yeno'am only metaphorical eponyms? Archaeological excavations at these sites demonstrate that they are not. Whitelam (2000) asked recently, what would happen if, in fact, Merenptah's scribe was right—if this "Israel" was completely wiped out? His suggestion belies perhaps the deepest wish of some of the minimalists (see Whitelam 2000: 20), that this early reference and the people to which it refers might simply have disappeared, for "the problem with accepting Merenptah's citation is that it is too early for some scholars' reconstructions of 'historic' Israel" (Younger 1999: 198; for a similar statement, see Halpern 1997: 335).

In the end, the theories of indigenous origin face two major challenges: (1) some do not connect the archaeological data satisfactorily with Merenptah's Israel, leaving minimalist scholars to discount, reinterpret, or relegate the stela to literary metaphor; and (2) others stretch the archaeological data and its chronology to fit the historical reality of the stela (but just barely) and, in doing so, do not address equally significant anthropological questions. How could a fledgling socioethnic group just emerging in the 12th–11th centuries B.C.E. already have been known as Israel by Merenptah's scribes in the 13th century? In addition to being known and identified, how is it that they are perceived as such a serious threat that they are mentioned alongside major city-states such as Ashkelon and Gezer? The most recent anthropological studies of ethnicity recognize the *external (etic)* recognition of a group as one of the indicators of established ethnicity (Jones 1997: xiii). In this vein, Kenton L. Sparks (1998: 107–8) cogently states, "'Israel' is not an Egyptian term and therefore can under no circumstance be viewed as an exonym of Egyptian origin. It is clearly West Semitic and must either be a name that Israel used for itself or an exonym coined by other West Semites to identify the group called 'Israel.'" But if this is so, and Egypt recognized Israel as an entity of this sort, how much time was required for the complex processes of ethnogenesis to occur? What duration was required for Israel to actually possess the land? Current anthropological and sociological reconstructions of Israel's origin seem to overlook the complex processes required for this emergence. That is, they do not provide the necessary time or factors needed for such internal and external ethnic recognition to be achieved. In this regard, the Merenptah stela, over a century after its discovery, still cuts through current scholarly reconstructions and rhetoric with a simple declaration: Israel exists as a socioethnic people already located in the land of Canaan by 1209 B.C.E. It remains the task of future study to firmly connect Merenptah's Israel with the realities of the archaeological record in the ongoing debate over the origins of ancient Israel.