The Structure of the Final Hymnic-Poetic Unit
on the Merenptah Stela

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The Merenptah Stela continues to play a central role in the current debate over the origin of ancient Israel. This is evident not only in the latest histories of Israel.[1] but also in studies concerning the history of Israelite religion[2] and questions about ethnicity.[3] Recent specialized articles highlight the importance of this ancient Egyptian text mentioning Israel in the context of Merenptah's campaign inscribed in 1209 B.C.E.[4]

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[1] Every recent history includes if not commences with a commentary on the Merenptah Stela, see V. Fritz, Die Entstehung Israels im 12. und 11. Jahrhundert v. Chr., 1996, 73–75; N.-P. Lemche, Die Vorgeschichte Israels, 1996, 81f.; L.E. Stager, Forging an Identity: The Emergence of Ancient Israel, in: The Oxford History of the Biblical World, 1998, 124–127; B.S.J. Isserlin, The Israelites, 1998, 56; W.C. Kaiser, Jr., A History of Israel from the Bronze Age through the Jewish Wars, 1998, 107f.; A. Kamm, The Israelites: An Introduction, 1999, 12; A. Malamat, History of Biblical Israel: Major Problems and Minor Issues, 2001, 60.

[2] Z. Zevit, The Religions of Ancient Israel: A Synthesis of Paralactic Approaches, 2001, 113 n. 47.

[3] W.G. Dever, Ceramics, Ethnicity, and the Question of Israelite Origins, BA 58 (1995), 200–213; idem, What Did the Biblical Writers Know and When Did They Know It? What Archaeology Can Tell Us about the Reality of Ancient Israel, 2001; idem, Who Were the Israelites and Where Did They Come From?, 2003; I. Finkelstein, Ethnicity and the Origin of the Iron I Settlers in the Highlands of Canaan. Will the Real Real Israel Please Stand Up?, BA 59 (1996) 198–212; D.V. Edelman, Ethnicity and Early Israel, in: Ethnicity and the Bible, 1996, 25–55; K.L. Sparks, Ethnicity and Identity in Ancient Israel, 1998; R.D. Miller, The Israelites are Philistines! The Trope of Ethnicity in the Archaeological Record, BASOR, in press.

[4] A. Nibbi, Some Remarks on the Merenptah Stela and the So-Called Name of Israel, Discussions in Egyptology 36 (1996), 79–102; A. Niccacci, La stèle d'Israël. Grammaire et stratégie de communication, in: Etudes egyptologiques et bibliques a la memoire du Pere B. Couroyer, 1997, 41–107; F.J. Yurco, Merenptah's Canaanite Campaign and Israel's Origins, in: Exodus: The Egyptian Evidence, 1997, 27–55; K.A. Kitchen, The Physical Text of Merenptah's Victory Hymn (The ›Israel‹ Stela), Journal of the Society for the Study of Egyptian Antiquities 24 (1997), 71–76; K.W. Whitelam, ›Israel is Laid Waste; His Seed is No More‹: What if Merenptah's Scribes Were Telling the Truth?, Biblical Interpretation 8 (2000), 8–22; A.F. Rainey, Israel in Merenptah's In-

It has long been recognized that the final few lines of the Merenptah
stela, documenting a campaign to the southern Levant, were written
with a certain rhythm or poetic structure.[5] One of the key issues in-
volves the interpretation of the structure of this hymnic-poetic unit. For
the first time in 1994 the various structures proposed to date were re-
viewed and evaluated.[6] These included the »ring structure« of G. Ahl-
ström and D. Edelman,[7] the »modified ring structure« by Ahlström,[8]
L. E. Stager's[9] and F. J. Yurco's proposed structures,[10] and the »chiastic
structure« of J. J. Bimson.[11] Following this critique a new, indepen-
dently developed structure was proposed by the present author based on
the »parallelism of political and geographical sequences and terms
which most accurately maintains the integrity of the text.«[12] Most re-
cently, with the welcome publication of J. K. Hoffmeier's Israel in Egypt
a new »grammatical structure« was proposed critiquing earlier propos-
als with specific attention to syntactical nuances in the final hymnic-
poetic unit.[13] The importance of understanding this internal structure
has direct bearing on the location of each of the lands/nations, regions,
city-states, and the people Israel. Moreover, it is on the basis of this
structure that the order of Merenptah's reliefs at Karnak were inter-
preted by Yurco, Rainey, Hasel and others.[14] For these reasons it is criti-

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      scription and Reliefs, IEJ 51 (2001), 57–75; see my response M.G. Hasel, Merenptah's
      Inscription and Reliefs and the Origin of Israel, BASOR, in press.

[5]   M. Lichtheim, Ancient Egyptian Literature, Volume II: The New Kingdom, 1976, 73;
      G. Fecht, Die Israelstele. Gestalt und Aussage, in: Fontes atque Pontes. Eine Festgabe
      für H. Brunner, 1983, 106–138; E. Hornung, Die Israelstele des Merneptah, in: Fontes
      atque Pontes. Eine Festgabe für H. Brunner, 1983, 225; on meter in Egyptian, see
      G. Fecht, The Structural Principle of Ancient Egyptian Elevated Language, in: Verse in
      Ancient Near Eastern Prose, 1993, 69–94.

[6]   M.G. Hasel, Israel in the Merneptah Stela, BASOR 296 (1994), 45–61; and most
      recently, idem, Domination and Resistance: Egyptian Military Activity in the Southern
      Levant, 1300–1185 B.C., 1998, 260–271.

[7]   G. Ahlström/D.V. Edelman, Merneptah's Israel, JNES 44 (1985), 59–61.

[8]   G. Ahlström, The Origin of Israel in Palestine, SJOT 2 (1991), 19–34.

[9]   L.E. Stager, Merneptah, Israel, and the Sea Peoples: New Light on an Old Relief, EI 18
      (1985), 56*-64*.

[10] F.J. Yurco, 3 200-Year-Old Picture of Israelites Found in Egypt, BArR 16/5 (1990), 27.

[11] J.J. Bimson, Merneptah's Israel and Recent Theories of Israelite Origins, JSOT 49
      (1991), 3–29.

[12] Hasel, Israel in the Merneptah Stela, 50f., 48 Fig. 1. After developing this structure
      I received Rainey's article which suggested a nearly identical formulation, confirming
      my own thinking, see: Who or What was Israel? Rainey Replies, BArR 18/2 (1992), 73.

[13] J.K. Hoffmeier, Israel in Egypt: The Authenticity of the Exodus Tradition, 1997, 28–31.

[14] Yurco, Merenptah's Canaanite Campaign, JARCE 23 (1986), 189; Rainey, Israel in
      Merenptah's Inscription and Reliefs.

cal to readdress some of the implications of the internal structure of the hymnic-poetic unit.

Hoffmeier adds significant insight by focusing on the grammatical choice of verb forms and syntax, suggesting the following sequence:[15]

	Passive *sḏm.f*		Old Perfective
I.	(a) captured is Libya		(b) Hatti is pacified
2.	plundered is Canaan with every evil	3.	Yenoam is made into nonexistence
	carried off is Ashkelon		Israel is wasted, its seed is not
	captured is Gezer		Harru is become a widow

The weight of the structure rests on three distinguishable grammatical units. The first is based on the pattern of (a) passive *sḏm.f* + subject, followed by (b) subject + old perfective. Hoffmeier proposes that this pericope sets the stage for the following two sections listing entities with the respective grammatical patterns. Hoffemeier must be commended for his judicious analysis of the Egyptian grammar in this final hymnic-poetic unit, but several aspects of his proposed structure remain unresolved.

The grammatical parallelism, suggested as the pattern used intentionally by the Egyptians for structural and poetic reasons, stands or falls with its grammatical consistency. Hoffmeier admits that his translation of the first clause as ›captured is Libya‹ poses some ambiguity. The line reads *ḥfˁ n thnw*. The difficulty lies with the *n* which Hoffmeier states may either be a preposition or the *n* of the *sḏm.f* form. Based on a note from W. H. Fairman, and on the passive nature of all the verbs in the final, hymnic-poetic unit, Hoffmeier concludes that a *sḏm.n.f* (which is active) »makes no sense in this context.«[16] Hoffmeier emends the text, by removing the n, so that it will fit the grammatical pattern of the verbs in the final unit and his proposed parallelism. This emendation is in fact necessary for Hoffmeier's proposed structure, but lacks appreciation for the broader context of the text. There may be another reason why the scribe chose to distinguish Tehenu grammatically from the other entities mentioned in this final unit. The scribe could have set Libya apart from the following entities precisely because the primary intent of the stela is to describe a campaign against the Libyans in Merenptah's fourth year. That is why the verb associated with Tehenu in this final unit does not appear as an active sḏm.n.f or as a passive *sḏm.f*, in-

[15]   J.K. Hoffmeier, Israel in Egypt, 28.
[16]   Ibid. 45 n. 27.

stead the n was written as the dative form of the preposition,[17] a position suggested by R. J. Williams who translated this phrase, »Desolation for Tehenu.«[18] In this case the scribe summarizes in a single line the detailed activities recounted earlier regarding Tehenu (Libya) before emphasizing Merenptah's further victory of Egypt's enemies located in the opposite geographical direction of Egyptian domination. This reading would best retain the integrity of the text while acknowledging the larger context of the stela.[19]

There are additional geographical complications to Hoffmeier's proposal. He suggests that Canaan refers to the city of Gaza and that »the cities of Gaza, Ashkelon, and Gezer represent a nice geographical unit within a limited area of what would later become known as Philistia.«[20] This line of reasoning assumes that Canaan refers here to a city-state rather than a geographical region. It is important to note that the reliefs on the »Cour de la Cachette« at Karnak recently assigned to Merenptah[21] depict only three cities, one of which is identified as Ashkelon. The other two unnamed cities are probably Gezer and Yanoam. Rainey's recent suggestion that Yurco's scene 4 may have once had the city Canaan depicted, is hypothetical and creates too many new problems for the sequence of Egyptian narrative art to hold credibility.[22] Moreover, Yurco maintains that the Egyptians in the XIXth Dynasty wrote *Gḏt* for Gaza, indicating that *pꜣ Knꜥꜣ* referred to the region Canaan.[23]

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[17] A.H. Gardiner, Egyptian Grammar, 1957³, 88 f.

[18] R.J. Williams, The Israel Stela of Merenptah, in: Documents from Old Testament Times, ed. D.W. Thomas, 1958, 139.

[19] Kitchen, 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 regarded as serious scribal slips affecting the understanding of the text in any significant way,« see Kitchen, Physical Text, 75.

[20] Hoffmeier, Israel in Egypt, 29.

[21] This astute identification by Yurco (Merenptah's Canaanite Campaign) has been widely accepted (see Rainey, Israel in Merenptah's Inscription and Reliefs; Hasel, Merenptah's Inscription and Reliefs).

[22] Yurco, Merenptah's Canaanite Campaign, 200; Can You Name the Panel with the Israelites? Yurco's Response, BArR 17 (1991) 54–61, 92 f.; for a detailed rebuttal to Rainey's interpretation of the stela and reliefs, see Hasel, Merenptah's Inscription and Reliefs.

[23] Yurco, Merenptah's Canaanite Campaign, 90; see also N. Naʾaman: The Canaanites and Their Land: A Rejoinder, UF 26 (1994), 404. The insistence that this designation always refers to the city of Gaza is primarily due to the study by H.J. Katzenstein, Gaza in the Egyptian Texts of the New Kingdom, JAOS 102 (1982), 111–113; see also Redford, Egypt and Canaan in the New Kingdom, 1992, 197; C. Uehlinger: Der Amun-Tempel Ramses' III in *pꜣ Knꜥn*, pseine südpalästinischen Tempelgüter und der Übergang von der Ägypter-zur Philisterherrschaft, ZDPV 104 (1988), 6–25.

The fact is that in the reliefs neither Canaan or Hurru are depicted as cities. This matches perfectly with the understanding of these entities as regions. Hoffmeier asks »if Canaan and Hurru correspond to each other as Hasel believes, why are toponyms in Canaan introduced while none are detailed for Harru?«[24] The answer has been heavily documented by myself and others: Canaan and Hurru were synonymous terms denoting the geographical region of Palestine.[25] As K. A. Kitchen has pointed out, Hurru is »a poetic synonym for Canaan« and further delineates that »between Canaan and Khurru is sandwiched their content – the four specific entities claimed by Merenptah as captured or destroyed: Ascalon, Gezer, Yenoam, and Israel.«[26]

The final weakness to Hoffmeier's structure is that the first and last two clauses are omitted presumably because they do not fit his reconstructed grammatical sequence. All others (Fecht, Ahlström and Edelman, Stager, Yurco, Bimson, Hasel, and Rainey) have included these lines as part of the final hymnic-poetic unit. I have argued for the last decade that the phrase »All the lands together, they are pacified« (plural) parallel Tehenu and Hatti, for Hatti is also »pacified« (*htp*). Thus a terminological parallel exists between the two lines which Hoffmeier does not explain. The last line, »Everyone who was restless has been bound« parallels the Nine Bows who have now been subjugated before the king. This is a structure that preserves the geographical and textual integrity of the text while observing these parallels:

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[24] Hoffmeier, Israel in Egypt, 28; I have since modified my understanding of these entities as »two corresponding geographical entities« that are to be understood as husband and wife (Hasel, Israel in the Merneptah Stela, 51). The husband/wife correlation was based upon the recommendation of a reader commenting on an earlier version of my article. Hoffmeier is correct in pointing out that there is no direct textual support for this. I do believe that my proposed structure stands firm if we are to understand these terms as representing the same basic geographical region as I allowed for earlier (Hasel, Israel in the Merneptah Stela, 56 n. 10).

[25] I have repeatedly insisted that Canaan and Hurru are synonymous terms by the Egyptian New Kingdom, citing: F. Stolz, Kanaan, TRE 17, 1988, 541; I. Singer, Egyptians, Canaanites, and Philistines in the Period of the Emergence of Israel, in: From Nomadism to Monarchy: Archaeological and Historical Aspects of Early Israel, I. Finkelstein/N. Naʾaman (eds.), 1994, 289; and those Egyptologists who interpret Hurru as Syria: A.H. Gardiner, Egypt of the Pharaohs, 1961, 273 n. 2; H.E. Stein, The Israel Stele, in: Papers for Discussion I, 1981–1982, S. Groll/H.E. Stein (eds.), 1982, 163 n. 4; Fecht, Israelstele, 120; Hornung, Israelstele des Merneptah, 232; or Syria-Palestine: Yurco, Merenptah's Canaanite Campaign, 190; see Hasel, Israel in the Merneptah Stela, 55 f. n. 10; idem, Domination and Resistance, 257–260.»It appears that *Ḫ3rw* is a region encompassing all Egyptian territory in the southern Levant during the XIXth and XXth Dynasties, including Gezer« (Hasel, Domination and Resistance, 260).

[26] Kitchen, Physical Text, 74.

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 (*htp*)
Region	C	Plundered is Canaan with every evil
City-states/ People	D	Carried off is Ashkelon Captured is Gezer Yenoam is made nonexistent Israel is laid waste, his seed is not
Region	C'	Hurru is become a widow
Lands/Nations	B'	All lands together, they are pacified (*htp*)
Binding of enemies	A'	Everyone who was restless has been bound

Hoffmeier's observation of verbal forms actually adds additional support to my proposed structure. He has correctly observed that the specific activities concerning the synonymous designations Canaan/ Hurru (C-C') are also syntactically parallel. Notice that Canaan is written with the *sḏm.f* + PN. – a pattern occurring with the next two city-states (Ashkelon and Gezer). Yenoam and Israel, however, appear with the PN + old perfective as does Hurru – the region closing the in-clusio C-C'. Thus there is a distinct syntactical change in the very center of this final hymnic-poetic unit dealing with Canaan/Hurru so that the entities within its territory poetically match with the synonymous names used for the region (D):

C   sḏm.f + PN

            sḏm.f + PN
D   sḏm.f + PN
            PN + old perfective
            PN + old perfective

C'   PN + old perfective

This structure suggests that Merenptah's Israel is not a territory that corresponds to Canaan. Israel, it follows, is also not a geographical region that would stand next to Hurru.[27] Instead, Israel is designated as

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[27] The argument is made by Hoffmeier that the »connection between Israel and Harru … further mitigates against the meaning ›grain‹ for *prt*« (Israel in Egypt, 28; cf. Stager, Merneptah, Israel and Sea Peoples, 56*). However, as he rightly observes, there is a neat play on *Hꜣrw* by the choice of the term *hꜣrt*, »widow« which may be the only reason for the use of *hꜣrt* by the scribe. In other words, the reason Hurru has become a widow is not clearly stated. It could either refer to the casualties inflicted on the cities and Israel within Canaan/Hurru that have suffered by the hand of Merenptah, as I have suggested, or it may simply be a play on words with the geographical name Hurru. For

a socioethnic entity within the region Canaan/Hurru in the same way that the three city-states are sociopolitical entities in the same geographical region. It follows that Israel, identified by the determinative for people, was a socioethnic entity powerful enough to be mentioned along with major city-states that felt the effects of Merenptah's campaign.

The structure of the final hymnic-poetic unit on the Merenptah stela has been crucial in the current discussion over the origin of Israel. This study appraises the latest suggestion by J.K. Hoffmeier (1997) and seeks to combine the grammatical interpretation with terminological, geographical, and conceptual considerations. Rather than contradicting earlier proposals these latest grammatical observations enhance and even bolster the interpretation that Israel was located within the region Canaan/Hurru and that it was an entity powerful enough to be mentioned alongside the major cities of Ashkelon, Gezer, and Yenoam.

Der Aufbau der abschließenden hymnisch-poetischen Einheit der Merenptah-Stele besitzt für die gegenwärtigen Diskussion über den Ursprung Israels entscheidende Bedeutung. Die vorliegende Studie setzt sich mit dem neuesten Vorschlag von J.K. Hoffmeier (1997) auseinander und versucht, die grammatische Interpretation mit terminologischen, geographischen und konzeptionellen Überlegungen zu verbinden. Die zuletzt gemachten grammatischen Beobachtungen widersprechen nicht den früheren Vorschlägen, sondern bekräftigen sie vielmehr und stützen damit die Auffassung, dass Israel im Gebiet von Kanaan/Hurru angesiedelt war und dass es eine Größe darstellte, die mächtig genug war, um neben den bedeutenden Städten von Askalon, Gezer und Jenoam erwähnt zu werden.

La structure du passage poético-hymnique final de la »stèle de Merenptah« a été prédominante dans la discussion récente sur les origines d'Israël. Cette étude se situe par rapport à l'étude récente de J.K. Hoffmeier (1997) et tente de combiner l'interprétation grammaticale avec les données terminologiques, géographiques et conceptuelles. Ces observations grammaticales ne contredisent pas le fait qu'Israël était établi dans la région de Canaan/Hurru et qu'il était une entité suffisamment puissante pour être mentionné parmi les plus importantes cités: Ascalon, Gézer et Yenoam.

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additional support for the translation of the term prt as »grain«, see Hasel, A Textual and Iconographic Note on *prt* and *mnt* in Egyptian Military Accounts, GöMisz 167 (1998), 61–72; idem, Merenptah's Inscription and Reliefs.