

## MERNEPTAH'S ISRAEL AND THE EXODUS

By SAMUEL A. B. MERCER, Bexley Hall, Gambier, Ohio

Since 1896, when Petrie discovered the "Israel Stela"<sup>1</sup> in the ruins of Merneptah's mortuary temple at Thebes, and when Spiegelberg made the first translation<sup>2</sup> of the hymn of victory contained thereon, a voluminous literature has grown up on the relationship between Merneptah and the Exodus of the Children of Israel from Egypt. This was due to the fact that Merneptah, who had usually been assumed to have been the pharaoh of the exodus, is represented in the hymn of victory as having encountered and defeated Israel in Palestine. Now, the inscription on the stela leaves no doubt about the name of Israel,<sup>3</sup> nor is there any doubt that the passage has reference to the defeat and devastation of Israel. There is also abundant evidence to show that Merneptah campaigned in Palestine, and had been in that country in the third year of his reign.<sup>4</sup> Furthermore, Merneptah's father, Rameses II, has been generally accepted as the pharaoh of the oppression. The discovery and publication of the "Israel Stela," therefore, have seemed to introduce considerable confusion in the minds of those students of the Old Testament who have accepted Rameses II as the pharaoh, "who knew not Joseph," and Merneptah as the pharaoh of the exodus. For if Merneptah was the pharaoh of the exodus, how could he encounter and defeat Israel in Palestine in his third year if Israel's wanderings in the wilderness consumed approximately forty years? Many attempts have been made to explain this difficulty.

<sup>1</sup> The stela was taken by Merneptah from the mortuary temple of Amenhotep III, and on its back was inscribed a hymn in celebration of the great victory of Merneptah over the Libyans in the fifth year of his reign. In the last section of the inscription occurs the famous reference to Israel.

<sup>2</sup> *Zeitschrift für ägyptische Sprache*, 34, 1 ff.

<sup>3</sup> The transliteration and translation of the passage in which Israel is referred to are: *wn y-s-r-y-a-l f ht bit prt-f*, "Israel is laid waste, his grain is not."

<sup>4</sup> Breasted, *Ancient Records*, III. § 605-606.

One attempt places the time of the exodus much earlier than the reign of Merneptah, in the time of Amenhotep II (1448-1420), another places the exodus earlier still, in the time of Ahmose I (1580-1557), and still another places the event much later, in the time of Rameses IV, 1167-1161. Other students of the Old Testament simply accept Merneptah as the pharaoh of the exodus without feeling the necessity of squaring that assumption with the implications of the "Israel Stela." It is the purpose of this paper to show that the reference to Israel in this stela is in close keeping with the reconstructed and probably real facts of the exodus and the entrance into the land of Canaan. If this be so the "Israel Stela" will prove to be a piece of invaluable confirmatory evidence to the general reliability of our Biblical account of the exodus.

Archaeology has been much abused by students of the Bible. They have made it confirm statements in the Bible where it merely illustrates them. The chief use of archaeology in the study of the Old Testament is to furnish a background and atmosphere for many events described therein. It often illustrates Old Testament stories, it sometimes explains them, and now and then it confirms them, and even contributes to a knowledge of Old Testament customs and events. The value of the "Israel Stela" in the study of Old Testament history is chiefly confirmatory. A background and atmosphere for this present investigation will be furnished by some facts established by the archaeology of Western Asia and Egypt. These will now be passed in review before tackling the problem of Merneptah's Israel and the Exodus.

Forgetting for the time being what tradition in the Bible teaches about the Hebrew people previous to their stay in Egypt, archaeology and the history of western Asia and Egypt furnish important information. Babylonian history and archeology make it reasonably certain that the original home of the Semites was in central Arabia. At a very early period a wave of these Semites flowed north through Canaan and Syria and then east to northern

Babylonia. Among the descendants of these Semites were Sargon I<sup>5</sup> and his immediate successors, Naram-Sin and Shar-Gani-Sharri, all of whom were great warriors, and extended their sway and influence westward to the Mediterranean, including Syria and Canaan. Sargon's date is about 2700 B.C. During the First Babylonian Dynasty, 2225-1926, a fresh Semitic element from the west was introduced into the settled Semitic life of the north Babylonian people. In fact the First Babylonian Dynasty was founded by foreign conquerors from the westland or the country of Amurru, and in turn these westerners settled in Babylonia, extended their sway over the land of Amurru. Thus, Hammurabi, the sixth king of this dynasty, was called "king of the land of Amurru."<sup>6</sup> Babylonian laws, customs, traditions, and civilization were widely diffused throughout Amurru, and the Babylonian cuneiform script was extensively employed by these western subjects of the great Babylonian kings. Although the Second Babylonian Dynasty, c. 2000-1700, was predominantly Sumerian, and the Third Babylonian or Kassite Dynasty, 1760-1185, was largely Indo-European, they were mostly Semitic in culture and civilization; and it is quite possible that they were in close contact with the west. Indeed, the use of the horse in the conquest of Babylonia by the Kassites passed over into the west and from there was introduced by the Hyksos into Egypt. From about 1400 till 1000 B.C. Babylonia and her successor Assyria were weak and not in a position to interfere in western affairs. Thus, it is clear that from before the time of Sargon I until 1200 B.C. Semitic Babylonian influence was universal in Syria and Canaan.

Turning to Egyptian history and archaeology, it is found that as early as 1675 B.C. Egypt was invaded and conquered by a Semitic people whom the Egyptians called the Hyksos. These people came from Amurru, making their way southward through Syria and Canaan, and entered Egypt, where they ruled for about

<sup>5</sup> Poebel, *Historical Texts*, 1914, pp. 73 ff.

<sup>6</sup> King, *The Letters and Inscriptions of Hammurabi*, III, pp. 195 f., 207 f.

a hundred years.<sup>7</sup> The chances are that Manetho is right in saying that they remained in Egypt 511 years, for although they sat on the Egypt throne for only about a century, it is quite possible that they were not finally driven from Egypt till much later. One of their kings bore the interesting name *Ykb-hr*,<sup>8</sup> which looks very much like *Jacob-hr*; and as *hr* is the name of the god Horus, Jacob-hr may be the equivalent of the Semitic Jacob-el.

Beginning with the reign of Ahmose I, 1580-1557, Syria and Canaan became more and more subject to Egypt. This was due to the decline of Babylonian power. Finally, Thutmose III, 1479-1447, in seventeen elaborate campaigns succeeded in completely conquering Syria and Canaan. Among the numerous places mentioned in his lists are Y-'-k-b-'a-ra and Y-s-p-'a-ra,<sup>9</sup> which are equivalent to the Semitic Jacob-el and Joseph-el. The Egyptians held their own in Syria and Canaan until the reign of the religious king Ikhнатon, 1375-1358. Ikhнатon devoted his attention to a religious reformation, while the Hittites from the far north made common cause with the Amurru of Syria and Canaan against the foreign overlord. Nor was that all. Further south, and coming from the east, were a people called the Habiru, who were contesting the possession of southern Canaan with the Egyptians. These Habiru are interesting. They appear in the Tell el-Amarna letters. These letters or reports are written in Semitic cuneiform and many of them are requests for aid from the Egyptian governors of southern Canaanitish towns to their overlord, the king of Egypt. The Habiru press on westward and some of them occupy the district of Shechem.<sup>10</sup> Now, the term Habiru is philologically equivalent to the word Hebrew. Consequently, in the time of Ikhнатon, the Hebrew people were forcing their way westward into Canaan.

<sup>7</sup> Breasted, *Ancient Records*, II, §§ i f.

<sup>8</sup> Petrie, *Hyksos and Israelite Cities*, pp. 68 f. and pl. LI.

<sup>9</sup> Mariette, *Karnak*, 17-21, Nos. io2 and 78.

<sup>10</sup> Knudtzon, *Die El-Amarna-Taflen*, No. 289, 1.23.

Another people mentioned in the Tell el-Amarna letters are the SA-GAZ. These Winckler<sup>11</sup> has proved to be equivalent to Habiru. At any rate, it is certain that the Habiru are to be looked upon as having been a part of the SA-GAZ people. In Egyptian, these people are known as the Sasu. Thus, the Sasu, the SA-GAZ and the Habiru are all Semitic nomads, are all related or are the same people, and are all Aramxans or people of Amurru. In short, the Tell el-Amarna letters picture Aramaean nomads forcing their way into Canaan as early as 1375 B.C.

From 1375 on, general anarchy ruled in Canaan, and the whole of Syria and Canaan became a bone of contention between the Hittites to the north and the Egyptians to the south. Finally, Seti I and his successor Rameses II recovered the land of Canaan and compromised by treaty with the Hittites over Syria in 1271. Both Seti I and Rameses II mention a place, which they call *y-s-ru* and *ya-sa-ru*.<sup>12</sup> This name seems to be the equivalent of the Hebrew word אֲשֶׁר and corresponds in location to the position assigned in the Old Testament to Asher. Rameses II was succeeded by his son Merneptah, 1225-1215, and in the third year of his reign he encountered and defeated a group of people in southern Canaan whom he calls *y-s-r-y-a-l*, or Israel. By the fifth year of Rameses III, 1198-1167, Egyptian influence in Canaan was practically dead, as the Report of Wenamon clearly shows; and the Hittites were becoming less and less influential until they ceased as a power in Canaan in 1170 B.C. when they were practically destroyed by the Muskaya,<sup>13</sup> the Meshech of Gen. X. 2.

During the years of Babylonian and Egyptian weakness that succeeded Merneptah, new peoples began to appear in Canaan. Already in the fifth year of Merneptah, northern sea-peoples appeared in the Egyptian Delta; and by 1193, in the fifth year of Rameses III, there was another invasion by the same peoples among whom were the Pulasati.<sup>14</sup> They appeared again in 1190,

<sup>11</sup> Mittheilungen d. deutschen or. Gesellschaft, 35, p. 25 n.

<sup>12</sup> Abyd. II, 2; LD 140 a; Anast. 1, 23, 8.

<sup>13</sup> KB I, p. 18.

<sup>14</sup> Breasted, *Ancient Records*, IV, §§ 35-64.

coming originally from Keftiu, Kaphtor or Crete (Deut. II. 23; Amos IX. 7) and making their way through Canaan. These Pulasati, or Philistines, about 1160 finally settled in the southwestern Canaan and gave their name to the whole country, namely, Palestine.

Having followed in outline the contribution which western Asia and Egypt have made to an understanding of early Syria and Canaan, it is now possible to see how far the traditions preserved in the Old Testament about the Hebrew people previous to the exodus fit into this outline, and to account for Israel in Palestine in the third year of Merneptah.

Hebrew tradition sees in Babylonia the home of Abraham. This accords excellently with the findings of archaeology, for the Habiru were in Babylonia in the time of Rim-Sin,<sup>15</sup> and the SA-GAZ, whom we have seen to be equivalent to the Habiru, were in Babylonia in the time of Hammurabi.<sup>16</sup> Moreover, Hebrew tradition seems to connect Abraham with Hammurabi, if Amraphel of Gen. XIV is to be identified with Hammurabi. The migration of Abraham to the west would also be in keeping with the larger Aramaean<sup>17</sup> movement which certainly continued for many centuries from Babylonia westward. Abraham's connection with Ur and Harran is further attested by the traces of lunar worship--characteristic of the religion of these two cities--which is also evident in early Hebrew religion.

If, however, Abraham, as an individual, be connected chronologically with Hammurabi, and Hammurabi's date be 2123-2081, there will be a discrepancy of about 200 years with the generally accepted chronology of the patriarchal and bondage periods. Of course Abraham and his followers may have formed only a later

<sup>15</sup> *Revue d'Assyriologie*, XII, pp. 114 f.

<sup>16</sup> King, *Hammurabi*, No. 35.

<sup>17</sup> The SA-GAZ, Sasu and Habiru were all plundering, Semitic nomads, and since their headquarters were in northern Syria they are to be identified with the Aramxans. Thus Abraham was a Habiru and also an Aramaean, *cf.* Gen. XXIV-XXV, where Bethuel the son of Nahor, brother of Abraham, is called an Aramaean; and Jacob is also an Aramaean, Deut. XXVI. 5.

branch of those Aramoean peoples who were making their way westward since before the time of Hammurabi, and the later Jewish historian, who wrote Gen. XIV, may have purposely identified the great Hebrew patriarch with Hammurabi for the greater glory of the Jewish race. Again, Abraham may possibly (though not probable, so far as our information leads us) be the name of a clan, parts of which migrated westward at different times. The most likely solution is that the patriarch Abraham migrated west about 1870 B.C. This conclusion ensues from the following considerations

Students of the Old Testament have long felt that Rameses II was the pharaoh of the oppression. This is hinted at in Exod. I. ii, where mention is made of Pithom and Rameses as store cities built by the Hebrews. This is confirmed by the findings of Naville, who in 1883 excavated these sites and discovered bricks bearing the name of Rameses II. In Pithom were found other memorials of Rameses II. Moreover, the entire narrative of the bondage is in keeping with what we know of Rameses II and the history of Egypt of that time. Nor is there any real conflict between this date and the statement found in I Kings VI. I to the effect that 480 years elapsed between the time of the exodus and the fourth year of Solomon's reign. For, if 480 years be added to the generally accepted date of the fourth year of Solomon, namely 967, the date 1447 will be arrived at, which may well represent the time when the first Hebrew clans began to leave Egypt. However, 480 is a round number and may not be very accurate. Moreover, it does not square with the Biblical dead reckoning for the same period, which far exceeds 534 years.

Taking, then, Rameses II as the pharaoh of the oppression and Merneptah as the pharaoh of the exodus, the date of the exodus would be about 1225. Add to this the 430 years, the Biblical estimate (Exod. XII. 40) of the duration of the sojourn in Egypt, and we get 1655 for the date when Jacob and his sons went to Egypt. Add to this 215 years as the duration of the patriarchal period, on the basis of Biblical reckoning, and we

have 1870 B.C. as the date of Abraham. In this scheme will fit in excellently the evidence which archeology has furnished. The Hyksos were Semites, most likely Hebrews, one of whose kings was called Ykb-hr, or Jacob-el. According to Egyptian chronology they came to Egypt in 1675. Consequently, the Jacob clans, who, according to our estimate, went to Egypt in 1655, were a part of the Hyksos movement. There is every reason to believe, that all the Jacob clans went to Egypt--in Biblical language, that all the tribes of Israel sojourned in Egypt. In the annals of Thutmose III, 1479-1447, two place names, Jacob-el and Joseph-el, occur. This would be as it should. Hyksos rule in Egypt lasted about a hundred years and the probabilities are that some of the Hyksos began to leave Egypt as soon as this period ended. That would be about 1575. Manetho estimates that the Hyksos were in Egypt for 511 years, making the final exodus come after the exodus under Merneptah. That is, even after the exodus in 1225 some Hebrews were left in Egypt. This is substantiated by the occurrence of the name '-pw-r, Hebrew, in the annals of the reigns of Rameses II, Rameses III, and Rameses IV (1167-1161). Meanwhile, between 1575 and 1164 many waves of Semitic sojourners may have crossed the borders of Egypt. The late Hebrew tradition above referred to, which would place the exodus at about 1447 B.C., may well mark the time of one of these waves that left Egypt. At any rate, between 1447 and 1375 when the name Samhuna occurs, which is probably Simeon, it is likely that the tribe of Simeon made up one of those waves of Semites that left Egypt and made its way into Canaan. This would coincide well with the occupation of Shechem by the Habiru in 1375. The late Hebrew tradition of the occupation of Shechem in the time of Jacob may be a reflection of the occupation of Shechem by Simeon in 1375 B.C. It is interesting to note in this connection that it was Simeon and Levi who avenged Dinah in Shechem (Gen. XXXIII and XXXIV). Consequently, Levi may also have made its way into Canaan from Egypt at the same

time. Be that as it may, the occurrence of the name Asher in the time of Seti I and Rameses II would point to a similar migration of the tribe of Asher out of Egypt and into Canaan before 1313 B.C. This is all the more reasonable when it is remembered that the position assigned to Asher in the annals of Seti and Rameses is just that assigned to it in Joshua XIX.

It is now possible to consider the Biblical evidence as to the exodus under Merneptah. Biblical tradition represents all the tribes of Israel as leaving Egypt at the same time and as entering Canaan by the way of the fords of the Jordan under the leadership of Joshua. But these traditions are late. Moreover, a careful reading of the Biblical sources will point to other conclusions. In the first place, there is every reason to believe that the route which the departing Israelites took, after their escape from Egypt, was in the direction of Kadesh and not southward along the eastern shore of the Red Sea. In other words, their intention was to reach Palestine as soon as possible. They would probably have taken the Mediterranean coast road had they not known that Merneptah could have easily headed them off in his ships. They, therefore, took the caravan route to Kadesh, and at once, not after a period of many years, attempted to enter Palestine from Kadesh. It is from Kadesh that the spies were sent out. The late priestly source says that there were twelve (Num. XIII. 1-17a, 21, 25-26a, 32a), and it also says that Caleb as well as Joshua and the others returned (Num. XIV. 38; *cf.* XXXII. 12). These two spies reported favourably as to an advance through southern Palestine (Num. XIV. 5-7, 10). The spies reported that the Amalekites dwelt in the south, Hittites, Jebusites and Amorites in the hill country (*cf.* Ezek. XVI. 3, 45, where, in speaking of Jerusalem, he says, "Thy father was the Amorite and thy mother a Hittite"), and Canaanites by the sea and by the Jordan (Num. XIII. 28-29). But Caleb was very anxious to enter Palestine from the south (Num. XIII. 30), and according to the oldest source, J, Caleb drove out the three sons of Anak and conquered Hebron and Debir (Joshua XV.

13-19; *cf.* Hebron as Caleb's lot, according to E, Joshua XIV. 6-15, and according to J, Judges I. 20). The sources here are probably ascribing to the period of Joshua an event which took place shortly after the exodus. Caleb probably put his wish into effect and, with his followers, penetrated into southern Palestine. It was comparatively easy for him to do so, for Israel was not as yet organized as it was later under Moses and his advisers and assistants.

A careful reading of the oldest source, J, will reveal a duplication which points to the conclusion that two distinct events are united by J into one event. In other words, the account of Judah's entrance into Palestine from the south is combined or confused with the invasion of Benjamin and Ephraim from the north, in such a way as to leave the impression that Judah entered Palestine from the north, when in reality it most likely entered from the south, as Caleb did. Thus, Joshua XV. 63 says that Judah did not drive out the Jebusites from Jerusalem. The same is recorded of Benjamin in Judges I. 21. Joshua XVI. 10 says that Judah did not drive out the Canaanites from Gezer. The same is said of Ephraim in Judges I. 29. The probabilities are that the passages in Joshua are duplicates of those in Judges, applied to Judah by a writer who desired systematically to ascribe some undertaking to each of the tribes and to represent them as operating from the north. This conclusion gains credence when we read Judges I. 8-10, where the redactor of J ascribes to Judah, operating from the north, the same work which is ascribed to Caleb by J in Joshua XV. 13-19. The account in Judges I. 8-10 is a duplicate, but may preserve a remembrance of Judah's cooperation with Caleb from the south in much the same way that Judges I. 1-7 preserves a tradition about Judah's operations from the south. The mention of Simeon in this passage is either purely traditional, or it possibly may refer to some portion of that clan which was left behind when Simeon migrated northward over a hundred years before. The same is true of Judges I. 17-19, although this may be a duplicate of Joshua XV. 63

and Judges I. 21 and of Joshua XVI. 140 and Judges I. 29. The conclusion to which all this leads is that the tribe of Judah, although systematically represented as having entered Canaan from the east across the Jordan, really entered from the south with Caleb and some other Arabian Semites, such as the Kenites, Judges I. 16. That is, Judah and those closely related to it, the Calebites, the Kenites and the Jerahmeelites (I Chron. ii), penetrated Canaan from the south. This is in keeping with the feeling expressed in the "Blessing of Moses" that Judah had been separated from his brethren (Deut. XXXIII. 7), with such passages as Judges I. 16-17 and Num. XXI. 1-3, with the fact that Judah is not mentioned in the Song of Deborah, and with the ease with which Judah always found itself separated from the rest of the tribes (*cf.* 2 Sam. XIX. 41-43). Such passages as Num. XX. 14-21, JE, are ideal reconstructions, representing all the tribes of Israel as acting together.

Simeon, as we have seen, probably migrated northward previous to 1375 B.C. This agrees with the fact that it is not mentioned in the Song of Deborah and is omitted from the "Blessing of Moses." Asher also migrated north before 1313 B.C. This accounts for the fact that it did not respond to the call to arms in the time of Deborah (Judges V. 17), nor is it represented as driving out the Canaanites (Judges I. 30) but dwelt among them. Gad and Dan did not respond to the call of Deborah and Naphtali, Dan, and Zebulun are represented as dwelling among the Canaanites and as not driving them out (Judges I. 30--36). In fact, the only tribes of which conquests are recorded are Judah and Simeon and the Joseph tribes. The conclusion arrived at is that probably Gad, Dan, Zebulun and Naphtali also migrated northward from Egypt and settled in Canaan before the exodus under Merneptah. The same may be true also of Issachar and Reuben. That is, while there is no good reason to doubt the Biblical tradition (e.g., in Gen. XLVI. 8-27) that all the tribes migrated all together to Egypt, there seems to be sufficient reason to believe that migrations of the Hebrews from Egypt extended

over a long period, and that Simeon, Asher, Gad, Dan, Zebulun, Naphtali, Issachar and perhaps Levi and Reuben left Egypt before the exodus under Merneptah, and that Judah left with the Joseph tribes but separated from them at Kadesh and penetrated into Canaan from the south. All the lists of tribes that left Egypt, such as those in Deut. XXXIII and Num. I, are ideal reconstructions of a later period. The only tribes, therefore, which can be said to have entered Canaan under Joshua from the east, across the Jordan, are Benjamin, Ephraim and half the tribe of Manasseh, that is, the Joseph tribes; and these are the only tribes together with Judah (and Simeon), of which conquests are recorded.

Finally, it is now possible to account for the exodus in the time of Merneptah and at the same time for his defeat of "Israel" in the third year of his reign. Briefly stated it is this: Shortly after the arrival of the Joseph and Judah tribes at Kadesh, Judah and his associates, Caleb, the Kenites and the Jerahmeelites, invaded Canaan by the way of Hebron. They met with considerable success and settled in southern Palestine. So soon as Merneptah had realized that the Hebrews who dwelt in Goshen had escaped he planned to attack them in the country for which they were aiming.<sup>18</sup> He perhaps waited until he thought they were settled in Palestine. Then he sent a force by sea, which landed in southern Canaan where he met, among others, just those Israelites, the tribe of Judah and its associates who had entered Canaan from the south, and defeated them. Thus, the "Israel Stela" is not a stumbling block in the way of accepting the traditional date of the exodus in the time of Merneptah, but is a confirmation of that fact, as well as an additional reason for believing that some of the Israelites actually did what the whole exodus intended to do, namely, to reach Canaan by the nearest possible route and at the earliest possible moment.

<sup>18</sup> None of the passages describing the crossing of the "Red Sea" necessarily infer the actual drowning of the pharaoh of the exodus, whose mummy was found in his own tomb. Even Ps. CXXXVI may be rendered, "But shook off Pharaoh and his host at the Red Sea."