

THE STELA OF MERNEPTAH

In spite of the proximity of Palestine to Egypt, even though the Israelites spent more than four hundred years as slaves in the Nile Delta and notwithstanding the numerous contacts in peace and war between the two countries after the conquest of the Promised Land under Joshua, there is only one sure reference to Israel in the recorded history of Ancient Egypt. This is contained in the Stela of Merneptah or the Israel Stela discovered by Flinders Petrie at Thebes, near the modern Luxor in Upper Egypt and published by him in 1897. There is little to be astonished at in this almost complete absence of reference to Israel in the annals and literature of the Egyptians, if the matter is considered from the point of view of the Pharaoh and his people.

The explanation, of course, lies in the utter contempt in which the Israelites were held by the Egyptians. For them, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob and their descendants were mere nomads or "sand-dwellers", who did not merit consideration. By the time of Abraham's visit to Egypt about 1850 B.C. the pyramids had already been in existence for a thousand years and the people of the Nile Valley were deeply conscious of the superiority of their civilization over that of any of their neighbours, especially those closest to them, the inhabitants of Sinai and Palestine. Evidence for this contempt for other, lesser, breeds is to be found in the story of the Patriarch Joseph. After Joseph had revealed himself to his brothers as that brother whom they had sold into slavery, he ordered that his family should be served a meal. "He (Joseph) was served separately; so were they (the brothers of Joseph), and so were the Egyptians who ate in his household, for the Egyptians cannot take food with Hebrews: they have a horror of it" (Gen. 43,32). The gulf, then, between the Ancient Egyptians and men of other racial origin was vast, so vast as to prohibit their eating at the same table. Even Joseph, a mere Egyptian by adoption, could not eat at the same table with his own brothers. It would seem, then, the Ancient Egyptians as long ago as the nineteenth century B.C. had already acquired that hubris which is engendered by a long history of national achievement, an exaggerated sense of their own importance which prevented them from commenting on their relations with a people of so little importance as the Hebrews.

Merneptah was a pharaoh of the nineteenth dynasty who ruled Egypt from 1225 until 1215 B.C. In the fifth year of his reign, 1220 B.C. he defeated the Libyans in battle and erected a stone stela at Thebes to commemorate his victory; it can now be seen in Cairo Pharaonic Museum. The greater part of the stone is covered with the text of the

inscription in hieroglyphs but this is surmounted by a picture sculpted in the stone and showing the great god, Amon-Re, in the act of presenting a sword to Merneptah, thereby commissioning him to begin hostilities against all foreign countries.

Though the inscription on the stela tells of an historical event it can scarcely be called "a historical text" in the sense in which that phrase is commonly understood today. It is rather a poetic glorification of the Pharaoh, a hymn of praise of Merneptah who has been victorious not only over the Libyans but also over all his enemies, including the Israelites who are mentioned only in the concluding lines of the inscription along with several other peoples in testimony of the universal character of the king's success. The text of the stela says in words what the footstools of Tutankhamon express in another art form, that the Pharaoh has been so successful in battle against his enemies that they are in a position of complete subjection to him. He "smites the Nine Bows", the nine traditional enemies of Egypt and gains "victories in all lands". He is "the Bull, lord of strength, slaying his foes, gracious on the field of valour when his conquest has been effected". Having established the universal nature of the victories of Merneptah, the inscription goes on to relate, no doubt with a great deal of oriental exaggeration, the fate of the Libyans at the hands of Merneptah. "The land of Temeh" is penetrated and "the terror of eternity" is set "in the hearts of the Meshwesh". "He causes to turn back the Rebu, who had trodden Egypt." These Libyan tribes are described as being utterly discouraged and running away from the field of battle. "Their legs did not stop, except to run. Their archers abandoned their bows. The heart of their runners was weak from travelling."

The fate of leader and people of the Rebu tribe, recalls that of many Egyptians in the short Sinai war of June 1967. "The wretched enemy prince of Rebu was fled in the depth of the night, by himself. . . . His feet were unshod. . . . The loaves for his provision were seized; he had no water of the waterskin to keep him alive. The face of his brethren was fierce, to slay him: among his commanders, one fought his companion." The leader of the Rebu is identified as Merey who, in attacking Egypt, "did evil and subversive things against every god who is in Memphis". His defeat is a condemnation by the gods and the result for the Egyptians is joy and a return to full liberty and security. "One walks with unhindered stride on the way, for there is no fear at all in the heart of the people. The forts are left to themselves, the wells (lie open), accessible to the messengers. . . . The cattle of the field are left as free to roam without herdsman, (even) crossing the flood of the stream. There is no breaking out of a cry in the night 'Halt! Behold,

a comer comes with the speech of strangers!', but one comes and goes with singing."

The inscription is made up of passages of prose which alternate with other passages in verse and it is in the last poem of the text that the reference to Israel occurs. It is a poem which takes up again the theme of the first lines of the text, the universal nature of the victories of Merneptah, and names many other peoples and states who have been defeated by the Pharaoh.

"The princes are prostrate, saying: 'Mercy!
Not one raises his head among the Nine Bows.
Desolation is for Tehenu; Hatti is pacified;
Plundered is the Canaan with every evil;
Carried off is Ashkelon; seized upon is Gezer;
Yanoam is made as that which does not exist;
Israel is laid waste, his seed is not;
Hurru is become a widow for Egypt!
All lands together, they are pacified;
Everyone who was restless, he has been bound."

Several of the names of these places and peoples mentioned in the above extract are easily recognizable, such as Tehenu, the Libyans who were referred to earlier in the text, Canaan, Ashkelon, Gezer and Israel; but others are less familiar such as Hatti, better known as the land of the Hittites, Yanoam, a city to the north of Palestine, and Hurru, the country inhabited by the Horites.

What exactly is meant by the text when it says that Israel is laid waste, his seed is not"? Does it mean no more than that the crops belonging to the Israelites have been destroyed? Or does it signify something much more drastic, that the great majority of the Hebrews have been put to the sword? More probably the second interpretation is the meaning which the Pharaoh meant to convey. However, it must be remembered that the poem which contains the reference to Israel is written in the same boastful spirit as the earlier description of the defeat of the Libyans and that it is a poem, full of hyperbole and the unrestrained imagery of the east. There is no case at all for taking the reference in its sober literal sense and the most that can be deduced from it is that the Pharaoh and his army met the Israelites in war and defeated them, in the year 1220 B.C.

The Stela of Merneptah and the conclusions to be derived from the information, slight as it is, are often employed as an argument by those who hold that the Exodus from Egypt took place at the later of the two dates favoured by most writers on the subject. The early date for the Exodus is 1445 B.C. under the Pharaohs of the eighteenth dynasty, while the more common or traditional theory is that the crossing over

the Red Sea took place under a king of the nineteenth dynasty, the Pharaoh Ramesses II, the predecessor of the Pharaoh of the Stela, Merneptah.

The argument derived from the Stela runs as follows: The language of the Ancient Egyptians was written in hieroglyphs, a sign script. One of the conventions of this script was to designate cities, states, regions by the addition of an ideogram which clearly meant that the writer was referring to a territory and not a race or tribe. The sign in question consisted of a small circle in which was inscribed a cross in the form of the Cross of St. Andrew. The inscription on the stone which contains the reference to the Israelites has the determinative of land after all the names which it contains except after the word, Israel. Since this is a remarkable omission, it must have been deliberate on the part of the composer of the text and is a strong indication that the Israelites were still a nomadic people at the time of Merneptah's raid on Palestine and had not yet settled down in cities. Wilson's translation of the Stela in Pritchard has a note pointing out that the argument is a good one but that it is not conclusive, because of the notorious carelessness of Late-Egyptian scribes and several blunders of writing in this stela".¹

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¹ *Ancient Near Eastern Texts Relating to the Old Testament*. Edited by James B. Pritchard. Princeton University Press, p. 378. Quotations from the Stela are taken from this translation by John A. Wilson.