10. MERENPTAH'S "ISRAEL," THE BIBLE'S, AND OURS

by William G. Dever

ONE of current biblical scholarship's liveliest debates has to do with defining "earliest Israel," that is, locating it historically (if at all) in both the textual and the archaeological records. Until recently, the most pertinent nonbiblical datum was the well-known inscription of the Egyptian Pharaoh Merenptah that mentions "Israel," which is securely dated to ca. 1210 B.C.E. Now, however, several studies have attempted to correlate Merenptah's "Israel" with the growing body of archaeological evidence from the thirteenth–twelfth centuries B.C.E. that documents a complex of some three hundred hill-country settlements in central Canaan.

The discussion on early Israel is brought up to date and thoroughly documented in my book *Who Were the Early Israelites and Where Did They Come From?* (Dever 2003). But it was Larry Stager who initiated this discussion in a brilliant article in 1985 entitled, "The Archaeology of the Family in Ancient Israel" (Stager 1985a) as well as in an article on Merenptah, our subject here, in the same year (Stager 1985b). Then in 1998 Stager offered an authoritative survey of the more current archaeological evidence in *The Oxford History of the Biblical World*, in an article entitled "Forging an Identity: The Emergence of Ancient Israel" (Stager 1998). I am delighted to offer to Larry Stager, a longtime colleague and friend, this further investigation of the Merenptah datum in the light of its recent archaeological context.

Merenptah's "Israel"

Merenptah's "Hymn of Victory" celebrates the Pharaoh's triumph over a series of enemies in Canaan, among them the peoples of places like "Tehenu/Canaan" (both specified); "Hurru" (the Hurrian empire in Syria); "Hatti" (the Neo-Hittite entity in northern Syria); and "Israel." It also mentions several specific Canaanite cities, such as "Ashkelon," "Gezer," and "Yanoam." Egyptologists have long noted that the references to enemies that are countries or states are preceded in every case by the determinative sign for "foreign country" (the throw-stick plus the three-hills sign). But the term "Israel," the sole exception, is preceded by the determinative sign for a "people" or nonstate entity (the throw-stick for foreigners plus the man+woman over plural strokes). Kenneth Kitchen, an acknowledged authority, describes this as:

> the mark in numberless instances of a people-group, and not a settled state with an urban center. So far as Merenptah's soldiers, record-keepers and this stele's scribe were concerned, this "Israel" was a people-group in western Palestine, and neither a land nor a mini-state. . . . The logic of the situation leaves only the hill-country to which "Israel" may be assigned.
>
> [Kitchen 2004:271f.]

A standard translation is that of J. A. Wilson in *Ancient Near Eastern Texts* (*ANET* [3] p. 378):

> 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.

There have been innumerable analyses of the poetic structure of the "Victory Stele," with consequent differences in the interpretation of its meaning and historical significance. Similarly, the phrase describing Israel's "seed" as having been wiped out has been subjected to exhaustive critical scrutiny.[1] None of this need concern us here, however, since the meaning of the key term "Israel" is unambiguous, as all Egyptologists have maintained since Petrie's discovery of the "Victory Stele" at Thebes over a century ago. Furthermore, as Kitchen and many others have pointed out, the term "Israel" not only is preceded by the determinative for "people" rather than "country/state," but is a gentilic (Kitchen 2004:271f.). Thus, the only correct reading is "the Israelite people."

That would seem to be the end of the discussion, but unfortunately it is not. Elsewhere, I have characterized the biblical "revisionists" as naïve postmodernists who have unwittingly borrowed an epistemology according to which there is no knowledge. As Baruch Halpern (1995) has cogently observed, the revisionists are not simply "minimalists"; their intent is to erase Israel from history altogether.[2] And, of

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[1] The literature is vast, but for convenient orientation and references see McNutt 1999:35–45; Hasel 1998; Noll 2001: 162–64; Stager 1985b. Fundamental Egyptological sources are Redford 1992:247–57; Kitchen 1994:71–77; 2004.

[2] I have also leveled the charge of nihilism in my book *What Did the Biblical Writers Know and When Did They*

course, the revisionists must perforce begin their campaign right at the beginning, with Israel's supposed origin. There cannot have been an "early Israel," for that would prove inconvenient for their agenda. Lest this charge seem too extreme, let me cite here some revisionist distortions of the Merenptah reference to "Israel."

In his book *Prelude to Israel's Past: Background and Beginnings of Israelite History and Identity*, Niels Peter Lemche (1998b:75) acknowledges that for a hundred years the Merenptah stele has been considered correctly as concrete proof of an Israel in Palestine around 1200 B.C.E. But in his more radical book, *The Israelites in History and Tradition*, Lemche declares that the traditional reading is irrelevant: "The victory stele of Merneptah, however, does not confirm the date of the Hebrew conquest of Palestine: in fact, it has no bearing on that topic" (Lemche 1998a:36). He argues that "the inscription's use of determinatives is inconsistent," quoting G. W. Ahlström (I presume). Yet Kitchen has demonstrated that the Egyptian scribe was not careless or inconsistent. And the archaeological "facts on the ground," discussed below, confirm that Egyptian intelligence was remarkably precise. The differences implied by the use of differing determinatives in the Merenptah stele correspond exactly to what we now know of the several political entities listed in the inscription. Israel *was* different.

Thomas L. Thompson, always the most extreme of the revisionists, goes even further than Lemche. He simply disposes of the issue of ethnicity, stating that: "Ethnicity, however, is an interpretive historiographical fiction. . . . Ethnicity is hardly a common aspect of human existence at this very early period" (Thompson 1997:12).

Thompson elaborates by declaring that ethnicity is only a modern attempt to describe societal relationships and collective decisions. But "the physical effects [material culture remains—*WGD*] of such collective decisions are often arbitrary and are, indeed, always accidental" (Thompson 1997:12). Of the Merenptah inscription that mentions "Israelites," Thompson opines:

> The sharp boundaries that the use of the terms "Canaanite" and "Israelite" makes possible are wholly unwarranted. "Canaan" appears on the Merenptah stele and has been shown to be paired with "Israel" as his spouse. They are the metaphorical parents of three towns destroyed by the Egyptian army. [ibid.]

Know It? What Archaeology Can Tell Us about the Reality of Ancient Israel (Dever 2001:28–52 *et passim*).

At an international symposium in 2000 in Copenhagen, where Thompson and I opposed each other, he went so far as to suggest that while the Merenptah inscription does mention "Israelites," that is only a coincidence. The Egyptian scribe invented these peoples and their names and by accident came up with the same ethnic designation that we have in the Hebrew Bible. This line of argument is patently absurd and is readily refuted on both philological and archaeological grounds.[3]

Subsequently, Thompson collaborated with Ingrid Hjelm on an article entitled "The Victory Song of Merenptah, Israel and the People of Palestine" (Hjelm and Thompson 2002).[4] In their treatment of the Merenptah inscription, Hjelm and Thompson advance four basic arguments:

1. The inscription is poetry, not history, so it is irrelevant for the historical question of Israelite origins. There was no Egyptian victory in Canaan, so nothing else in the inscription matters. Of course, one may ask how Hjelm and Thompson know this. In fact, there is some specific evidence for Egyptian destructions in Canaan in this horizon, and precisely at Ashkelon and Gezer, which are the sites singled out for mention in the inscription.[5]

[3] If Thompson were correct that ethnicity is "often arbitrary . . . always accidental," then none of the social-scientific disciplines would be viable, for they all depend upon our ability to discern patterns and purpose in culture. Archaeology, in particular, seeks the "material correlates of behavior"—an impossible task if there is no patterning in culture and history. The topic of archaeology and ethnicity is especially timely and the literature is vast. See, provisionally, Killebrew 2005. See also my forthcoming chapter in the Eric M. Meyers Festschrift, "Ethnicity and the Archaeological Record: The Case of Early Israel."

[4] Here and elsewhere, Thompson avoids using "Israel" as an ethnic label, even for the period of the Israelite monarchy, when he refers to "the province of Samarina" (adopting the Neo-Assyrian usage) or more often "Syria's marginal southern fringe" (Thompson 1999:9, 235, 252; 1997: 176–78, 183, 184). See also Lemche 1998a:51–54.

[5] As I (and others) have argued, whether or not Merenptah actually defeated his enemies in Canaan, or even campaigned there, is irrelevant for our purposes, since the reference to "Israel" stands on its own. Nevertheless, in our excavations at Gezer, Stratum 15 does show signs of major disruptions in the late thirteenth century B.C.E., which can hardly have been caused by Israelites or Philistines. This would provide a context for the pectoral of Merneptah found by Macalister (Dever 1986:50f.). The evidence from Ashkelon is now published in Stager et al. 2008:256. If Yurco and Stager are correct, the Egyptian relief showing the siege of Ashkelon, now redated from Rameses II to Merenptah, may have some historical basis (see Stager 1985b).

2. The term *Ysrʾel* in the inscription, universally translated by Egyptologists as "Israel," can just as easily refer to any number of other entities. Hjelm and Thompson (2002:13f.) offer as many as five alternatives: "Sharon," "Yeshurun," "Asher," "Asher'el," and "Jezreel."[6]

3. In any case, *Ysrʾel* here refers to the whole population of Hurru (Canaan), not some putative "Israel" (ibid., p. 16). Again, how do they know that?

4. In any case, "Israel" is only "an eponym . . . a literary reality," not "a specific people in history" (ibid., p. 17).

Happily, Kitchen, with his formidable Egyptological expertise, has refuted all of Hjelm and Thompson's tortured arguments, particularly their notion that the term "Israel" can just as easily be translated in other ways. He also effectively disposes of their assertion that the poetic and metaphorical character of the hymn negates any historical significance. The presence of rhetoric and its ideology has no bearing on the historical element; to think otherwise is simply to miss the point of Egyptian usage (Kitchen 2004: 268). Finally, Kitchen demonstrates, with copious documentation from numerous other inscriptions, that the significance of the determinative sign for "people" that accompanies the term "Israel" cannot be explained away by the "carelessness" of Egyptian scribes (Kitchen 2004:28–71).

At least we have to acknowledge that Hjelm and Thompson's arguments here are consistent with Thompson's (and the other revisionists') ideological program in their other voluminous publications, in which they insist that there was no "early Israel." The most notoriously anti-Israel of the revisionists, Keith Whitelam, insists that the attempt to write the history of this nonpeople is not only impossible but illegitimate. All along, it is the history of the "Palestinian peoples" that biblical scholars and archaeologists should have been writing (Whitelam 1996).[7]

One final revisionist scholar may be cited here. In a 1996 contribution to a volume of essays on ethnicity and the Bible, Diana Edelman, like some others who have adopted the postmodern notion that ethnicity equals racism, rejects the very category (Edelman 1996). As for the data often cited by archaeologists, Edelman, despite having gained considerable field experience herself, nevertheless insists that "there are no *artifactual* [italics hers] remains that can consistently be used to understand a group's ethnicity" (p. 26). It is not surprising, then, that Edelman seeks to dispense with the textual data as well. She repeats the old canard that the term "Israel" in the Merenptah stele may mean something else, in this case "Jezereel," citing only Eissfeldt's long-discredited reading (p. 35; cf. Kitchen 2004:270f.). She also repeats the error, so well refuted by Kitchen and others, that the determinative sign for "people" may not mean anything because Egyptian scribes used these signs "loosely, mistakenly" (p. 35). Thus, apparently, even texts do not help to determine "ethnicity"—and certainly not those of the Bible, in the opinion of Edelman and the other revisionists. So let us turn to that issue.

Virtually all the scholars who devalue the Merenptah reference to "Israel" are biblical scholars (although by no means do the majority of biblical scholars agree with them). One archaeologist, however, has joined the minimalists. Israel Finkelstein, who literally wrote the book on early Israel in his 1988 work *The Archaeology of the Israelite Settlement* (Finkelstein 1988), now insists that in the three hundred or so early Iron Age hill-country villages that he himself put on the map, there was no ethnic group that we can positively identify as Israelites. When his book was first published, Finkelstein accepted the caution of reviewers like myself concerning the use of the term "Israelite" in this period; then he adopted my term "Proto-Israelite"; and finally he rejected the term "Israelite" altogether. He argues that the distinctive Iron I material culture traits that we both recognize on the Late Bronze/Iron I horizon are more the result of environmental and socioeconomic factors than they are reflective of any new ethnic self-consciousness. It is all about "lifestyle," he concludes. But Finkelstein does not seem to understand that lifestyle *is* "ethnicity"—it is what makes "us" different from "them." In any case, in his 2001 popular book with Neil Silberman, *The Bible Unearthed*, (Finkelstein and Silberman 2001), he reverts to the term "Israel."[8]

The Hebrew Bible's "Israel"

One of the recurring motifs of the skepticism of the biblical revisionists concerning ethnicity is that Merenptah's "Israel," as well as the "early Israel" of archaeologists, has nothing whatsoever to do with bib-

[6] For rebuttal, see Kitchen 2004:270f.

[7] Other reviewers also correct identify "the political agenda that dominates this book" (Sommer 1998:85) and conclude that it "comes close to being a political manifesto" (Levine and Malamat 1996:288).

[8] For references, see Dever 2001:40f.; 2003:194f.

lical Israel.[9] Of course not; but that is irrelevant. "Israel" of the settlement horizon in the thirteenth to eleventh centuries B.C.E. is obviously different from the state of "Israel" and its population during the monarchy in the tenth to early sixth centuries. Even the biblical writers knew that.

In the Bible's "prehistory"—that is, in the narratives about the patriarchs and the Exodus-Conquest—the writers sometimes use the term "Hebrew" rather than "Israel." Then, in describing the earliest phases of the settlement in Canaan, "Canaanite" peoples like the inhabitants of Shechem and Gibeon are said to have joined the emergent Israelite confederation with few apparent barriers. The Israelite "tribes" are by no means unified in the stories in Joshua and Judges, and their lack of solidarity probably stems from an ethnic identity that was still fluid. Some even spoke different dialects, as the famous shibboleth/sibboleth incident of Judges 12:5–6 reveals. Even later, during the monarchy, Uriah, a "Hittite," is a prominent career officer in David's army. There is much other evidence to show that, at least originally, the ethnic designation "Israelite" was neither self-evident in meaning nor exclusive, and that it became so only much later. "Early Israel," as many now maintain, was a motley crew.[10]

To be sure, the later Deuteronomistic writers do speak of "all Israel." But they are assuming an ethnic homogeneity that even then may not have been factual. It is significant that 1 Sam. 13:34 uses the gentilic "Hebrew" and the phrase "all Israel" in parallel. Moreover, the term "all Israel" is used so paradigmatically that it may be largely hyperbole, just as we speak in everyday parlance about "all Americans," despite our awareness of the enormous diversity of the U.S. population.

In light of the foregoing, the revisionist's insistent depreciation of the ethnic designation "Israelite" in the Merenptah inscription—our earliest, best-dated, and least-biased reference to Israel—appears to be more a reflection of ideology than honest, fair-minded scholarship. As for the reluctance on the part of some of these scholars to use the term "Israel" even for later periods, we need only point out that by the ninth century B.C.E., "Israel" is the designation used by Israel's neighbors and enemies—no hesitancy there about ethnic labels, much less a "biblical bias." The Tel Dan inscription in Aramaic refers to a "king of Israel" (whether David or not). The Moabite Stone also speaks of a "king of Israel," in the case of Omri. Finally, the earliest of the cuneiform texts that describe the first encounter of the Assyrians with the petty states in the west, Shalmaneser III's account of the Battle of Qarqar in 853 B.C.E., mentions "Ahab, King of Israel."[11]

Our "Israel"

That leaves us with the "Israel" of modern scholarship, in particular the Israel of the Iron Age (not a "Persian" or "Hellenistic" Israel) that is so well attested archaeologically. Elsewhere, I have written extensively on the general question of the date and the historicity of the biblical sources, assessed on the basis of the context now supplied by archaeology (see Dever 2001); and in *Who Were the Early Israelites and Where Did They Come From?* (Dever 2003), I have discussed at length the specific question of Israelite origins, adducing virtually all the current archaeological evidence and interpretive theories (see also Noll 2001 and Killebrew 2005).

Having previously presented in full the empirical data for the existence of an "early Israel" (my "Proto-Israelites"), here I need only raise the question of how or indeed whether *this* "Israel" may correspond to that of the Merenptah stele. To do that, we need first to summarize what we can actually know from the passage in the stele that describes "Israel," whatever its literary structure and its historical veracity. The following are the salient points, all of which I believe are obvious to any dispassionate observer:

1. There was an ethnic group in Canaan sometime before ca. 1210 B.C.E. who called themselves "the Israelite people" and who were known as such to Egyptian intelligence.

2. These people were sufficiently numerous and well established that they were perceived as a threat to Egyptian hegemony in the region.

3. These peoples were not, however, organized into city-states, much less state-like entities, unlike the other peoples listed, a fact reflected in the unique determinative sign with the gentilic.

[9] This notion is ubiquitous; see, e.g., Davies 1992:61–63; Thompson 1992:310f.; Lemche 1998a:36–38; Whitelam 1996:209, 210, 228; Edelman 1996:35–42.

[10] See Dever 2003:181f.; Killebrew 2005:149–96. Note that the fluidity in ethnic identity in Iron I and even into early Iron II does not contradict the continuity in material culture during that time span (see below). The two overlap but are not necessarily identical.

[11] For references, see Dever 2001:29, 30, 163–66.

4. These Israelites were distinct socioeconomically and politically from the general Canaanite ("Hurru"/Hurrian) population, and specifically from the population of city-states like Ashkelon and Gezer along the coastal plain and Yanoam in Galilee. The central hill-country is conspicuously empty on a map of Merenptah's campaigns in Canaan (regardless of whether these were real or imaginary).[12]

Skeptics like the biblical scholars discussed above typically argue that there is not enough information in the Merenptah stele to specify anything about who these "Israelites" actually were or to ascertain whether they have anything to do with later "biblical Israel." These, however, are arguments of which we can easily dispose.

First, although the information derived from the Merenptah stele is minimal, it tells us all that we need to know about the Israelites at this juncture. And, however cryptic, all the information conveyed by Egyptian intelligence is correct. Earliest Israel was a loosely organized "tribal" confederation somewhere in central Canaan at this time: a group of people contiguous with the indigenous population, but already beginning to distinguish themselves as a separate ethnic group, and on an evolutionary scale far short of state-level development.

What is significant here is that all of this information about "early Israel," derived independently from a source far removed from the nationalist biases of the biblical writers, is corroborated by the archaeological data that we have accumulated in the past two decades or so. Yet the revisionists, despite paying lip-service to archaeology, have never responded to the vast body of data that I and many other archaeologists have presented. They only demonize archaeologists as "credulous" or worse.[13] Some have likened these revisionists to secular fundamentalists whose minds are made up and who do not wish to be confused by facts. Nevertheless, the Merenptah inscription's facts and the archaeological facts converge at all the salient points, and it is just such convergences that place us on firm historical ground.

The second answer to the revisionists' unwillingness to connect Merenptah's "Israel" to later biblical Israel obviously has to do with cultural and historical continuity and how these are perceived. To give skeptics the benefit of the doubt, there is indeed no textual continuity. The Merenptah text dates to the late thirteenth century B.C.E., while the earliest relevant biblical texts (the Pentateuch/Tetrateuch, the Deuteronomistic History, and the early prophetic writings) are from the late eighth century at best—a gap of some five centuries.[14] Even if the gap is partially bridged by presuming earlier oral tradition embedded within our canonical sources, that gap is considerable.

What few biblical scholars seem to realize is that it is archaeology that bridges the gap. We have a complete and continuous archaeological record from the late thirteenth through the early sixth century, with not even a generation missing. And if from about the eighth century onwards this continuous Iron II culture is "Israelite" (as even some of the revisionists must admit), then its immediate predecessor in Iron I was also "Israelite"—or, at the very least, as I have suggested, "Proto-Israelite," to err on the side of caution.[15] Merenptah's "Israelites" are the authentic progenitors of the biblical Israelites. Yet I can find very few biblical scholars who are aware of the distinctive archaeological assemblage and its striking continuity through the Iron Age.

As Baruch Halpern (1997) has observed, we are still plagued by two monologues rather than the dialogue that some of us have advocated for years.[16] The revisionists seldom cite the numerous archaeological handbooks that are now available to any interested reader.[17] Their agenda becomes increasingly ideo-

[12] We have noted Kitchen's recognition of this fact. See also Redford 1992:275; Ahlström 1986:40–42; Finkelstein 1988:28f. Even Lemche (19989a:38) acknowledges this. See further Dever 2003:201–8.

[13] See Dever 2001:30–40. The rhetoric only escalates in Thompson 2001 and Lemche 2000. Lemche dismisses me as a "rustic," but he has much more difficulty refuting my charge of postmodernism, as extended and carefully documented by James Barr (2000:102–78). See further Hagelia 2002.

[14] Both biblical scholars and archaeologists have tended recently to lower the dates of J, E, and Dtr by as much as two to three centuries (see, conveniently, Schniedewind 2004). The Persian or Hellenistic date advocated by the revisionists is not justified, however.

[15] On my "Proto-Israelites," see Dever 2003:194–200 *et passim*. I am not the first to use the term, however. Both Norman Gottwald and P. Kyle McCarter preceded me with a sort of off-hand use of the term, but it was I who first employed the term in a deliberate archaeological sense. Many of my archaeological colleagues in Israel urge me to drop it now that a consensus is emerging that there *was* an "early Israel."

[16] My own calls for such a dialogue go back to 1974; see my *Archaeology and Biblical Studies: Retrospects and Prospects* (Dever 1974).

[17] These include Weippert 1988; Mazar 1990; Ben-Tor 1992; Levy 1995. The most egregious example of this lack of attention to basic information is provided by Davies, who in his book *In Search of "Ancient Israel"* (Davies

logical—political rather than scholarly. And as the rhetoric escalates, the facts on the ground are obscured. The "deconstruction" of the Merenptah inscription, our earliest reference to the early Israelites, is just another sad example of the inroads that postmodernism has made into the field of biblical criticism, which was once a historical discipline. Fortunately, mainstream biblical scholarship, buttressed by old-fashioned positivists (shall we say "empiricists") like Lawrence Stager, help us to hold the middle ground.

Conclusion

I seem to have been the first to charge that the biblical revisionists are really thinly disguised postmodernists. Now, however, James Barr—arguably the dean of British Old Testament scholars—has agreed with me specifically and has in fact gone well beyond my original critique (Barr 2000:102–78). I can only conclude that in their deprecation of the Merenptah datum on early Israel, the revisionists are simply behaving like typical postmodernists. Otherwise, I am at a loss to explain their recalcitrance in the face of the overwhelming evidence, both textual and archaeological. Consider how similar are the basic tenets of the two schools:

1. A contrarian attitude. This is Lyotard's much touted "incredulity toward all metanarratives," in this case the grand metanarrative of the Western cultural tradition, the Bible.

2. A preference for novel, even exotic, "readings of all texts" (and, in this case, artifacts). The only legitimate technique is "deconstruction"; the text can mean anything—except, it seems, what it appears to mean.

3. "All readings are political," postmodernism's most typical mantra. "Reading" is not about truth at all, for there is none, but rather about race, class, gender, politics, and power.

4. In any case, "all claims to knowledge are simply social constructs." Therefore following Foucault, "all history is fiction."

This is not the place to offer a full-scale refutation of postmodernism, even in its revisionist guise. There is, however, a growing literature that suggests that it is becoming passé in real intellectual circles.[18] If that is true, then devotees of Hayden White-style "metahistory" like Davies, Thompson, Lemche, Whitelam, and the other revisionists, will soon be as obsolete as their Merenptah.

1992) cites Mazar only once, in a footnote explaining that Mazar's handbook deals with the Iron Age and is thus irrelevant to Davies' "Persian-period Israel" (p. 24 n. 4). Here, as too often, the presupposition trumps the evidence.

[18] See, for instance, the devastating critiques in Gress 1998 and especially Windschuttle 1996. Recently, however, John Collins (2005)—as much a modernist as I am—has conceded ground to the revisionists, arguing that they have had considerable influence on American biblical scholarship.

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