

Historical Parallels: The Israel Stele

Topics: **Discovery of the Israel Stele**
 Rulers Exaggerate Accomplishments
 The Long Chronology vs. the Short Chronology
 Key Words of the Stele
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Charts: **Merneptah**
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Preface: One of the occasionally enjoyable and often frustrating task is, setting up a parallel between various events in Israel according to Scripture and historical occurrences which are determined by various archeological finds. Such it is with the braggadocio of Merenptah, Pharaoh of Egypt and the parallel time frame of Israel.

1. In 1896, a monument was discovered at Thebes—a granite stone, a stele, standing in the funeral temple which honored Pharaoh Merneptah (also spelled *Merenptah*). The stone contains the first extra-Biblical reference to the nation (or to the people) *Israel*. Because the name of *Israel* appears on this stone, it is often called the *Israel Stele*, although it would seem more proper to call it the *Merneptah Stele*. Durant estimates that it was engraved in 1225 B.C. ZPEB tells us that the stele was originally Amenhotep III's, but that Merneptah reused it. Unfortunately, they don't go into any sort of detail here.

Merneptah

Line:	The 13 th son and successor to the famous Rameses II
Length of Rulership:	This is given variously as 10 years and 20 years.
Time Period:	1213 B.C. (Millard); circa 1233–1223 B.C. (Durant); 1224–1211 B.C. (Packer and Tenney); 1213–1200 B.C. (Princeofegypt website); 1234–1214 B.C. (Catholic Encyclopedia); 1224–1214 B.C. (ZPEB).
Reconciliation with Biblical time period:	One of the biggest problems is reconciling the Biblical chronology with Egyptian chronology. Although Biblical chronology is based upon a limited type of source (it is primarily based upon written documents), there are more manuscripts which support Biblical history than there are ancient manuscripts of any sort. When it comes to Egyptian time lines, these are based upon a wider set of types of artifacts—however, even from an unbiased view, it is hard to place one over the other. Tradition has Israel leaving Egypt around 1440 B.C. and entering into the land around 1400 B.C. Allow some time for the lengthy rule of Rameses II and the shorter reign of his son Merneptah (this is, of course assuming that Rameses II was the exodus pharaoh), and Merneptah would be ruling Egypt in the late 1300's, a discrepancy of nearly 200 years. If one of the Thutmose's or Amenhotep's are reigning in Egypt during the exodus, then the time difference is a lot less.

Accomplishments:

It is said that his father was the pharaoh of the exodus, although some have thought that Merneptah was the pharaoh of the exodus as well (this was prior to the discovery of the Israel Stele, of course, although the online Catholic Encyclopedia still lists him as the pharaoh of the exodus). Millard tells us that he was not the soldier or builder that his father was (which is the general consensus), but his ruler was much shorter as well. The Libyans threatened Egypt from the west, and Merneptah defeated them in his fifth year, which triumph is recorded on the Israel Stele.

The Stele reads, in part:

Text of Israel Stele

From *Treasures from Bible Times*

Canaan has been plundered in every evil way,
Askelon has been brought away captive,
Gezer has been seized,
Yenoam has been destroyed,
Israel is devastated, having no seed,
Syria is widowed because of Egypt.
All lands, they are united in peace,
Everyone who roamed, he has subdued him,
By the king of Egypt...
Merenptah¹

From Will Durant:

The kings are overthrown, saying "Salam!"...
Wasted is Tehenu,
The Hittite land is pacified,
Plundered is Canaan, with every evil,...
Israel is desolated, her seed is not;
Palestine has become a widow for Egypt,
All lands are united, they are pacified;
Every one that is turbulent is bound by King Merneptah.²



The Israel Stele

From the Internet:

One comes and goes with singing, and there is no lamentation of mourning people. The towns are settled again anew; as for the one that ploweth his harvest, he shall eat it. Re has turned himself to Egypt; he was born, destined to be the protector, the King Merneptah ... the Sun, driving away the storm which was Egypt, allowing Egypt to see the rays of the sun, removing the mountain of copper from the neck of the people... `The kings are overthrown, saying: SALEM! Not one holds up his head among the Nine Bows. Wasted is Tehenu, Kheta is pacified, plundered is Pекanan, with every evil, carried off is Askalon, seized upon is Gezer, Yenoam is made as a thing not existing.
Israel [-s-r-'r] is desolated, his seed is not, Palestine has become a widow for Egypt. All lands are united, they are pacified, everyone that is turbulent is bound by King Merneptah, life like Re, every day.³

¹ Alan Millard; *Treasures from Bible Times*; ©1985 by Lion Publishing; p. 100.

² *The Story of Civilization; 1. Our Oriental Heritage*, by Will Durant; MJF Books, ©1963; p. 301.

³ Taken from the Web site: <http://www.geocities.com/Athens/Pantheon/5061/israel.html>

Text of Israel Stele

From *Treasures from Bible Times*

From Will Durant:

From the Internet:

As you can see, there is no clear mention of Egypt doing anything to Israel. It appears as though Israel is devastated, although it is not clear why; also, it appears as though they had no *seed* (descendants). There, of course, is also the problem with the translation itself. What do the words mean exactly? What is the author trying to get across? What passages are idiomatic? Millard says that this may reference a single battle between Israel and Egypt in the southern portion of Israel, but there is no indication that an actual conflict took place when this stone was inscribed. It is just as reasonable for this to be the *state of the union* record; and we would expect the Egyptian king to speak disparagingly of Israel, whose exodus coincided with the greatest set of disasters ever to befall Egypt.

2. We first must realize that ancient kings and pharaohs used to exaggerate their accomplishments, the people they conquered, the length of their rule, and/or the area over which they ruled. Don't act like this is some big deal here. We had tremendous economic growth during the Clinton administration. President Clinton and the Democratic party took the credit for this growth, whereas Republicans took the credit, saying that it was the result of the sound fiscal policies of the Reagan era. Even a corrupt ruler does not want to think that his legacy is simply the amassing of personal wealth. Therefore, in the examination of this Stele, we must bear in mind that the weak state of the nations surrounding Egypt might be somewhat overstated, and the role that Egypt played in the condition of the other nations might be overstated as well.
3. As you probably realize, there are two different chronologies given with respect to the establishment of Israel; the *short chronology*, in which Israel becomes a nation in the mid-1200's B.C.; and the *long chronology*, which has Israel making its way to the Land of Promise 1440–1400 B.C.
 - a. The short chronology would very likely deny much of the Biblical record of that period of time. The period of the judges is abbreviated, and much of the information found in exodus would be called into question. Although some teach that the Israel Stele indicates that Israel is an established nation in the 1200's, thus refuting the short chronology, the stele really does not unequivocally convey that Israel is a nation.
 - b. The long chronology seems to be most in line with the Biblical record, but, apparently, it does not match up entirely with the Egyptian history that we *know*.
4. There are two key words in the stele which affect our interpretation of the state of Israel at that time: *seed* and *Israel*.
 - a. *Seed* can be taken to mean *descendants* and it can refer to *grain*. Those who take it in the latter way, say that this corresponds with Gideon's lack of agricultural prosperity (which would have been typical of the Israelites of that time—Judges 6).
 - b. *Israel* can be taken to refer to the *people* or the *nation*. Some have also suggested that it refers to an area north of Israel (Izreel or Jezreal) and others that it is a descriptive name for the Libyans (it means *wearers of the side lock?*). Michael Hasel, a doctoral candidate at the University of Arizona, maintains that *Israel*, identified by the determinative for people, is a socio-ethnic unity powerful enough to be mentioned along with major city-states that were also neutralized, and therefore refers to a nation Israel.⁴
5. The Israel Stele and Israel:
 - a. Placing this stele in time is the most difficult thing to do. During the period of the judges, we have no mention of Egypt; however, the stele does not state that Egypt caused the downfall of Israel either. Israel, during the period of time of the judges, appeared to be reduced in population size and was under the control of several nations. Therefore, the stele passage could simply be stating that Israel is in dire straits. One might make a case for this being the 20 year oppression of the Canaanites (Judges 4:1–3) or the 7 year oppression of the Midianites (Judges 6:1–6). This would accord well with the traditional time frames given both to Israel and to Egypt.
 - b. Another possible choice would be for the son of the exodus pharaoh to evaluate the state of Israel (along with the condition of other nations) while Israel is in the desert. This would have given Egypt time to

⁴ Hasel, M.G. 1994 "Israel in the Merneptah Stela". Bulletin of the American Schools of Oriental Research 296: p. 51. Taken from www.ChristianAnswers.Net.

recuperate from the disasters that God brought upon them and would have been perfect timing for the pharaoh to make such statements concerning the national health of Israel (which was given an eponymous name from Jacob, also known as Israel). This would agree in many ways with the state of Israel and the context of the stele, but would throw our time out of wack by almost two centuries.

- c. What is undoubtedly clear is that Israel is a separate entity from Egypt, whether as a nation during the time of Joshua or later; or as a people wandering in the desert.
 - d. You will note that Ashkelon is mentioned in this stele as well. Ashkelon was one of the Philistine cities. We have two letters, one from Ashkelon and one from Jerusalem, from rulers of these two cities who served the pharaoh of Egypt 1400–1350 B.C. Ashkelon revolted against Egyptian rule under Rameses II when Rameses II was defeated by the Hittites. Rameses II went back and took back this city, recording the conquest on the walls of his temple in Karnak in 1282 B.C. Apparently, there was another local revolt, which caused Merneptah to take Ashkelon back again.
6. **Addendum:** Apart from this stele and the Old Testament, we would not know that Israel existed as a nation as early as 1200 B.C. The next time that Israel is mentioned in an extra-Biblical reference is on the Moabite Stone, which was engraved nearly 400 years later. Apart from the Biblical record, this would have left us with four centuries of Israel's history unaccounted for.

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3. *The Story of Civilization; 1. Our Oriental Heritage*, by Will Durant; MJF Books, ©1963; p. 301
4. Hasel, Michael G. 1994 "Israel in the Merneptah Stela". *Bulletin of the American Schools of Oriental Research* 296: pp. 45-61 (the information actually came from www.ChristianAnswers.net).
5. Alan Millard; *Treasures from Bible Times*; ©1985 by Lion Publishing; pp. 100–101.
6. *The Zondervan Pictorial Encyclopedia of the Bible*; Merrill Tenney, ed., Zondervan Publishing House, ©1976; Vol. 1, p. 356; Vol. 4, p. 191.

Web Sites:

1. <http://www.geocities.com/Athens/Pantheon/5061/israel.html>
2. <http://www.ChristianAnswers.Net>; Bryant G. Wood of Associates for Biblical Research. © 1995, Associates for Biblical Research.