

The merneptah stele and early 'israel'



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

The mention of 'Israel' as a people rather than a region in the Merneptah Stele identifies them as an important socioeconomic entity and therefore a political threat to a hegemonic Egypt. The resilience of the people 'Israel' was established through a segmented tribal coalition, formed as a religious and social identity that attributed to their survival in the turbulent times of the early 12th century. The inclusion of 'Israel' in the Merneptah Stele demonstrates the importance of these people.

It was not in the traditions of the Egyptian scribes to mention an entity that was considered socially inferior or of little importance in the political environment of the era. Poetic licence and propaganda was employed to ensure the Egyptian people regarded the Pharaoh with illustrious fervour. Only events of 'political significance' were narrated and only in the context of the will of the Pharaoh not as miscalculated occurrences. Although it is recognised the scribes employed propaganda, this does not take away from the historical reliability of the narration.

The traditions of the 'New-Kingdom Pharaohs' included daily journals being kept on papyrus, which subsequently were transcribed on to stone for the 'public record'. Once the rhetoric was completed the plain text of the conquest of the Pharaoh was there and basically reliable. The literary interpretation of 'Israel' as a people in the inscription is supported by the determinative used by the scribe and the Egyptian word *prt* as 'seed' correlates with the assumption of Israel existing as a '.... rural sedentary group of agriculturalists'.

Ahlstrom and Edelman propose the people determinative could be attributed to scribal carelessness or a lack of knowledge of the area but this is contradicted by Kitchen who maintains '.... the writing and engraving of the ' Israel Stela' was executed extremely accurately.... ' . In separating ' Israel' by the use of the people determinative from the city-states Ashkelon, Gezer, and Yanoam, the scribe is identifying the differences of the socio-political structures and allowing us a brief glimpse of a specifically defined group of people.

Hjelm and Thompson suggest that ' seed' is understood to mean descendants or offspring and arguments to support this theory are referenced to Bible traditions and Egyptian texts , however in the context of ' Israel' the people being farmers, it would be feasible that the inference would mean their grain was decimated rather than the population being slaughtered in battle. The implication of prt, understood as ' seed' is very important in so much that it identifies the people from an occupational and economical perspective.

In the context of the inscription the scribe portrays the message of taking away the core of the people's existence, their sustenance, culture and framework of the agricultural society identifiable as the people ' Israel' . If we are to assume the people ' Israel' were a sedentary group of agriculturist strong enough to be a threat to Egypt we must also make the assumption the group were firmly established and had been for some time.

The Egyptian scribe must have already been aware of the existence of ' Israel' as mentioned above and this would imply some former experience

with this group that obviously made an impact on Egyptian society . The most noteworthy event would have to be the Exodus. Brown argues the Exodus took place in the time of Merneptah as the result of his father Rameses II being referred to as ' the persecutor of the Jews' . Support is given by Brown on the content of a document held in the British Museum known as the papyrus Anastasi VI.

Briefly this states that the tribes of Shasu have been given permission to graze their cattle in the Crown lands of Goshen where it is assumed the tribes of Israel previously inhabited, therefore confirming the Israelites had left the domains of Egypt sometime within the first seven years of Merneptah's reign, loosely around the time of the inscription. Within Brown's argument lies his acceptance of the literary translation of ' seed' meaning children or offspring therefore relying on the premise of the Bible as denoting the Israelites as ' the children of Israel' and the correlation with the inscription to mean that the expulsion from Egypt was the true interpretation of the text . This view contradicts the theory of ' seed' meaning grain so although appearing to be a sound hypothesis relies too heavily on hyperbole and does not fit with ' Israel' as an established socioeconomic entity that posed a threat to Egypt. We may ask the question of why a group of people that were perceived as a hill dwelling rural sedentary group of agriculturalists threatened the power of hegemonic Egypt.

From a geopolitical perspective Egypt's agenda was to control the coastal highway that included Ashkelon, Gezer and Yanoam to fortify military strongholds and control the trade route. ' Israel' situated in the hill country posed an autonomous threat, as had the other city-states so it stands to

reason it needed to be conquered to fulfil the Merneptah's campaign goals. It must also be pointed out that it was not unusual for unrest and rebellion to occur when a new ruler came to the throne.

Vassals would have used this opportunity to test the governing body and try to extricate themselves from the yoke of the oppressor. The '.... sly rhetorical device' used by the scribe in the inscription and the literary translation ' Israel is laid waste, his seed is not' encourages investigation into the transparency of the language used. The scribe infers that the success of Merneptah's campaign was complete but a closer analysis may indicate otherwise. Leuchter posits a strong argument based on the tool of warfare that was favoured by the Pharaohs, namely the chariot.

To clarify, a hill dwelling community would be hard to conquer with chariots as the dominant weapon of conquest. This may also explain why the Israelites had chosen to inhabit the hills, obviously a calculated strategy to provide a safe refuge for the tribal coalition and a stronghold that served them well in the unsettled times of the early Canaan region. Different interpretations of the line mentioning ' Israel' also support Leuchter's claim a full victory may not have been achieved.

Egyptologist Joseph Davidovits refutes the accepted translation of ' Israel is laid waste, his seed is not' and proposes a new translation on the basis of the hieroglyphs being read incorrectly (the owl being read as a vulture in line 27), therefore the new translation is ' existing is Israel the people'. If the Israelites were not conquered and their ' seed' was not laid waste then this would also allow for a solid framework for the establishment of the Hebrew

monarchy and much to the consternation of minimalist scholars, a loose confirmation of the biblical traditions .

The location of ' Israel' in the central highlands, protected them from conquering factions and larger armies, and also set them apart from the people of the Canaan lowlands . The other factor that constituted a strong coalition of the people was the common identity shared by the Israelite entity. The unrest in the lowlands ' forged alliances' between the highland people for the obvious reasons of survival. The only way to prosper in an area that would have involved a sustainable existence of a rural nature would be to co-operate and maintain a certain amount of egalitarianism .

Another element that set ' Israel' apart was in the simplest of forms to identify one self and that was by their name. The name is West Semitic and can be translated to mean ' El persists' or ' El rules' when placed in ' the divine element'. Sparks posits the common element of El in the name denoted a sense of common religious identity which would set them apart from others and one that would afford a cohesive front to would be conquerors and oppressors .

This would also explain why the scribe recognised ' Israel' as a people rather than a region and was very precise in his usage of the determinative for such. The one line in the inscription is so brief that theories about coalitions and tribes existing in the hill country can only be speculations formed from placing pieces of the puzzle together at this early stage of ancient Israel, and the recognition of them in the context of the Merneptah Stele as evidence of Israel outside the biblical texts.

We can assume that this league of people were resilient and were held together by more than just the will to survive. Religious faith would have played a very real role in their survival. K. Sparkes disagrees with K. van der Toorn's assertion that there is no evidence of a common ethnic identity in regards to a common religious faith by the simple premise of the name 'Israel' meaning a shared devotion of the god 'El' .

A suggestion on the premise of a group of people living in a segmented community and accepting to be known as the one name, may also point to the social structure of tribes that existed autonomously but came together for a common purpose such as the threat of conquest. This as mentioned above suggests a pre-monarchic foundation for the early 'Israel' entity and the monotheist culture followed by 'Israel'. The worship of Yahweh was a collective faith and a strength drawn on through adversity giving the people a meaning for their existence and an explanation for hardships encountered or successes granted.

In conclusion the mention of 'Israel' in the Merneptah Stele in one line suggests a strength and resilience of a people that identified themselves by their name and their faith. This inclusion also reflects the importance of this tribal coalition to the hegemonic Egypt and Merneptah's campaign to extend Egypt's territory through Canaan and the highlands. We should take note about the importance of faith and the willingness to lead an egalitarian existence if it means the survival of the greater community when faced with adversity and oppression.