MERNEPTAH IN CANAAN

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Egyptologists continue to debate whether or not Merneptah actually campaigned in Canaan as he so boasts in his famous stela. 1 Petrie, 2 Gardiner, 3 and Faulkner 4 argue that this Pharaoh of the 19th Dynasty did invade Canaan, while Budge, 5 Wilson, 6 and Montet 7 are among those who believe that he did not. 8

One piece of evidence which has not been used in the entire debate is the appearance of Merneptah's name in the Hebrew Bible. One of the markers of the boundary between Judah and Benjamin in ancient Israel is a place called ma’yan mē neptō ḥ (Josh 15:9, 18:15). Although English Bible translations unanimously render these words as “the spring of the water of Neptō ḥ,” various scholars have correctly identified the site as “the spring of Merneptah.” 9 Hebrew mē neptō ḥ, without r, follows the phonology of the Late Egyptian used during the New Kingdom. 10 Other examples of this in the Hebrew Bible are pātōm, “Pithom” (Ev pr itm, “house of Atum”) in Exod 1:11, 11 and šāp’nāh, “Zaphenath” (Ev. dg p3 nṯr, “the god has spoken”) in Gen 41:45. 12

That a locale in Canaan should bear the name of Merneptah is virtual proof that the Pharaoh did indeed campaign there. It would be incomprehensible that a toponym in Canaan should include the name of a foreign ruler who never visited the place or whose armies never marched there. Biblical ma’yan mē neptō ḥ is usually identified with

8. They draw this conclusion with or without referring to the lesser known inscription found at Amada where Merneptah bears the epithet “reducer of Gezer.” For the text see U. Bouriant, RT 18 (1896), p. 159, and J. Černý, Amada: Stela of Amenophis II and Inscription of Merneptah (Cairo, n.d.).
11. That Hebrew pārōh, “Pharaoh” (Ev pr ṣḥ) preserves the r unlike pātōm suggests that it was borrowed into Hebrew (or Canaanite, if you will) sometime before the advent of Late Egyptian, contra D.B. Redford, JNES 22 (1963), p. 119, who posits a later borrowing.
12. If āsnat, “Asenath,” in Gen 41:45 means “Isis is god(dess)” or “the god(dess) Isis” or the like, then we have another instance of Egyptian nṯr ≠ Hebrew -nat with final r dropping. The identification is not certain, however, as some take -nat here to be the goddess Neith; cf. J. Vergote, Joseph et Égypte (Louvaine, 1959), pp. 148ff, and N.M. Sarna, Understanding Genesis (New York, 1966), p. 221.
modern Līfṭa, three miles from Jerusalem. Thus we may add the area near Jerusalem to those of ṣaḥal, ṣaḥar, and ṣaḥar where the royal army served. This conclusion coupled with the sword bearing Merneptah’s name found at Ugarit gives us a clearer picture of this Pharaoh’s presence in Western Asia.

This little notice does not purport to offer any new material per se, either Egyptological or Biblical. Rather, it merely attempts to make known to Egyptologists an identification which has not been brought forward in one of their own specific publications in almost fifty years. Moreover, it shows how Biblical evidence can and should be used to solve Egyptological riddles just as Egyptian material has so often been forwarded to elucidate particular Biblical problems.

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13. Cf. Aharoni, op. cit. 111, 173, 235. The shift of original n to present-day l is not without parallel in Biblical toponomy, e.g., Biblical ṣawām equals modern Solem and Biblical mânāgār equals modern Ma‘āj. Similarly the laryngeal ḫ may disappear in modern equivalents. e.g., Biblical ṣawnāq equals modern Yanun and ancient Yaḥam equals modern Yemma. This last site does not appear in the Bible, rather in the account of Thutmose III’s battle at Megiddo, this text is treated and/or translated by Breasted, BAR II, 391-443; R.O. Faulkner, JEA 28 (1942), pp. 2-15; Wilson ANET 234-238; and Lichtheim, op. cit. 29-35.

14. Whether this Biblical “spring of Merneptah” is to be equated with the “well of Merneptah” mentioned in Papyrus Anastasi III is another question. The text is translated in BAR III, 629-635. This “well of Merneptah” appears among a number of Canaanite sites (Gaza, Tyre, etc.) and is even located in mountainous terrain as is Līfṭa. A “fortress of Merneptah” appears in Papyrus Anastasi VI but it is located near ḫw (= Sukkoth?) and Pithom, not in Canaan.


16. Additional evidence for the historical accuracy of the “Israel Stela” has been proposed by F. Yurko, JJS 7 (1978), p. 70. I thank Prof. James Hoffmeier for pointing this reference out to me.
CORRIGENDA TO "MERNEPTAH IN CANAAN"

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A number of printing errors appeared in my article, "Merneptah in Canaan," JSSEA XI:3 (1981), pp. 171-172, and the editor has been kind to permit me to correct them.

Page 171, col. 1, line 14: read ma'yan not ma'yan
Page 171, col. 2, line 17: read ma'yan not ma'yan
Page 171, note 11, line 1: read par'ôh not par'ôh
Page 171, note 11, line 1: read '3 not '3
Page 171, note 12, line 3: insert equal sign [=] after nfr
Page 172, note 13, line 5: italicize h
Page 172, note 14, lines 8-9: delete italics in "(=Succoth?) and Pithom, not in Canaan."
Page 172, note 15, line 1: delete italics in "15. Cf. C.F.-A. Schaeffer"