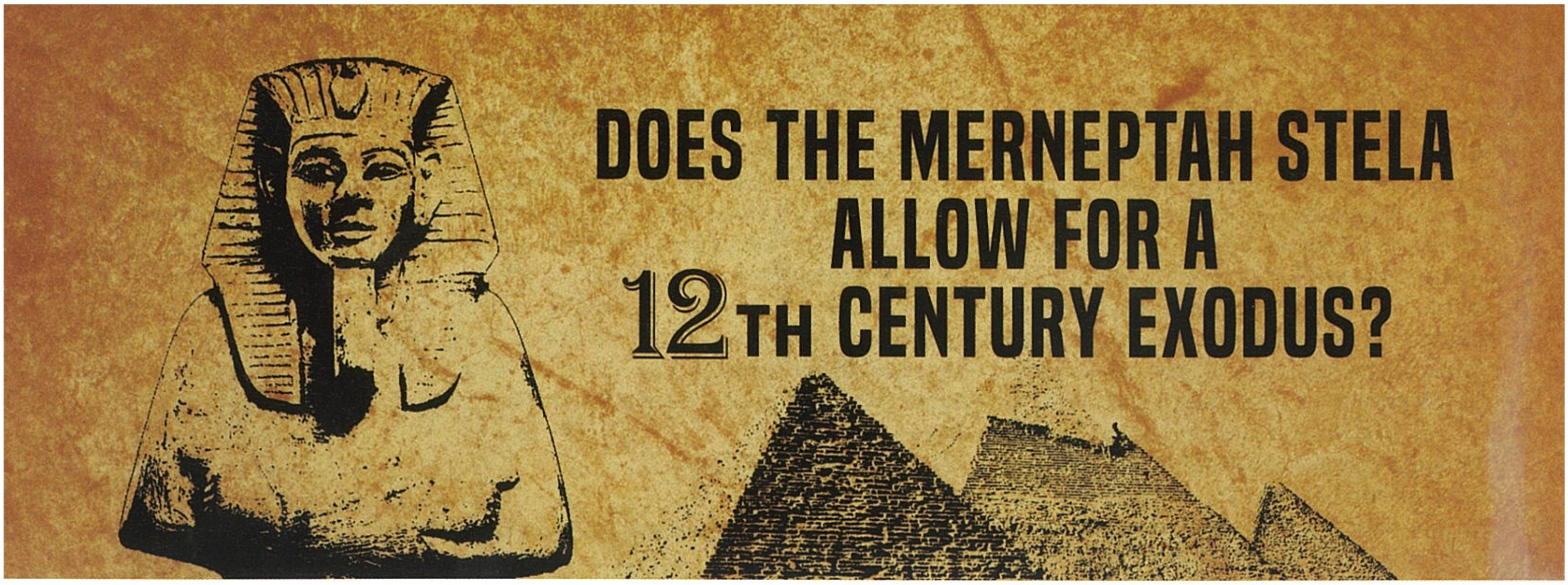


Does the Merneptah Stela Allow for a 12th Century Exodus?

By Jonathan J. Routley

In the September 2019 issue of the *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society*, independent researcher Larry D. Bruce advanced the idea that Israel may have been living in the land of Goshen at the end of the 13th century BC.[1] His primary support for this conjecture was a reexamination of the Merneptah Stela that allowed for Israel to be viewed as a foreign entity while simultaneously dwelling in the Wadi Tumilat region of the Nile delta (biblical Goshen) in Lower Egypt. In his analysis, Bruce presents linguistic, literary, historical and archaeological evidence to support his hypothesis, focusing not only on Egyptology but also the archaeology of the Levant in the Late Bronze and early Iron Ages. Bruce's desire is to show that the Israelite exodus correlates better with historical and archaeological data when placed in the context of the early 12th century BC. This article seeks to summarize Bruce's arguments before evaluating his hypothesis in light of relevant biblical, historical, and archaeological data.

A Summary of Bruce's Interpretation of the Merneptah Stela

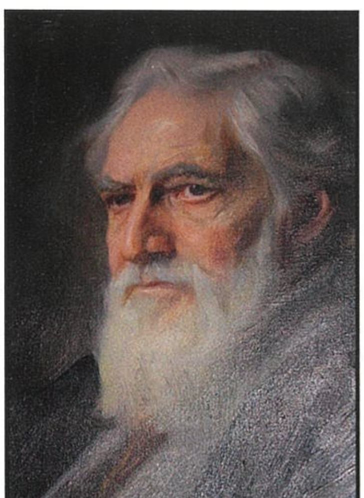
Bruce's article begins by describing the significance of the Merneptah Stela for biblical studies. The stela, found by W. Flinders Petrie at Thebes in 1896, is generally viewed as a victory hymn describing the accolades of 19th Dynasty pharaoh Merneptah in combating the unified forces of the Libyans and Sea Peoples, and can be dated with reasonable certainty to 1209 BC. Near the end of Merneptah's inscriptions on the stela are several lines related to the people of Israel:

> The princes are prostrate saying: "Shalom!"
> Not one of the Nine Bows lifts his head:
> Tjehenu is vanquished, Khatti at peace,
> Canaan is captive with all woe.
> Ashkelon is conquered, Gezer seized,
> Yanoam made nonexistent;
> Israel is wasted, bare of seed,
> Khor is become a widow for Egypt.
> All who roamed have been subdued
> By the King of Upper and Lower Egypt, *Banere-meramun*
> Son of Re, *Merneptah, Content with Maat,*
> Given life like Re every day.[2]

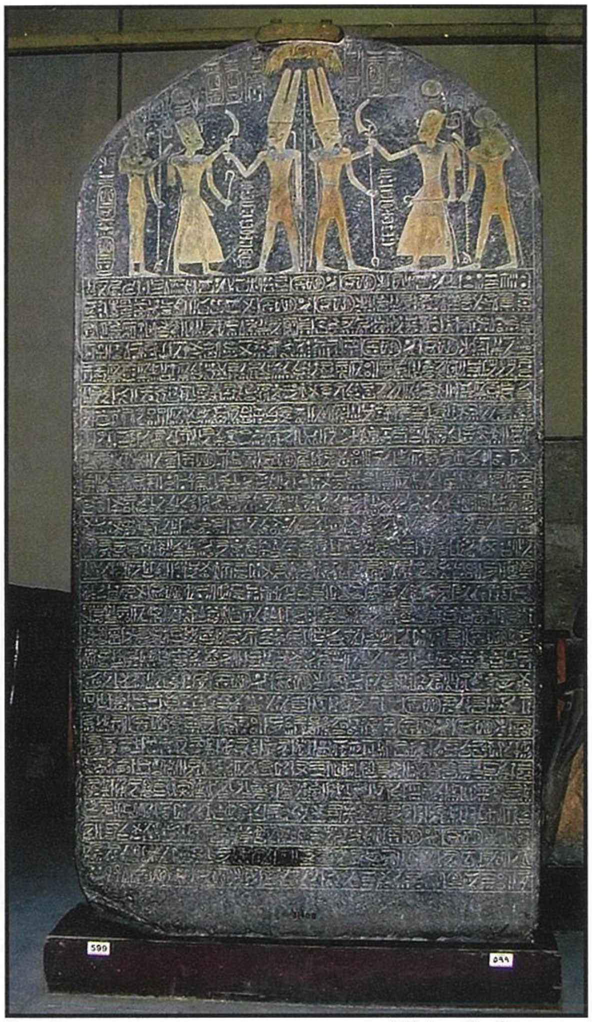
These lines have long been viewed as evidence that Israel was outside of Egypt and in the land of Canaan by this time.[3] Yet Bruce argues that the hieroglyphics used to identify Israel on the stela present the nation as still living in Goshen at the end of the 19th Dynasty. He does this by arguing that Goshen (specifically the Wadi Tumilat) was considered to be beyond the boundaries of Egypt, thus making it a foreign land.

Bruce's main evidence for this claim is twofold. The first comes from Papyrus Anastasi VI, an Egyptian document dating to the time of Merneptah. This document refers to the Wadi Tumilat as a foreign region.[4] Bruce's theory is that Israel had settled in this area which was considered to be foreign territory by the Egyptians. Israel's designation as a foreign people on the Merneptah Stela, therefore, reflects this settlement. The second piece of evidence he presents is that the lines of the Merneptah Stela related to Israel should not only be read poetically, but in couplets, creating a geographic picture of the totality of Egyptian conquest. Bruce argues these couplets are: Tehennu (also Tjehenu or Libya)/Hatti, Gaza (or possibly Canaan more generally)/Ashkelon, Gezer/Yenoam, Israel/Hurru (or Khor). The first and last couplets (Tehennu/Hatti, Israel/Hurru) represent geographical extremities (far north and south), while the center two couplets (Gaza/Ashkelon, Gezer/Yenoam) represent more regional contrasts between north and south. This literary argument is used by Bruce to show that Israel could be in the delta region of Egypt and contrasted with Hurru, which he takes as indicative of Canaan as a whole.

This interpretation leads Bruce to read the Merneptah Stela as presenting Israel as still in Egypt (Goshen) by the time of Merneptah and after. He criticizes the view that Israel is in Canaan by 1209 BC


Wikimedia Commons

Flinders Petrie was an English Egyptologist and a pioneer of systematic methodology in archaeology and preservation of artifacts. He held the first chair of Egyptology in the United Kingdom. See the Fall 2018 *Bible and Spade* article "Who's Who in Biblical Archaeology" for more on Flinders Petrie.



Wikimedia Commons

The Merneptah Stele, also known as the Israel Stele or the Victory Stele of Merneptah. A black granite slab of over 3 meters (10 feet) high, it is an inscription by the ancient Egyptian pharaoh Merneptah discovered by Flinders Petrie in 1896 at Thebes. It is now housed in the Egyptian Museum in Cairo.

as problematic because there is no textual account of Merneptah's interaction with Israel after the Exodus recorded either in Joshua or Judges. In his estimation, surely an event of this magnitude, with the Egyptian pharaoh attacking newly settled Israel, would be recorded in these books if they were in Canaan by this time. Bruce thinks it inconceivable that Israel could have escaped Egyptian captivity and settled in Canaan during the powerful 18th or 19th Dynasties. Instead, he presents archaeological evidence arguing for the Conquest of Canaan in the 12th century BC from Sinai, the Transjordan, and the land of Canaan.

Bruce then goes about reconstructing a historical account of the Exodus in the 12th century, after Merneptah's reign. He presents a hypothetical uprising where Israel collectively revolted against Merneptah and was subdued by the powerful ruler around or before 1209 BC. The Israelites were later able to escape under the weaker 20th Dynasty rulers, travel through the wilderness, and enter into Canaan in the 12th century. Bruce argues this must be the case as "there is no biblical record of contact with Egyptian forces after the Israelites left Egypt."[5]

A Critical Analysis of Bruce's Theory

Biblical Considerations

There are several aspects of Bruce's hypothesis that merit a response. Foremost among these issues is the absence of any attempt to work through the biblical dates related to the Exodus. He gives attention to this only briefly in a footnote where he says, "A divergence to address these passages would require a much larger study only to review issues that are well established at an impasse for the 1 Kings 6:1 passage."[6] While the author appears on the surface of the article to be concerned with the historicity of the biblical text, his failure to address relevant texts related to the biblical numbers and dates demonstrates an inconsistency in his approach. After reading the article, we are left to wonder what can be done with 1 Kings 6:1 and Judges 11:26 if we accept Bruce's argumentation. These verses and their dating schemes cannot merely be written off as impossible to interpret. Both proponents of the 15th-century and 13th-century Exodus dates have sought to reconcile the biblical texts with their positions. Advocates of the 15th-century position take the texts of 1 Kings 6:1 and Judges 11:26 as presenting literal, historical numbers of years, allowing them to work backward from the times of Solomon and Jephthah respectively to an Exodus date around 1450 BC.[7] Adherents of a 13th-century Exodus tend toward viewing these numbers as figurative or perhaps idealistic rather than literal, while preferring to base their dating around the city names given in Exodus 1:11.[8] For Bruce to posit a new theory requires that he should offer explanation for the relevant biblical texts, not sidestep the issue.

Bruce thinks it unlikely that Israel could have left Egypt and established itself in Canaan under the reigns of the powerful rulers of the 18th or 19th Dynasties. Yet this is exactly how the biblical text presents the Exodus! Israel is not able to leave because they revolt and overpower the Egyptians, but because God in his mercy reaches down and with a mighty arm brings Israel up out of Egypt, through the wilderness, and into the Promised Land. He does this to show himself as God supreme over all, to Israel, to the people of Egypt (Ex 7:5), and to Pharaoh himself. To Pharaoh God said, "But, indeed, for this reason I have allowed you to remain, in order to show you My power and in order to proclaim My name through all the earth" (Ex 9:16, NASB). Asserting that Israel was simply not capable of this during certain periods of history denies the omnipotence of God and relegates His actions in human history merely to what is possible in human estimation. Bruce relies too heavily here on perspectives which view the Exodus merely as a social or military phenomenon, removing God and His supernatural involvement from the equation.

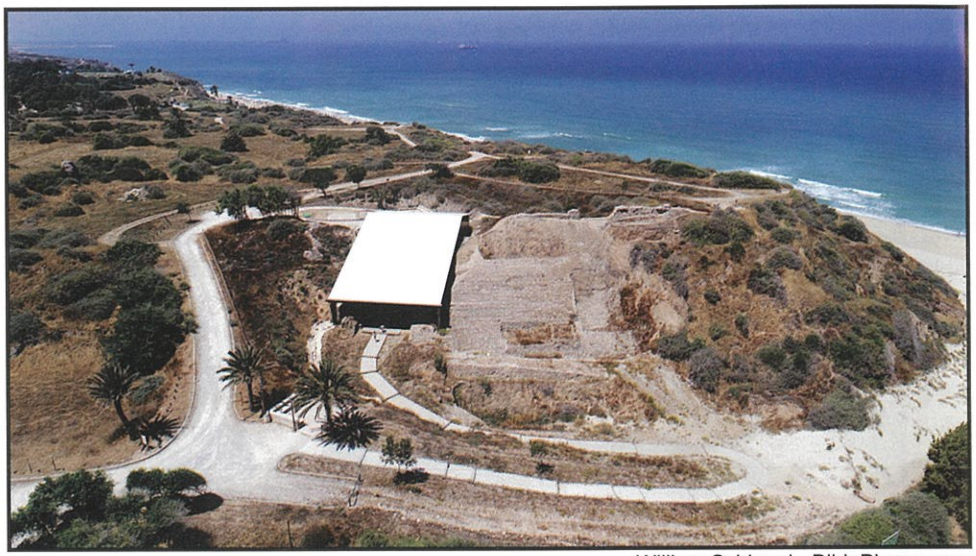
Bruce's methodology must also be questioned from a biblical perspective. He argues that if Israel is not in Egypt during the time of Merneptah, the biblical record fails to be a successive historical account since there is no mention of an Egyptian campaign in the book of Judges. Yet he doesn't do any textual work to show that the biblical record is intended to be read as an absolute successive account documenting every major historical event of importance in Israel. In fact, he argues conversely in presenting Judges as a theological treatise organized topically or ideologically rather than chronologically.[9] While the author of Judges surely is constructing a theological history of Israel's sin cycle and failure to adhere to the law of the Lord, it seems dubious to assert, as Bruce does, that "failure to mention such a defeat [Merneptah's campaign] contradicts the persistent principle of the 'Deuteronomic theology' (Dt 27–28) which correlates Israel's fortunes/misfortunes with obedience/disobedience to the Sinai covenant."[10] Although Bruce is likely right in seeing Merneptah's raid into Israel as a consequence of Israel's sin and the subsequent enacting of curses by God predicted in Deuteronomy 27–28, he is wrong to demand that the book of Judges detail every instance of Israel's sin and God's punishment, even one as seemingly prominent as Pharaoh Merneptah's campaign as recorded on his stela.

God in his mercy reaches down and with a mighty arm brings Israel up out of Egypt, through the wilderness, and into the Promised Land. He does this to show himself as God supreme over all, to Israel, to the people of Egypt, and to Pharaoh himself. Asserting that Israel was simply not capable of this denies the omnipotence of God and relegates His actions in human history merely to what is possible in human estimation. Bruce relies too heavily here on perspectives which view the Exodus merely as a social or military phenomenon, removing God and His supernatural involvement from the equation.

Literary Considerations from the Merneptah Stela

Bruce's argument that the stela should be read as a series of literary couplets fails to convince in light of the assessment of Egyptologists today that the stela points to Israel as a people group within Canaan. James K. Hoffmeier says of the literary structure of Merneptah's stela, "While there is general agreement that the Israel pericope is chiastic in structure, and may reflect on Israel's geopolitical status in the Levant, there is no consensus regarding how to relate the toponyms to each other."[11] Michael G. Hasel made an initial assessment of these various theories of how to read these enigmatic lines of the stela in 1994.[12] He concluded, in light of textual and literary evidence, that this last portion of Merneptah's stela should be read as including Israel in Canaan, though not tied to one particular city-state.[13] This coincides well with the picture of Israel we have in Joshua and Judges of a nation composed of multiple smaller villages and cities without a central political capital. Hasel's case for viewing Israel as a socioethnic entity within the general region of Canaan in the victory hymn of Merneptah is well-reasoned and convincing.[14]

Examining Bruce's literary structure itself, several questions emerge. He sees a parallel between Libya, located to the west of Egypt, and Israel, which he locates in the eastern delta of Lower Egypt. He translates "Canaan" as "Gaza," and theorizes that the stela juxtaposes it geographically to Ashkelon, with Gaza being south and Ashkelon north. This seems highly unlikely, as the two cities were so close in proximity geographically and also close in alliance politically as part of the emerging geopolitical region of Philistia. Likewise, Gezer and Yenoam (possibly east of the Sea of Galilee) are juxtaposed as south to north, while both clearly fall within the region of Canaan broadly. Bruce's final couplet of Israel (again, in his view in the



William Schlegel - BiblePlaces.com

Aerial view of the Ashkelon tell and Middle Bronze gate from the northeast. Ashkelon became one of the five Philistine cities that were constantly warring with the Israelites and later the United Kingdom of Israel and successive Kingdom of Judah.

William Schlegel - BiblePlaces.com

Aerial view of Gezer from the west. The Amarna letters mention kings of Gezer swearing loyalty to the Egyptian pharaoh. Its importance was due in part to the strategic position it held at the crossroads of the ancient coastal trade route linking Egypt with Syria, Anatolia and Mesopotamia, and the road to Jerusalem and Jericho, both important trade routes.

delta region) with Hurru (defined as Canaan generally) seems to destroy the chiastic structure of the stela that Hoffmeier advances as generally agreed upon by revisiting an area previously focused on in the hymn.[15]

Bruce also fails to address the question of "seed" in the inscription. Scholars are divided over how this term should be understood. It can be interpreted as referring to the offspring of a society, in which case Merneptah would be claiming to have wiped out Israel to the extent that even their children were destroyed—a confusing claim in light of the biblical record and if Israel is in bondage to Egypt in the delta at this time. Another option is to take the term as referencing the grain supply of the Israelites. In this scenario, Merneptah would be claiming to have destroyed Israel's crops and agricultural industries. Hasel has made a convincing case for reading the term as "grain" in this context, pointing out that the phrase "implies that in war times the conqueror will not allow him who plows to eat the harvest, to eat his grain, because the conqueror will have destroyed it or confiscated it for his own use."[16] Bruce seems to take the term to mean "offspring" without addressing the probability of its reference to Israel's grain. It is counterintuitive to think that Merneptah would destroy the produce of Israel if they were still living in the Nile delta (his own backyard) and working as slaves for the Egyptians. Pharaoh would essentially be destroying his own grain supply.

It seems best to take this section of Merneptah's stela as presenting the pharaoh's conquest over all his enemies, from Libya to Hatti, with the central part of the chiastic structure focusing on Canaan/Hurru. Ashkelon, Gezer, Yenoam and Israel then fall within this central focal point. Whereas Ashkelon, Gezer and Yenoam are settled and fortified city-states, Israel is a socioethnic group occupying territory in the land of Canaan but without one central fortified city-state to claim. That Israel occupies territory is seen from the reference to "seed" or grain, rather than by the hieroglyphic determinative for Israel. Merneptah speaks of Israel on his stela as a people group living in the central hill country of Canaan (the Cisjordan) who have a grain supply that he either destroys or steals for his armies.

Historical Considerations from Egypt

Bruce's attempted reconstruction of historical events related to Israel and Egypt in the late 13th and 12th centuries raises a number of significant questions. First, does the historical context of the late 19th and early 20th Dynasties fit well with Israelite enslavement as presented in the early chapters of Exodus? Bruce wants to preserve the historicity of the biblical text, but creates a problem by saying that Israel did not leave Egypt until later during the 20th Dynasty rulers. The problem is that the largest construction projects of these periods appear to occur earlier. The Thutmosid palaces of Peru-nefer and the Ramessid complexes at Piramesse evidence the large-scale projects that occurred under what were arguably the most powerful pharaohs of the New Kingdom. Exodus 5 presents Israel as laboring intensely to make mudbricks under their taskmasters. Yet if Israel was in Egypt after Merneptah, they should have experienced a downsizing in labor demand. Construction projects were on the decline from the 18th and earlier 19th Dynasties as wealth and order declined in the late New Kingdom, and participation in wars against the Libyans and Sea Peoples would have become prominent.[17] This decrease in construction projects, both quantitatively and qualitatively, is evident not only in the delta, but in Thebes at Karnak and with mortuary projects in the Valley of the Kings.

Both the Thutmosid and Ramessid periods in Egypt saw vast construction near Tell el-Dab'a in the Nile delta. While construction during the time of Rameses II is well attested, there is now also good reason to view the period of the 18th Dynasty as one of large-scale construction in the delta. The biblical text testifies to Pharaoh building up the "storage cities" of Pithom and Rameses (Ex 1:11). If we allow for a later updating of the site name to match the contemporary 19th Dynasty usage under Rameses II, the earlier name associate with the site would be the harbor city of Peru-nefer.[18] The usage of the Hebrew term for storage cities agrees with recent archaeological analysis of the area around Tell el-Dab'a as a naval base of foreign campaigns for the 18th Dynasty.

Hieroglyphs are inscribed into a limestone lintel partially defaced with the cartouches of (probably) Hatshepsut scraped out. It was discovered in the Ramesseum, reused in the 9th century BC. But it originally was part of Hatshepsut's temple. It is now in the University of Pennsylvania Museum. This carving was exhibited in "Egypt Gift of the Nile" in Seattle from October 1998–January 1999.

"There is evidence from the early 18th Dynasty of a military base with camps for Egyptian soldiers and associated storerooms, including large granaries."[19] The city likely held provisions for the annual military campaigns of the pharaoh to foreign lands and the spoils of war brought back from those locations. Manfred Bietak, excavator at Tell el-Dab'a, provides evidence for the size of the city and its abundance during this period in his description of one Thutmosid palace containing "what is, by far, the biggest throne room found in Egypt."[20] This massive court, displayed frescoes with leaping bulls, perhaps evidences a political relationship between the 18th Dynasty pharaohs and Minoan rulers from Knossos on Crete during this time.[21]

Regarding Karnak and the Valley of the Kings, the 18th and 19th Dynasties were periods of advancement and expansion. The temple of Amun at Karnak received some its greatest advances during the reigns of 18th Dynasty pharaohs Hatshepsut and Thutmose III, while Seti I and Rameses II contributed to the creation of the famous hypostyle hall between the second and third pylons in the 19th Dynasty. Projects at Karnak decreased after the time of Rameses II, however, and nothing was contributed from the reign of Merneptah through the end of the 19th Dynasty.[22] The Valley of the Kings tombs increased in size and design from the 18th Dynasty and peaked under the 19th Dynasty pharaohs before leveling out again in the 20th Dynasty. Both of these building sites in Upper Egypt demonstrate periods of large-scale production prior to the 12th century BC. By the time Bruce wants to see Israel ready to come out of Egypt, national construction projects were declining. The historical context of New Kingdom Egypt best fits the biblical picture presented in Exodus earlier than the 12th century.

Archaeological Considerations from Syro-Palestine

Bruce also presents claims that support his theory of a 12th-century Exodus based on archaeological data from late Bronze Age Syro-Palestine. However, much of his cited information comes from archaeological work done in the early to mid-twentieth century. For example, he uncritically accepts Kathleen Kenyon's data at Jericho without addressing the numerous modern challenges that have been leveled against her findings. He presumes the site of et-Tell for Joshua's Ai, in spite of referencing the work of Peter Briggs in positing Khirbet el-Maqatir as the location for the site at the time of the Conquest.[23] If there is more up-to-date archaeological information available, should it not be analyzed and applied to the present discussion? Bruce also assesses Israel Finkelstein's archaeological contributions at Shiloh too highly, without seriously considering the recent finds of renewed excavations at Shiloh.

Bruce's discussion of Hazor raises a particular point of shortcoming in his archaeological argumentation. His evidence is mounted against the prevailing theory of a 13th-century Exodus, which he seeks to dismantle to show how his 12th-century theory better fits. Some of his arguments demonstrate the shortcomings of the 13th-century theory, but without addressing how his 12th-century theory explains the biblical text better than the 15th-century proposal. For example, in his discussion of Hazor Bruce states, "The king of Hazor's position in the latter 13th century BC would likely have been at the good pleasure of Ramesses II, the overlord of Canaan. It is difficult to imagine the king of Hazor in the time of Ramesses the Great assembling a military coalition (as described in Joshua) while Ramesses held claim to the region."[24] There are two issues with this statement. First, Bruce may be right to question how much control Hazor's ruler had during the Ramessid period, but that does not demand a later date for the Exodus. It is possible that the king of Hazor enjoyed independence from Egypt during the 15th century as well, since Thutmose III likely campaigned along the coastal region and not as far inland as Hazor. Second, Bruce presumes that Rameses II acted as "overlord of Canaan." Does this theory demand too much of the historical texts concerning Rameses? Was his interest in Canaan interest in her land, or was it more pointedly interest in the invaluable "Way of the Sea" trade route as a means to preserve and advance Egyptian economic interests? Not to mention that, regardless of who the pharaoh of the Exodus was and what time it took place, the Egyptians were likely still feeling the effects of losing a large number of their workforce forty years later, and thus their presence in Canaan at sites like Hazor would have been lessened.

Conclusion: Merneptah's Stela Establishes Israel in Canaan

Bruce's article is an attempt to offer a new interpretation to the reading of the Merneptah Stela that would allow for Israel's presence as an ethnic group living in the Nile delta in the late 13th century BC. While in theory he claims his view allows for the biblical record to be historical, in practice his removal of God's supernatural deliverance of Israel in favor of naturalistic explanations of their departure itself deviates from a historical, literal reading of the text. Archaeological insights from Egypt and Canaan have neither conclusively ruled out the possibility of a 15th-century Exodus nor positively affirmed a 13th-century or later date. In fact, the historical context of New Kingdom Egypt fits better, in many ways, with the 15th-century possibility, as do the biblical texts. Literary and linguistic examinations of Merneptah's stela firmly support a reading that locates Israel in Canaan by 1209 BC. In the end, the case for the 12th century Exodus presents more problems than it solves, while ironically giving support to an Israelite exodus prior to 1209.

Endnotes for this article can be found at www.BibleArchaeology.org. Type "Endnotes" in the search box; next, click the "Bible and Spade Bibliographies and Endnotes" link; then page down to the article.

Jonathan J. Routley (JJ) teaches Bible geography and archaeology at Emmaus Bible College in Dubuque, Iowa. He received a BA in archaeology and Near Eastern studies from Wheaton College and has a ThM degree from Western Seminary in Portland, Oregon. JJ is currently pursuing a PhD in theological studies from Columbia International University.