

THE BIRTH LEGEND OF SARGON OF AKKAD (1.133)

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Sargon of Akkad erected the first world empire on Asiatic soil around 2300 BCE, and his exploits almost immediately became the stuff of legend. His (throne) name, in Akkadian *šarru-kēn(u)*, means “the king is legitimate,” “the legitimate king,” and served to make up for his usurpation of the claims of the ancient dynasty of Kish. The name was assumed again by an early king of Assyria (Sargon I, 20th century BCE) and by the more famous Sargon II (8th century BCE). “Sargon” is the biblical rendering of the last-named king (Isa 20:1). It was presumably also this king who commissioned a number of texts intended to glorify his old namesake, including the following legend of the latter’s birth and rise to power, which shares features with the Moses narrative and with later treatments of the theme of the hero exposed at birth who nevertheless grows up to claim his birthright including, in this case, kingship. [WWH]

I am Sargon the great king, king of Agade.<sup>1 a</sup>  
 My mother was a high priestess, I did not know my father.  
 My father’s brothers dwell in the uplands.  
 My city is Azupiranu, which lies on Euphrates bank.  
 My mother, the high priestess, conceived me, she bore me in secret.<sup>2</sup>  
 She placed me in a reed basket, she sealed my hatch with pitch.  
 She left me to the river, whence I could not come up.<sup>b</sup>  
 The river carried me off, it brought me to Aqqi, drawer of water.  
 Aqqi, drawer of water, brought me up as he dipped his bucket.  
 Aqqi, drawer of water, raised me as his adopted son.  
 Aqqi, drawer of water, set (me) to his orchard work.  
 During my orchard work, Ishtar loved me,<sup>3</sup>  
 Fifty-five years I ruled as king.

a Gen 10:10

b Exod 2:2f.

I became lord over and ruled the black-headed folk,  
 I ... [ ] hard mountains with picks of copper,  
 I was wont to ascend high mountains,  
 I was wont to cross over low mountains.  
 The [la]nd of the sea I sieged three times,  
 I conquered Dilmun.  
 I went up to great Der, I [ ],  
 I destroyed [Ka]zallu and [ ].  
 Whatsoever king who shall arise after me,  
 [Let him rule as king fifty-five years],  
 Let him become lo[r]d over and rule] the black-headed folk.  
 Let him [ ] hard mountains with picks [of copper].  
 Let him be wont to ascend high mountains,  
 [Let him be wont to cross over low mountains].  
 Let him siege the [la]nd of the sea three times,  
 [Let him conquer Dilmun].  
 Let him go up [to] great Der and [ ].  
 ... from my city Agade  
 [breaks off]

<sup>1</sup> Agade, the capital newly constructed by Sargon, also known as Akkad after its spelling in the Biblical “Table of Nations” (Gen 10), where it is associated with the semi-legendary Nimrod, perhaps a reflex of Naram-Sin, the grandson of Sargon; see Hallo 1971a.

<sup>2</sup> As explained at the end of the Atra-hasis Epic (above, Text 1.130 and n. 9), the high priestess (*entu*) was forbidden to bear children perhaps, on one theory, because her child-bearing capacities were reserved for the king.

<sup>3</sup> The infatuation between Ishtar (or her Sum. equivalent Inanna) and a gardener, or vice versa, is the theme of several myths; see Hallo 1980a; Abusch 1985:161-173.

REFERENCES

Text: CT 13:42f. and duplicates. Translations and studies: ANET 119; Lewis 1980; Hallo 1991b:130f.; Foster BM 2:803-804; FDD 165-166.

## THE (ISRAEL) STELA OF MERNEPTAH (2.6)

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Discovered in 1896 by Sir Flinders Petrie in western Thebes, the Merneptah Stela instantly became one of the most important documents from the ancient Near East, thanks to the appearance on it of the name "Israel" (Petrie 1897, pl. 13-14). Now over a century later, this reference remains the earliest occurrence of Israel outside of the Bible. In recent years, as more minimalist readings of the Hebrew scriptures have increased, this stela's reference to Israel has considerable interest for biblical historians as they attempt to explain Israel's origins in Canaan apart from the Bible.

Merneptah, the thirteenth son of Ramesses II, reigned a decade, beginning in 1213 BCE. According to Kenneth Kitchen (1982b:215), a major military campaign against Libyan tribes occurred in summer of year 5. Thus the stela, which is dated to regnal year 5, was set up to celebrate this triumph. Hence the Libyan campaign occupies the majority of the stela. This means that the king's sortie to the Levant, in which the Israelites were encountered, must have occurred no earlier than year 2 and before the Libyan campaign (1211-1208 BCE). Consequently the earlier campaign to Canaan did not receive as much notice on this stela as the recently concluded victory over the Libyans. In all, the stela has 28 lines, 23 of which deal with the battle with the Libyans, while the closing paean in which Israel occurs, begins towards the end of line 26 and runs to the very end of line 27. Since this short hymn mentions Tehenu (the main Libyan tribe) first among the eight toponyms, the hymn must be regarded as celebrating all the king's victories, from his first campaign into the Levant up to the most recent victory against the Libyans. These factors must be kept in view because it was not the writer's intent to give a full report on the events in Asia. It could well be that earlier annals or victory stelae, which have not survived or await discovery, documented this campaign.

The stela as a whole is generally recognized to be hymnic in nature. John Wilson called it a "Hymn of Victory" (*ANET* 376), while Ronald J. Williams saw it as "a series of hymns" (*DOTT* 137), and Miriam Lichtheim refers to it as "The Poetical Stela of Merneptah" (*AEL* 2:73). Both the literary structure of the stela as well as that of the final paean, have attracted considerable scholarly study in recent years. While there is general agreement that the Israel pericope is chiasmic in structure, and may reflect on Israel's geo-political status in the Levant, there is no consensus regarding how to relate the toponyms to each other. A number of scholars, however, believe that Israel and Hurru (a general term for Syria-Canaan) are used in parallelism. This association suggests that the Israelites are a significant enough presence to be compared with Hurru. It has long been noted that the writing of Israel uses the determinative (semantic indicator) for an ethnic group, and not for a geographic region or city. This scenario is in complete agreement with the picture portrayed in the books of Joshua and Judges, viz. the Israelites had no clearly defined political capital city, but were distributed over a region.

A concluding historiographic note needs to be made. In the "origins of Israel" debate of the 1980's and 1990's, many critical scholars rejected the historical value of the Joshua narratives on the grounds that they are tendentious, as well as theological and ideological in nature. These same tendencies permeate the Merneptah Stela. Nevertheless, these same scholars readily accept the historical value of this important text.

The (foreign) chieftains lie prostrate, saying "Peace."<sup>1</sup> Not one lifts his head among the Nine Bows.<sup>2</sup>

Libya is captured,<sup>3</sup> while Hatti<sup>a</sup> is pacified. Canaan is plundered, Ashkelon<sup>b</sup> is carried off, and Gezer<sup>c</sup> is captured.

<sup>a</sup> Gen 15:20; 23:3; 25:9; Exod 3:8; 13:5; Josh 1:4; 3:10  
<sup>b</sup> Josh 13:3; Judg 1:18; 14:19; 1 Sam 6:17  
<sup>c</sup> Josh 10:33; 12:12; Judg 1:29; 2 Sam 5:25; 1 Kgs 9:15, 16, 17

Yenoam<sup>4</sup> is made into non-existence; Israel is wasted, its seed<sup>5</sup> is not; and Hurru<sup>6</sup> is become a widow because of Egypt.

All lands united themselves in peace. Those who went about are subdued by the king of Upper and Lower Egypt ... Merneptah.

<sup>1</sup> The Semitic word, *shalom* is written.

<sup>2</sup> A longstanding Eg. expression for its enemies.

<sup>3</sup> The line reads, *ḥꜥ n ṯḥnw*. The problem with this text is the function of the preposition, *n*, which makes no sense grammatically, esp. given that all the verbs in this paean are either passive *sdm.f* forms or old perfectives, neither of which are written with *n* after the verb. This appears to be a scribal error (cf. Hoffmeier 1997:45, n. 27).

<sup>4</sup> Identified with Tell el-Ubeidiya, south of the Sea of Galilee (Ahituv 1984:206-208). See also *COS* 2.2A, note 65; 2.4B, note 4.

<sup>5</sup> The Eg. word *pꜣt* can apply equally to seeds, i.e. grain, as to human offspring. The latter interpretation has been generally accepted. The former position has recently been advocated by Hasel (1994:48-50), but the traditional understanding seems to fit the context better (Stager 1985:61\*; Hoffmeier 1997:28, 45 n. 26).

<sup>6</sup> A generic, Egyptian term for Syria.

#### REFERENCES

Text: Petrie, 1887; *KRI* 4:12-19. Translations: *ANET* 376-378; Williams in *DOTT* 137-141; Lichtheim *AEL* 2:73-77. Studies: Fecht 1983; Ahlström and Edelman 1985; Stager 1985; Bimson 1991; Hasel 1994; Kitchen 1994-97; Hoffmeier 1997:27-31; Niccacci 1997.