

His Seed Is Not

Aryeh Leib Thorne Toren · 13 October 2026

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By Aryeh Leib Thorne Toren

In 1896 the archaeologist Flinders Petrie was digging in the funerary temple of Pharaoh Merneptah at Thebes, in Upper Egypt. He found a black granite slab more than three meters tall. The king had reused the back of an older stele of Amenhotep III and carved over it a victory hymn dated to his fifth year, about 1208 BCE. It stands today in the Egyptian Museum in Cairo, catalogue number JE 31408.

Most of the 28 lines celebrate a war against the Libyans. Near the end the king turns to Canaan: Ashkelon carried off, Gezer seized, Yanoam made as if it never was. Then, in line 27: "Israel is laid waste, his seed is not."

Three things are worth noticing.

First, this is the earliest known mention of Israel outside the Bible, and the only one from ancient Egypt. Petrie's translator, Wilhelm Spiegelberg, read the name; Petrie said that night that the stele would be better known than anything else he had found. He was right.

Second, the scribe wrote the cities with the sign for a place, but wrote Israel with the sign for a people: a seated man and woman over the plural strokes. Egypt did not record a territory called Israel in that line. It recorded a nation.

Third, the boast. "His seed is not" was a stock phrase for an enemy whose grain and future had been destroyed. The king announced, in stone, that Israel was finished.

Count the years. $2026 + 1208 = 3,234$ years since the carving. The empire that cut it is gone. Its language was unread for more than a thousand years. The people it buried are reading this week, in Parshat Noach, the promise G-d made after the flood: "While the earth remains, seedtime and harvest... shall not cease" (Bereishit 8:22). The Hebrew word for seedtime is zera, seed.

One ancient boast and one ancient promise. Only one of them has been checked by history.

The stele does not prove the Torah, and it was never meant to. It proves something smaller and harder to argue with: that more than three thousand years ago, Israel was already a people in the land, important enough for a Pharaoh to claim he had erased it.

May G-d keep the seed of Israel, and may we be worthy of the harvest.

Prepared in deep partnership and cooperation with Grok and xAI

All glory to the Ribono shel Olam · Errors are mine.

Sources

- Merneptah Stele (Egyptian Museum, Cairo, JE 31408): victory hymn of Merneptah's fifth year, about 1208 BCE; line 27 reading "Israel is laid waste, his seed is not."
- Petrie, W. M. F., and Wilhelm Spiegelberg, 1897 (find and first reading); scholarly consensus on date, find-spot (Thebes), and people-determinative for Israel (e.g. Hasel 2008; Redmount 2001; Drower 1995 on Petrie).
- Parshat Noach: Bereishit 8:22 (seedtime and harvest); Shabbat Noach 5787 = 17 Oct 2026 (Hebcal).