

Pharaoh's War with the Israelites: The Untold Story

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In the long and remarkable history of ancient Egyptian civilization, Pharaoh Merneptah played a fairly marginal role. The odds, it must be conceded, were against him from the start: Having ascended his country's throne in what was probably the seventh decade of his life, he governed Egypt for a mere ten years (1213-1203 B.C.E.). In such a short span of time it was naturally difficult to step out from under the huge shadow cast by his father, Ramses II, one of the great kings of the ancient world. Nevertheless, Merneptah succeeded in earning a special place in the history of the Jewish people: He was the first foreign leader to publicly announce the annihilation of Israel.

This declaration—which was, of course, somewhat premature—is inscribed on a memorial stele that Merneptah erected in celebration of his military victories. Since the 1896 discovery of the stele in a temple in the ancient Egyptian city of Thebes, it has piqued the curiosity of scholars and stirred the imagination of laymen alike.¹ The stele's chief significance lies in the fact that it contains the first mention of the name "Israel" outside of the Bible. This obscure reference poses a number of questions: Who or what did

the Egyptian sovereign mean to identify by this appellation? Exactly when and where did the confrontation to which he referred take place? And, no less important, does the Bible itself contain any mention of such a dramatic event in the history of the people whose story it tells?

As we will discover, the answers to these questions are contained in an enigmatic hymn in the book of Psalms, which has yet to receive the attention it deserves. Deciphering this text, laden as it is with ambiguous expressions and arcane images, requires painstaking exegetical effort. Yet such an undertaking is richly rewarded. For not only does it provide a glimpse into a mysterious event from Israel's earliest days, but it also sheds new light on the religious world of our ancestors, demonstrating just how radical and unique their beliefs already were when they made their first appearance as a nation on the stage of history.

Psalm 68 is perhaps the most difficult chapter in the book to understand. There are many *hapax legomena* (words that are singular to the text) and archaic linguistic forms that complicate its analysis. Its main thrust is a hymn that celebrates a divine victory on the battlefield. It opens with the proclamation "Let God arise, let his enemies be scattered; let his foes flee before him."² The account of the battle is preceded by a call to sing and rejoice before God,³ as well as a depiction of the moral virtues of the deity, who is "the father of orphans and the champion of widows."⁴ The psalmist then enumerates the many kindnesses that God has shown his people in the past, as a preface to the celebration of deliverance in the present war.⁵ He waxes eloquent on God's tremendous might, before which all of creation trembles: "The earth quaked and the heavens poured down rain because of God."⁶

The battle itself concludes with the enemy generals defeated and fleeing.⁷ According to the psalmist's praise, God smites the heads of his enemies.⁸ After the carnage, a victory parade is held, in which the revelers sing and play, and young women gaily dance: "First come singers, then musicians, amidst maidens playing timbrels."⁹

Following the description of the war and the defeat of the enemy, the psalmist voices his expectation that the nations will recognize the supremacy of the God of Israel: “Kings will bring you tribute.... Sing to God, O kingdoms of the earth.”¹⁰ In this context, he refers to only two nations by name: “Tribute-bearers shall come from Egypt, Cush shall hasten to stretch out her hands to God.”¹¹

Why were Egypt and Cush singled out? The answer is likely to be found in the preceding verse, which begins with an appeal to God to “rebuke the beast that dwells among the reeds.”¹² The verse evidently alludes to Egypt, which is presented as an animal that lives among the reeds on the banks of the Nile. This interpretation is supported by numerous biblical references to Egypt as a “splintered reed of a staff” on which Israel cannot depend,¹³ as well as by Ezekiel’s portrayal of Pharaoh as a sea monster.¹⁴ It is thus quite plausible that the enemy described in this psalm, as many scholars have argued, is Egypt.¹⁵ Hence the author’s specific mention of the Pharaonic kingdom and its ward, Cush, as the nations that would ultimately recognize the sovereignty of God.

After likening Egypt to a “beast that dwells among the reeds,” the psalmist goes on to describe the country as “the herd of bulls with the calves of the peoples.”¹⁶ This representation is reminiscent of Jeremiah’s critique of the southern empire: “Why are your bulls (*abirim*) swept away.... Egypt is a beautiful heifer.... Even her mercenaries in her midst are like fatted calves.”¹⁷ The Hebrew word *abirim* is used in the Bible to denote both bulls and warriors.¹⁸ Accordingly, we may assume that the *abirim*—the large bulls mentioned by the psalmist—symbolize the commanders of the Egyptian army, whereas the “calves” refer to their soldiers.¹⁹

Let us now turn to the last part of verse 31: “Those who are appeased (*mitrapes*) only by pieces of silver, and who forcibly disperse nations that would rather fight than pay.”²⁰ This is a highly enigmatic phrase, and commentators have debated its correct interpretation at length. One particularly compelling explanation is offered by biblical scholar Umberto (Moshe David) Cassuto: “Rebuke him who is appeased only by bars of silver, that is

to say, by the payment of tribute, but scatters by the might of his arm the peoples who refuse to be tributary to him and prefer to oppose him in battle.”²¹ Cassuto holds that the expression “pieces of silver” (*ratzei kasef*) alludes to ingots that are broken up (*rotzetzu*) from a larger block of the precious metal. In ancient times, when coins were not yet in use, these pieces of silver were an accepted form of payment. Cassuto’s reading of the Hebrew word *mitrapes* as a willingness to be gratified is based on the assumption that “we may derive from the primary signification of the stem *r-p-s* in Semitic languages (akin to ‘trample’) the meaning, in the *hitpael* conjugation, ‘to be appeased.’”²² Other scholars understand *mitrapes* as a transitive verb meaning “to trample.”²³ They evoke, in this context, Ezekiel’s depiction of the king of Egypt as a sea monster that slithers through rivers, leaving them turbid and muddy in his wake: “You are like a dragon in the seas, thrusting through their rivers, troubling the waters with your feet, and fouling [*tirpos*] their rivers.”²⁴ In Psalm 68, the “beast that dwells among the reeds” tramples its subjugated nations to collect their tax in silver pieces. If we adopt Cassuto’s explanation, the continuation of the verse, “who forcibly disperse nations that would rather fight than pay,” implies Egypt’s practice of waging war against peoples who refused to pay it taxes and forcefully dispersing them.²⁵ It would not, then, be far-fetched to assume that “Israel” too was, at one stage or another, one of these peoples and was consequently headed for a clash with Pharaoh’s army. The question is, when?

The denunciation of Egypt as a violent and predatory kingdom may illuminate the historical background of the confrontation depicted in Psalm 68, but it does not provide us with a date of the events. Indeed, scholars have struggled with this difficult question.

Hermann Gunkel, who identified Egypt as the main butt of the psalm, suggested that the text was composed between 408 and 343 B.C.E., at the end of which Egypt liberated itself from Persian domination and gained its independence.²⁶ However, John Gray, a professor of ancient Semitic

languages at the University of Aberdeen, pointed to the flaws in this conjecture, as there is no evidence that Egypt attempted to subjugate Israel during this period.²⁷ Gray claims that Psalm 68 would have been composed no later than the eighth century B.C.E., since it mentions the presence of representatives from the tribes of Zebulun and Naphtali at the victory parade.²⁸ Since both these tribes were exiled from the land by Assyrian king Tiglath-Pileser in 732 B.C.E., it is highly unlikely that their members would have taken part in any local ceremony after that year.²⁹

Yet Gray, too, does not provide us with a satisfactory theory. For example, he understands verse 31 as a censure of Egypt for oppressing the People of Israel when the latter was still living as a slave nation there.³⁰ Although this might appear to be a reasonable hypothesis, it is not congruent with the rest of the hymn. True, the description in the book of Exodus of Israelite enslavement under Egyptian rule refers to *sarei misim*³¹ (literally, “ministers of taxation”), but these functionaries were actually taskmasters charged with the supervision of forced labor. In Psalm 68, moreover, there is no trace of this enslavement, and the conflict it portrays does not take place anywhere near Egypt or the Red Sea.

It is likewise difficult to accept the argument advanced by Gunkel and other scholars according to which the linguistic similarities between Psalm 68 and numerous prophecies from the period of the Babylonian exile and the return to Zion suggest that these texts were composed at roughly the same time.³² We have no concrete proof that the psalmist was acquainted with these prophecies, or that he borrowed expressions and images from them. Indeed, it is quite possible that it was actually the other way around—that is, that it was the psalm that inspired the prophets.³³

The language of the psalm suggests that at the time of its composition, Egypt was still the dominant power in the land, although its hold over its northern neighbors was already beginning to weaken.³⁴ This indeed was the geopolitical situation in Canaan at the end of the twelfth century B.C.E., when the decline of the mighty Egyptian empire led subjugated kingdoms and peoples to turn against it, hoping to rid themselves of its burden.

Merneptah's victory stele bears witness to this state of affairs. The stele was erected to commemorate Pharaoh's successful military campaign, during the fifth year of his rule, against the Libyans and the "sea peoples"—a confederacy of tribes who terrorized the eastern basin of the Mediterranean during the second millennium B.C.E. In the stele's inscription, Merneptah also recounts the events of a campaign he had conducted in Canaan³⁵ at an unknown date.³⁶ The inscription does not explain the circumstances that caused the Pharaoh to launch this campaign, but it is reasonably surmised that he intended to reassert his authority over rebellious subjects who refused to pay his taxes.³⁷ If we are to believe Merneptah, the insurgents learned a costly lesson:

Canaan is captive with all woe.
Ashkelon is conquered, Gezer seized,
Yanoam made nonexistent;
Israel is wasted, bare of seed.

Merneptah boasts of taking over three Canaanite cities—Ashkelon, Gezer, and Yanoam—and of dealing "Israel" a mortal blow. Egyptian hieroglyphics employ determinatives to clarify the meanings of certain words; the determinative that appears next to the name "Israel" denotes a tribe or a people. From the context of the inscription, then, it clearly emerges that during Merneptah's military campaign in Canaan his army clashed with a local tribal group named Israel. The Egyptian ruler claims that he succeeded in wiping this group off the face of the earth.³⁸ As I will attempt to show in what follows, Psalm 68, too, was composed to commemorate the war with Merneptah, and it presents the Israelites' version of this event.

In what region did this group named Israel reside when Merneptah waged war against it?

As historian Nadav Na'aman has established, Yanoam, the name that precedes that of Israel in the Merneptah inscription, was located in northern

Transjordan. In Egyptian documents Yanoam is mentioned alongside sites in the southern Bashan region. Egyptian sources also indicate that this Canaanite city was located near a lake or river. Na'aman therefore suggests that Yanoam was located at Tell esh-Shihab, on the banks of one of the tributaries of the Yarmuk River, overlooking the road between the cities of Ashtaroth and Damascus.³⁹ If he is correct, Merneptah's army proceeded in a north-easterly direction: from Ashkelon, on the edge of the Mediterranean, to Gezer, west of Jerusalem, and thence to Yanoam, in Transjordan.

As noted, the Egyptian inscription mentions the name "Israel" after announcing the destruction of Yanoam. One could of course make a case that inasmuch as the name Israel refers to a tribal group rather than a city, it is not part of the campaign's geographical trajectory, as outlined on the stele. Yet it is more likely that the inscription *does* adhere to the progression of the Egyptian army, whereby the battle against Israel actually took place in a region near Yanoam.⁴⁰ Na'aman thus reasons that the tribal confederation called "Israel" resided at the time in Transjordan.⁴¹

The information that may be inferred from Psalm 68 helps to complete the picture. Verse 15 reads, "When Shaddai scattered the kings there, snow fell on Zalmon." This should probably be understood in reference to verse 13: "The kings and their armies are in headlong flight; the women at home divide the spoil." Verse 15 adds that when "Shaddai," God, dispersed the commanders of the armies, snow fell on Mount Zalmon.⁴² Mount Zalmon, near Shechem, is mentioned in the story of Abimelech's enthronement in Judges,⁴³ but as Psalm 68 does not contain any other references to this region, we ought to consider other possibilities as well. Abraham Ibn Ezra, the famous twelfth-century scholar, wrote in his commentary on the Bible that Mount Zalmon is a "well-known mountain in eastern Transjordan."⁴⁴ And indeed, it appears that Jabal al-Druze, a mountain located in the Hauran region, was known in ancient times as Mount Zalmon.⁴⁵ This identification is geographically consistent with the mention of Mount Bashan in the following verses:

O mountain of God, Mount Bashan; O many-peaked mountain, Mount Bashan. Why do you watch from on high, O many-peaked mountains, the mount God desired as his abode, where the Lord will dwell forever? God's chariots are myriads upon myriads, thousands upon thousands of warring angels; the Lord is among them, Sinai is in his holy place.⁴⁶

The scholarly opinion according to which Mount Bashan is actually Mount Hermon is certainly sound.⁴⁷ The Bible, after all, refers to Mount Hermon as the northern border of the Bashan.⁴⁸ The mountain, which has multiple peaks, is described in the psalm as a “many-peaked mountain, Mount Bashan.” According to the talmudic sages and later commentators, the verses cited above portray a confrontation between the many-peaked Mount Bashan and the “mount God desired as his abode,” which they identify with Mount Sinai or Mount Zion. The reason for the conflict, they maintain, was Mount Bashan's envy of the site where God had chosen to dwell.⁴⁹ There is, however, little evidence for this approach in the plain meaning of the psalm: Although commentators argue that the word *teratzdun*, “watch from on high” (verse 17), means to gaze jealously, there are no grounds for this exegesis.

A more plausible reading is suggested by Rashi, following Rabbi Moshe Hadarshan. This interpretation, which understands *teratzdun* to mean an ambush or a stakeout, is based on the context in which the word *yeratzed* appears in the *Book of Ben Sira*,⁵⁰ as well as on a similar expression in Arabic that means “to lay in wait” or “to inspect.”⁵¹ Addressing the summits of Mount Hermon with the call “Why do you watch from on high?” the psalmist demands the reason for their spying on the events. The expression echoes a verse in Judges: “The citizens of Shechem erected ambushes against him on the mountaintops.”⁵² The psalm depicts the “many-peaked mountains”—the summits of Mount Hermon—as observing the enemy from above. In this manner they seem to take part in the battle and help God, not unlike the role Deborah ascribes to the stars in the campaign against Sisera.⁵³

The most reasonable conclusion, then, is that Mount Bashan with its many peaks is *itself* the subject of verses 16-17. The reference to Mount Hermon in verse 17 is consistent with the language of Psalms 42:7—“in this land of Jordan and the Hermons”—in which the plural “Hermons” reflects the mountain’s multiple peaks.

The psalmist exalts Mount Bashan as the “mountain of God”: “the mount God desired as his abode, where the Lord will dwell forever.”⁵⁴ Ibn Ezra, characteristically astute, argues that the psalm considers Mount Bashan to be the dwelling place of the Lord and his angels.⁵⁵ This may be a Hebrew adaptation of the ancient Mesopotamian myth that establishes the cedar forests in the mountains of Lebanon as the home of the gods.⁵⁶

The identification of Mount Bashan as the mountain of God in Psalm 68 does not cohere with the prevailing approach in the Bible, which exalts Jerusalem as the dwelling place of God.⁵⁷ Although Jerusalem is mentioned later on in the psalm—“From your temple above Jerusalem kings bear gifts to thee”⁵⁸—the garbled syntax of the verse gives rise to questions. After all, the gifts should be brought *to* God’s temple, not from it. This is probably, as some scholars claim, the result of an intervention by a later editor who scrambled the text. Israeli scholar Yehezkel Kaufmann, for example, argued that the original opening of the verse was “From *their* temple” and was subsequently changed to “From your temple” by editorial emendation.⁵⁹ The same editor was most likely responsible for the heading in verse 1 that ascribes the psalm to David. It is not inconceivable that the insertion of Jerusalem in the psalm was designed to reconcile this hymn with the ideology, dominant from the time of David onward, that consecrated the capital of the united Kingdom of Israel (and subsequently of the Judean state) as the city in which God had chosen to establish his abode for all eternity.⁶⁰

The unique notion, reflected in Psalm 68, that Mount Bashan is the dwelling place of God indicates that this is an early text, and it supports our hypothesis that it was written some time after the clash with Merneptah, during a period when the People of Israel lived in northern Transjordan.⁶¹ The evidence we have presented supports the assumption that a battle

between Israel and Egypt took place in the Hauran or the Bashan, most likely in approximately 1210 B.C.E. Now we must try to determine, on the basis of the same data, what exactly took place during this elusive confrontation whose outcome the two sides interpret so differently.

Psalm 68 goes to great lengths to praise the divine intervention that led to the defeat of the enemy. God's army, the psalm relates in verse 18, was composed of a multitude of chariots and thousands of warrior angels ("*shinanim*" in the words of the poet).⁶² But if we leave aside the fantastic element of the text for a moment, we will discover that it, as well as other documents, contains significant clues as to what really happened on the battlefield.

Verse 28, for example, reports that the tribes of Benjamin, Judah, Zebulun, and Naphtali participated in the victory parade: "There is little Benjamin who rules them, the princes of Judah who command them, the princes of Zebulun and Naphtali." It appears, then, that these tribes took part in the battle as well. Zebulun and Naphtali were northern tribes whose lands were not far from the Bashan and the Hauran, and it may well be that they inhabited these areas before they settled in the Galilee. But the mention of Benjamin and Judah is problematic. What did these tribes, who lived in the southern parts of the land, have to do with a conflict that transpired in northern Transjordan?

This difficulty, however, is easily resolved, as the Bible itself provides us with ample evidence of the presence of Judahites and Benjaminites in northern regions at those times. The connection between Judah and Gilead is confirmed by Chronicles,⁶³ while the episodes of the concubine of Gibeah and Saul and Ish-bosheth attest to Benjamin's ties to the same area, particularly to the town of Jabesh-Gilead.⁶⁴ Over time the tribe of Judah assimilated such southern ethnic groups as the Kenizzites and the Kenites, but during the period we are discussing it was firmly rooted in the north. Thus, Judah's absence from the list of tribes in the Song of Deborah⁶⁵ is evidently due to

the fact that a Jebusite-Canaanite territory separated it from the other tribes of Israel and prevented it from joining that campaign.⁶⁶ Conversely, the tribe *did* participate in the clash with Merneptah, which took place before it had settled Israel's central mountain range, fighting alongside its kinsmen from Benjamin, Zebulun, and Naphtali.

It is not very likely that Merneptah's imperial force was really vanquished by the tribal coalition that rose up against it in northern Transjordan. At the same time, it is clear that the Egyptian ruler's claim to having annihilated Israel was also unfounded. We must therefore comb our sources for slivers of information that will enable us to construct a more reliable account of the outcome of the event in question.

Fortunately archaeological findings shed some light on the matter. Together with Merneptah's victory stele, these findings include pictures of combat engraved in the outer wall of the temple erected by Rameses II in Karnak. Egyptologist Frank Yurco of the University of Chicago has shown that the subject of these engravings is Merneptah's military campaign in Canaan.⁶⁷ One of them depicts a conflict between the Egyptian army and another force of men; these men are similar in appearance and clothing to the Canaanites, and they are using chariots as part of the campaign. Yurco believes that this picture portrays the battle between "Israel" and Merneptah's forces. If there is any truth to this assumption, then the Israelites were equipped with chariots—a prestigious and highly sophisticated weapon in those days.⁶⁸ Anson F. Rainey, an expert on the ancient Near East, points out the weakness of Yurco's theory, arguing that chariots were a sign of warrior nobility, whereas the Merneptah inscription refers to Israelites by the determinative of a nomadic tribe.⁶⁹ In his view, the picture Yurco discusses illustrates a confrontation between the Egyptians and Canaanites, probably ensuing during the conquest of Yanoam. He identifies "Israel" in other reliefs from the same series, however, in which men dressed like nomadic shepherds are carried off as prisoners to Egypt.⁷⁰

If, then, Pharaoh's army captured combatants from among the People of Israel, it is not inconceivable that the reverse also occurred. This is one way

of understanding verse 19: “Thou didst ascend the heights, having taken captives, having taken gifts of men, even of those who rebel against the Lord God’s abiding there.” The psalmist’s choice of words may be understood in light of a similar verse in Numbers: “I hereby take your brethren the Levites from among the people of Israel; they are a gift to you, given to the Lord, to do the service of the Tent of Meeting.”⁷¹ Both verses feature a gift that God takes for himself: “having taken gifts,” and “I hereby take... a gift.” In both cases, the gift is a “gift of men” (the prisoners of war and the Levites taken from among the People of Israel to serve God in the Tent of Meeting⁷²).

What can we infer from the parallels between these two verses? Perhaps that Egyptian soldiers, referred to as “rebels,”⁷³ were captured by the Israelites and assigned to work in God’s temple. The verse “Thou didst ascend the heights, having taken captives, having taken gifts of men” can be read in this vein. The phrase “Thou didst ascend the heights” evokes the haughty speech of the Assyrian king: “It is I who have climbed the highest mountains, ascended the remotest parts of the Lebanon.”⁷⁴ Here, too, the reader is told that God ascends a mountaintop covered in cedars, “Mount Bashan” or the Hermon, leaving the battle—probably fought on the plains of the southern Bashan or Hauran—far behind him.⁷⁵ The verse thus suggests the intriguing possibility that an ancient Hebrew temple existed atop Mount Hermon to which the captives were brought. The name “Hermon” itself, with its etymological connection to *herem* (“consecration”), seems to imply this possibility. It may be that when the tribes of Israel gave this name to the mountain, they were already using it for ritual purposes.⁷⁶

On the basis of all of the above, we may formulate the following hypothesis: In the confrontation between the Egyptian army and the tribes of Israel that took place in northern Transjordan, no side was able to crush the other completely. On the one hand, Scripture and archaeological findings indicate that not long after this clash, the Israelites crossed the Jordan and settled in the central mountain range west of the river. On the other hand, though Merneptah’s claim that he annihilated Israel was clearly vainglorious, it is doubtful whether he would have dared to make such a declaration

if he hadn't exacted a heavy death toll among his opponents. It is equally doubtful, in light of the imbalance of power between the two sides, that Merneptah suffered a real defeat. Yet the results of the battle clearly gave the ancient Israeli poet a reason for celebration. The very fact that the small tribe of Israelites could hold its own against the great Egyptian empire, inflicting losses and evidently taking captives as well, is viewed by the psalmist as a resounding triumph. The hymn he composed expresses his conviction that this achievement was the outcome of divine intervention, a miraculous salvation for which God must be thanked.

If the contribution of Psalm 68 consisted merely of obscure allusions to a forgotten battle in Israel's early history, it would probably have remained the province of academic discussions by biblical scholars. But the importance of the psalm is not limited to the historical testimony it contains. For it also sheds light on the birth of biblical faith—a faith that was, from its very beginning, theologically groundbreaking.

In order to understand the revolutionary nature of the religious worldview expressed by the psalm, we must place it in a comparative context. For example, a number of experts have pointed out the connection between the singular language of Psalm 68 and Canaanite poetry.⁷⁷ It is also worth noting the likeness the psalm bears to Egyptian religious texts from the Rameside period, texts that were composed—if our hypothesis is correct—at about the same time.⁷⁸

The Ramesside period began after the reign of Akhenaten, or Pharaoh Amenhotep IV, and his successors. Akhenaten, who ruled Egypt in the mid-fourteenth century B.C.E., was considered the first major religious innovator: He sought to transform Egyptian religion, with its rich, polytheistic tradition, into a belief in one deity, Aten, identified with the sun disk. His monotheistic reform did not last long: After his death his name was erased from the lists of Egyptian kings, the city he had built in honor of Aten was abandoned and destroyed, and the faith he had championed seemed to

vanish into thin air. But his unique legacy was not entirely eradicated. During the Ramesside period, the Egyptian religion displayed an inclination to profess the unity of God, perhaps due to the influence of Akhenaten's ideas.⁷⁹ The chief deity of the Egyptian pantheon at the time was Amun-Ra, an amalgam of the invisible creator Amun and the sun god Ra. In religious texts of this period Amun-Ra is portrayed as the foundational source of all existence; he is a moral and compassionate god, "who frees the prisoner from the dungeon, the father of the needy and poor."⁸⁰ Amun-Ra was not considered the heavenly ruler of Egypt alone, however. He was a universal god, and foreign peoples were also expected to worship him and to contribute to his cult. The Egyptians counted the Asiatics (i.e., the Canaanites) among the nations that bowed before Amun-Ra.⁸¹

This context may help us understand some of the images and expressions of Psalm 68, such as the glorification of God as "the father of orphans and the champion of widows... [He] sets free the imprisoned, safe and sound"⁸²; the description of the gifts that will be brought to the God of Israel by the kings of foreign nations (especially Egypt and Cush⁸³); and the call to "Sing to God, O kingdoms of the earth."⁸⁴ The psalmist seems to have appropriated for his own deity some of the titles and virtues that had been attributed to Amun-Ra. It is not inconceivable that he was acquainted with the Egyptian religion, whether directly or through intermediaries. The conflict of Psalm 68, then, is not merely a military struggle between ancient Israel and the forces of Pharaoh Merneptah. It is also a religious-cultural clash. In defiance of the Egyptian faith, which viewed Amun-Ra as the universal ruler of all peoples, the psalmist announces that it is precisely Pharaoh's kingdom that will send tributes to the Lord of Israel, for all nations will ultimately come to recognize the sovereignty of the *Hebrew* God.

The biblical text, however, does not content itself with appropriating certain aspects of the Egyptian religion. It goes a step further. Egyptian religious writings from the Ramesside period repeatedly emphasize that Amun-Ra is one of a kind. At the same time, they do not deny the existence of other gods, who emanated—so they claim—from this supreme creator.⁸⁵

In contrast, the author of Psalm 68 employs a broad range of divine names and descriptions⁸⁶ (which he cites in varying combinations⁸⁷), yet *all of them refer to a single, exclusive deity*; other gods are not even implied.

This idea is fully expressed in verse 9 of the psalm, which, I believe, has not been adequately explained by commentators: “The earth quaked and the heavens poured down rain because of God, he is Sinai, because of God, the God of Israel.” Various interpretations of the phrase “he is Sinai” have been suggested in scholarly literature.⁸⁸ Some see it as an epithet along the lines of “the God of Sinai,”⁸⁹ while others regard it as an addition designed to indicate that it was Mount Sinai that quaked when God chose to reveal himself upon it.⁹⁰ In my view, however, the key to understanding this enigmatic expression can be found in another verse in the same chapter: “God’s chariots are myriads upon myriads, thousands upon thousands of warring angels; the Lord is among them, Sinai is in his holy place.”⁹¹ As we have seen, the first part of the verse is a hyperbolic description of God’s army. When the poet writes, “the Lord is among them,” he means that God is present among his warriors. In the second part of the verse, “the Lord is among them, Sinai is in his holy place,” the word “Lord” is parallel to the word “Sinai.”⁹² The parallelism suggests that “Sinai” is one of the names of God; “Sinai is in his holy place” indicates that the God of Israel, who is also called “Sinai,” is “in his holy place,” namely in his temple.⁹³ If this conjecture is correct, we can understand the words “he is Sinai” as a complement to the preceding phrase, “because of God.” The psalmist announces that the God before whom the mountains shook and the heavens poured down rain “is Sinai.”⁹⁴ The importance of this statement becomes clear to us in view of the fact that the names “Sin” and “Sinai” appear in close proximity in the Torah.⁹⁵ Sin is the Mesopotamian moon god, the heavenly patron of the city of Haran, whence, according to biblical tradition, the patriarchs originated.⁹⁶ The psalm, then, seems to be equating “Sinai”—Sin—with the God of Israel.

Verse 5 features another example of how the psalmist ascribes holy names from other religions to a single divine entity: “Sing to God, sing

praises to his name; extol him who rides the clouds; in the Lord is his name, exult before him.” As many scholars have observed, the moniker “who rides the clouds” is taken from an all-but identical expression in the vocabulary of Canaanite mythology, where it is used to describe Baal, the god of storms and rain.⁹⁷ Yet in Psalm 68 it is the God of Israel who is the cloud-rider, about whom it is also said, “to him who rides the ancient, highest heavens.”⁹⁸ The addition “in the Lord is his name”—introduced by the identifying prefix “in”—serves to emphasize that the name originally used for Baal is now being used to describe the one and only God, whom the People of Israel worship.⁹⁹

The cardinal significance of Psalm 68, the victory song over Merneptah, for our knowledge of the origins of the Israelites and their faith cannot be overstated. This psalm—probably one of the most ancient texts in the Bible—is both a rare historical document and an innovative theological manifesto. It provides invaluable information about the history of the People of Israel as they took their first steps in settling the land, and about biblical religion as it formulated its first expressions of monotheism. Crucially, the psalm reveals that, contrary to popular opinion within academic circles, such belief was not forged over hundreds of years, during which a particular tribal and national god gained ascendancy over other deities. It seems that, already in the early stages of their conquest of the land, when they were just beginning to embark on their path to nationhood, the Israelites experienced a genuine revolution in religious consciousness, evidenced by the merging of various supernatural entities from neighboring cultures into a single deity bearing multiple names.¹⁰⁰ The God to whom the psalmist devotes his triumphal hymn is at once the heavenly patron of the People of Israel and the universal sovereign, whom all the nations are called upon to worship and praise: “Sing to God, O kingdoms of the earth.”

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Notes

1. See, for instance, Michael Gerald Hasel, "Merenptah's Inscription and Reliefs and the Origin of Israel," in Beth Alpert Nakhai, ed., *The Near East in the Southwest: Essays in Honor of William G. Dever* (Boston: American Schools of Oriental Research, 2003), pp. 19-44; John J. Bimson, "Merneptah's Israel and Recent Theories of Israelite Origins," *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 49 (1991), pp. 3-29; Donald Bruce Redford, *Egypt, Canaan, and Israel in Ancient Times* (Princeton: Princeton, 1992), pp. 257-280.

2. Psalms 68:2.

3. Psalms 68:5.

4. Psalms 68:6.

5. Psalms 68:8, 10-11.

6. Psalms 68:9. See also Samuel E. Loewenstamm, "The Trembling of Nature at the Appearance of God," in *Oz le-David: Biblical Essays in Honor of David Ben-Gurion* (Jerusalem: Kiryat Sepher, 1964), pp. 508-520 [Hebrew].

7. Psalms 68:13.

8. Psalms 68:22.

9. Psalms 68:26.

10. Psalms 68:30, 33.

11. Psalms 68:32.

12. Psalms 68:31.

13. See II Kings 18:21; Isaiah 36:6; Ezekiel 29:6.

14. Ezekiel 29:3; 32:2.

15. See Hermann Gunkel, *Psalms* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1929), p. 286 [German]; Mitchell Dahood, *Psalms*, vol. 2: 51-100 (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1968), pp. 145, 149-150.

16. Psalms 68:31.

17. Jeremiah 46:15, 20-21.

18. Naftali Herz Tur-Sinai, "Abir," in Umberto Cassuto, ed., *Biblical Encyclopedia*, vol. 1, (Jerusalem: Bialik, 1965), pp. 31-33 [Hebrew].

19. Dahood, *Psalms*, p. 150.

20. Psalms 68:31.

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21. Umberto Cassuto, *Biblical and Oriental Studies*, trans. Israel Abrahams, vol. 1 (Jerusalem: Magnes, 1973), p. 275.
 22. Cassuto, *Biblical and Oriental Studies*, p. 275.
 23. Dahood, *Psalms*, p. 150.
 24. Ezekiel 32:2. Daniel also uses the root *r-p-s* to describe the tyrannical character of the “fourth beast” he saw in his vision, symbolizing the kingdom of Greece, which tramples all the other beasts underfoot (see Daniel 7:7).
 25. Dahood, *Psalms*, p. 150.
 26. Gunkel, *Psalms*, p. 287.
 27. See John Gray, “A Cantata of the Autumn Festival: Psalm LXVIII,” *Journal of Semitic Studies* 22:1 (1977), p. 6.
 28. Psalms 68:28.
 29. As Gray points out, Gunkel’s attempt to clarify this aspect of the psalm on the basis of the description of Hezekiah’s Passover in II Chronicles 30:9-15 is not particularly persuasive. See Gray, “Cantata,” p. 7.
 30. Gray, “Cantata,” p. 6.
 31. Exodus 1:11.
 32. See the abovementioned connections between the psalm and passages in Jeremiah 46 and Ezekiel 32.
 33. While there are certain similarities between Psalms 68:32 (“Tribute-bearers shall come from Egypt, Cush shall hasten to stretch out her hands to God”) and Isaiah 45:14 (“The wealth of Egypt and the merchandise of Cush... shall pass over to you and be yours”), Gray is right to reason that this does not necessarily indicate that the psalmist was influenced by the prophecy of the Second Isaiah (rather than vice versa). The mention of Egypt and Cush does not cohere with the historical circumstances of the period of the return to Zion, when Egypt was ruled by foreign nations. See Gray, “Cantata,” p. 8.
 34. Pharaoh Shishak’s expedition to Canaan around 925 B.C.E. was a one-time event, and did not result in Egyptian rule over the Land of Israel.
 35. See Frank J. Yurco, “Merenptah’s Canaanite Campaign,” *Journal of the American Research Center in Egypt* 23 (1986), pp. 189-215.
 36. Donald B. Redford hypothesizes that this campaign was conducted during the first year of Merneptah’s rule. See Donald B. Redford, “The Ashkelon Relief at Karnak and the Israel Stela,” *Israel Exploration Journal* 36:3-4 (1986), p. 199.
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37. It may be that the revolt broke out upon the death of Ramses II, Merneptah's father. This possibility is consistent with Redford's theory regarding the date of the campaign against Canaan (see previous note).

38. Some scholars have argued that the words "bare of seed" are not a metaphorical expression, but a statement denoting the destruction of Israel's agricultural harvest (see, for example, Hasel, "Merneptah's Inscription"). Anson F. Rainey, however, has effectively refuted this claim, demonstrating that the word "seed" refers to Israel's descendants. See Anson F. Rainey, "Israel in Merneptah's Inscription and Reliefs," *Israel Exploration Journal* 51:1 (2001), pp. 57-75.

39. See Nadav Na'aman, *Canaan in the Second Millennium B.C.E.: Collected Essays*, vol. 2 (Winona Lake, Ind.: Eisenbrauns, 2005), p. 197.

40. There is in scholarly literature an argument according to which the text in the Merneptah inscription is concentric in structure, so "Israel" parallels "Canaan" and is not related to the three cities mentioned before it. See Gösta Werner Ahlström and Diana Vikander Edelman, "Merneptah's Israel," *Journal of Near Eastern Studies* 44:1 (January 1985), pp. 60-61. The argument, however, is not altogether convincing; see John Adney Emerton, "Review of G.W. Ahlström 'Who Were the Israelites?'" *Vetus Testamentum* 38:3 (July 1988), p. 373.

41. Na'aman, *Canaan*, p. 198. Benjamin Mazar and Moshe Weinfeld accepted Na'aman's hypothesis and pointed specifically to the Sukkot Valley in northern Gilead. See Benjamin Mazar, "Biblical Archeology: Historical Aspects," *Biblical Archeology Today* (Jerusalem: Israel Exploration Society, 1985), pp. 17-18; Benjamin Mazar, *Excavations and Discoveries* (Jerusalem: Bialik and Israel Exploration Society, 1986), p. 176 [Hebrew]; Moshe Weinfeld, *From Joshua to Josiah: Turning Points in the History of Israel from the Conquest of the Land Until the Fall of Judah* (Jerusalem: Magnes, 1992), pp. 38-39 [Hebrew]; Moshe Weinfeld, "Historical Facts Behind the Israelite Settlement Pattern," *Vetus Testamentum* 38:3 (July 1988), pp. 327-328.

42. As Abraham Ibn Ezra notes, the word "there" in verse 15 refers to verse 11: "Your flock dwells there" (Ibn Ezra on Psalms 68:15). "There" is the land in which God settled his "flock"—his tribe, his people (for the use of "flock" to denote a group of people or an encampment, see II Samuel 23:11, 13). The boundaries of this land, where the people of Israel were living and the battle of the psalm took place, shall be delineated henceforth.

43. Judges 9:48.

44. Ibn Ezra on Psalms 68:15.

45. See Johann Gottfried Wetzstein, *The Bataneic Gable Mountains* (Leipzig: Dorssling, 1884) [German].

46. Psalms 68:16-18.

47. See, to name but two, Gray, "Cantata," p. 5; and Emerton, "Review."

48. See Deuteronomy 3:8; Joshua 12:1-5; I Chronicles 5:23.

49. See Megilla 29a.

50. "And all its entrances will be spied on (*yeratzed*)." See Moshe Tzvi Segal, *The Book of Ben Sira* (Jerusalem: Bialik, 1953), 14:22, p. 92 [Hebrew]. Likewise, the expression *azal veratzad* in midrashic Aramaic means "went and ambushed." See Leviticus Rabba 26:2.

51. See the gloss by Rabbi Moshe Hadarshan, cited in Rashi on Psalms 68:17; see also Francis Brown, S.R. Driver, and Charles A. Briggs, *A Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1977), pp. 952-953. Rashi also quotes the interpretation of Rabbi Menahem ben Saruk, who reads *teratzdun* as *tirkedun*, "dance." Such a reading, however, presupposes the replacement of the letter א by the letter ק. A replacement that in the Bible is relatively rare, and does not occur in any other appearance of the root *r-k-d* in its various forms. Menahem ben Saruk, *Menahem's Notebook* (London: Filipowski, 1854), p. 166 [Hebrew].

52. Judges 9:25.

53. Judges 5:20.

54. See Hans-Joachim Kraus, *Psalms* (Neukirchen, Germany: Neukirchener, 1978), p. 625 [German]. The alternative explanation for "the mount God" as merely a "mighty mountain" does not seem plausible in this case. See Emerton, "Review," and John Day, *God's Conflict with the Dragon and the Sea* (Cambridge: Cambridge, 1985), p. 116.

55. "Do not be ashamed, Mount Bashan, because you are the mountain that the angels chose to live on, and even the *Shechina* (divine presence) dwells there" (Ibn Ezra on Psalms 68:17); see also Shlomo Dov Goitein, "The City of Adam in the Book of Psalms?" *Bulletin of the Israel Exploration Society* 13:3-4 (1947), p. 86 [Hebrew]. Yehezkel Kaufmann correctly points out that "the mount God desired as his abode" does not refer to Mount Zion. Yet his interpretation that "Bashan is the 'mountain of God,' a poetic symbol for all of the Holy Land," is not convincing either. Why should this marginal area be chosen to symbolize for the entire Land of Israel? See Yehezkel Kaufmann, *The Religion of Israel: From Its Beginnings to the Babylonian Exile* (Jerusalem: Bialik-Dvir, 1960), vol. 2, p. 656 [Hebrew].

56. *Epic of Gilgamesh*, tablet 5, lines 6, 361; see Shin Shifra and Jacob Klein, *In Those Distant Days: Anthology of Mesopotamian Literature in Hebrew* (Tel Aviv: Am Oved, 1996), pp. 225, 232 [Hebrew].

57. See Psalms 78:68-72; 132:8-15.

58. Psalms 68:30.

59. Kaufmann maintains that the original version of the whole verse was "From their temple kings bear gifts to thee." See Kaufmann, *Religion of Israel*, vol. 1, p. 148. But if we adopt this suggestion, the verse would be too short and would not match the rhythm and prosody of the psalm. We may thus suppose that the original version included additional words that were deleted during the editing process.

60. Sigmund Mowinckel suggested that this is essentially an ancient northern psalm that was later adapted to suit the Jerusalem cult. See Sigmund Mowinckel, *The Psalms in Israel's Worship*, trans. D.R. Ap-Thomas (Oxford: Blackwell, 1962), vol. 2, p. 152.

61. The theory that Israel lived in the Bashan region at this time was proposed already by Johannes Cornelis de Moor, though he based it exclusively on the evidence in Psalm 68, which he dated to approximately 1220 B.C.E., and not on the Merneptah inscription. See Johannes Cornelis de Moor, *The Rise of Yahwism: The Roots of Israelite Monotheism* (Leuven, Germany: Leuven University, 1990), pp. 118-128.

62. In Ugaritic, *shinanim* refers to a special band of warriors. See William Foxwell Albright, "A Catalogue of Early Hebrew Lyric Poems (Psalm LXVIII)," *Hebrew Union College Annual* 23 (1950-1951), p. 25.

63. See I Chronicles 2:21-23. It may be that Joshua 19:34, which mentions Judah in connection to Naphtali's eastern border, should be interpreted in this manner as well. Note that the name "Penuel," which appears on the list of the descendants of Judah in I Chronicles 4:4, is also the name of a place in Gilead (see Genesis 32:30; Judges 8:8-9, 17).

64. See Judges 21:9; I Samuel 11:1-11; 31:11-13; II Samuel 2:8-9.

65. Judges 5:14-18.

66. See Andrew D.H. Mayes, "Israel in the Pre-Monarchy Period," *Vetus Testamentum* 23 (1973), p. 168.

67. See Frank J. Yurco, "Merenptah's Canaanite Campaign and Israel's Origin," in Ernest S. Freriches and Leonard H. Lesco, eds., *Exodus: The Egyptian Evidence* (Winona Lake, Ind.: Eisenbrauns, 1997), pp. 27-55.

68. Yurco, "Campaign," pp. 39-43. See also Lawrence Stager, "Merenptah, Israel, and Sea Peoples: New Light on an Old Relief," *Eretz Israel* 18 (1985), pp. 60-61.

69. Rainey, "Israel," p. 70. Redford, too, believes that the "Israel" mentioned in Merneptah's inscription refers to nomadic shepherds, called "Shasu" in Egyptian literature. See Redford, "Ashkelon," p. 200.

70. The depiction of these nomads is consistent with the conventional portrayal of the "Shasu" in Egyptian art. See Rainey, "Israel," pp. 68-75.

71. Numbers 18:6. The phrase “to you” is missing in several of the textual witnesses. This phrase reflects the concept that the Levites are given to the priests, Aaron and his sons (see Numbers 3:9). However, the main thrust of the verse is that the Levites were actually given to God (see Numbers 8:16).

72. As Ephraim Speiser has demonstrated, the use of the noun *matana* (“gift”) or the adjective *netunim* (“given”) in the context of the Levites implies that they have been *given over* to service in the Temple. Similar expressions may be found in Mesopotamian literature, appearing already in Assyrian documents from the twelfth century B.C.E.—close to the time to which we have dated Psalm 68. See Ephraim A. Speiser, “An Unremarked Sanctification,” in *Oz le-David*, pp. 503-507. The use of the verb “give” also appears in the story about the Gibeonites: “That day Joshua gave them (*vayitnem*) as hewers of wood and drawers of water for the community and for the altar of the Lord” (Joshua 9:27). In a later period the Bible mentions the *netinim* (“subjects”), who were Gentiles conscripted into service in the Temple. See, for instance, Ezekiel 2:58, 8:20; Nehemiah 7:72.

73. Verse 7 also mentions rebels; see also Psalms 66:7.

74. II Kings 19:23; see also Isaiah 37:24.

75. Since the Egyptian army used chariots, it is logical that the battle took place on a plain.

76. The name “Hermon” does not appear in extrabiblical sources, and we can therefore assume it was given to the mountain by the ancient Israelites on account of their belief in its sanctity.

77. See, for instance, Gray, “Cantata,” pp. 8-19.

78. The Ramesside period (1290-1070 B.C.E.) denotes the reigns of the nineteenth and twentieth dynasties. The period got its name from the many members of these dynasties who bore the name “Ramses.”

79. See Jan Assmann, *Egyptian Solar Religion in the New Kingdom: Re, Amun, and the Crisis of Polytheism*, trans. Anthony Alcock (London: Kegan Paul International, 1995).

80. See Jan Assmann, *Sun Hymns in Thebanic Tombs* (Mainz am Rhein: P. von Zabern, 1983), p. 262, text 187, lines 47-48 [German].

81. Assmann, *Sun Hymns*, p. 260, text 187, line 12.

82. Psalms 68:6-7.

83. Psalms 68:30, 32.

84. Psalms 68:33.

85. See Assmann, *Egyptian Solar Religion*.

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86. God, the God of Israel, my God my King, Shaddai, YHWH, the Lord.
87. God-the God of Israel (9), God-YHWH (17), God, the Lord (18), the Lord-God (20), God-my God my King (25), God-the Lord (27, 33), God-the God of Israel (36).
88. The same phrase famously appears in the Song of Deborah (Judges 5:5). I intend to address the relationship between Psalm 68 and the Song of Deborah at length elsewhere. For now, I will only state that in my opinion, Psalm 68 was composed before the Song of Deborah, and its influence is evident in the song.
89. See Albright, "Catalogue," p. 20.
90. See Michael Fishbane, *Biblical Interpretation in Ancient Israel* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1988), pp. 54-55, 75.
91. Psalms 68:18.
92. Several scholars have suggested amending this verse to read, "the Lord comes from Sinai in holiness." See, for instance, Gunkel, *Psalms*, p. 290. But the revised version is problematic, inasmuch as it leaves the function and meaning of "in holiness" unclear. In my view, the text needs no correction.
93. Compare also with Psalms 68:5. We can reasonably assume that the temple in which "Sinai" dwells was on the peak of Mount Bashan, the Hermon. For a refutation of the possibility that the verse refers to the Temple in Zion, see Moses Buitenvieser, *The Psalm* (New York: Ktav, 1969), p. 35.
94. Due to limited scope of this essay I cannot here expand on the origins of the name "Sinai" and the importance of its being presented in this context as the name of the God of Israel.
95. See, for example, Exodus 16:1. Scholars have already noted the connection between the name "Sinai" and the god Sin. See Andre F. Key, "Traces of the Worship of the Moon God Sin Among the Early Israelites," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 84 (1965), pp. 20-26.
96. See Genesis 12:4-5, 28:10.
97. See, for instance, Albright, "Catalogue," p. 18.
98. Psalms 68:34. Compare with "who rides through the heavens to help you" (Deuteronomy 33:26); "thick cloud beneath his feet" (II Samuel 22:10); "the Lord is riding on a swift cloud" (Isaiah 19:1); "who makest the clouds thy chariot" (Psalms 104:3). See also Moshe Weinfeld, "'Rider of the Clouds' and Similar Images in Israel and the Ancient World," in *Sefer Ben-Tzion Luria: Studies in Bible and the History of Israel* (Jerusalem: Kiryat Sepher, 1979), pp. 235-245 [Hebrew].
99. See Bill T. Arnold and Brent A. Strawn, "A Hebrew Gloss to an Ugaritic Epithet?" *Zeitschrift für die Alttestamentliche Wissenschaft* (Journal of Old Testament
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Studies) 115:3 (2003), pp. 428-432. Arnold and Strawn maintain that the phrase “in the Lord is his name” is an editorial addition, but in my opinion these words are part of the original verse and express the religious creed of the poet, by which various divine beings are considered one and the same. Regarding the phenomenon of unifying different gods in the ancient world, see Mark S. Smith, *God in Translation: Deities in Cross-Cultural Discourse in the Biblical World* (Tübingen, Germany: Mohr Siebeck, 2008).

100. This concept may be defined as “inclusive monotheism.” Regarding the phenomenon of inclusive monotheism in the cultural space of ancient Israel, see Jan Assmann, *Of God and Gods: Egypt, Israel, and the Rise of Monotheism* (Madison, Wis.: University of Wisconsin, 2008), pp. 53-58.