

Manasseh, Manassites

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I. Hebrew Bible/Old Testament

Manasseh (MT *Mēnaššēh*, “one who makes to forget”; LXX Μανασσης) is an eponym of the Israelite tribe of the Manassites in the hills of Central Palestine and Transjordan. Manasseh was the eldest son of Joseph and Asenath, daughter of Potiphar, priest of On (Gen 41:50–51; 46:20). Joseph chose this

name in relation to the stem *n-š-y* “to forget,” because “God has made me forget all my hardship and all my father’s house.” Accordingly, Jerome and later church fathers translated the name Manasseh as “forgetful” or “necessity.” The latter meaning may be related to the Arabic word *nassa* (“to urge”; *Sit.* 8.27), although there are other etymologies like “dejected” or “made” (*PL* 23:1236). The common etymology is symbolically related to Israel’s forgetting of God (Ambrose, *Patr.* 1.4) or to God forgetting Israel’s sins (Isidore of Seville, *Orig.* 7.6.73).

1. Manasseh within the Tribal System. Manasseh and Ephraim were adopted by their grandfather Jacob on his deathbed, giving Joseph a part of Jacob’s estate (Gen 48). Therefore, Manasseh and Ephraim were regarded equally, and as separate tribes of the tribal entity of the house of Joseph. Despite Manasseh being the firstborn, the primogeniture was transferred to Ephraim (Deut 33:17), whereas the original order is still present in Josh 16:4; 17:1. Unsurprisingly, there are several indications of tensions between both tribes (Judg 8:1–3; 12:1–6; Isa 9:20). Apparently their linkage to the expression “house of Joseph” is a later development; it appeared at a time when a common name for both northern highland tribes was needed for polemical use against the “house of Judah.”

The genealogy of Manasseh is not coherent. On the one hand, Abiezer, Helek, Asriel, Shechem, Hephher, and Shemida are sons of Manasseh (in Josh 17:2). On the other hand, Manasseh has only two sons (according to 1 Chr 7:14): Asriel, a son of an Aramean concubine; and Machir, the father of Gilead. The difficult genealogy shows that this tribe was quite inhomogeneous. The clans settling in the Manasseh hills, and differing from other Israelite tribes, were regarded as Manassites only at a late stage. Unlike other tribes, the Manassites inherited a cis- and transjordanian territory. Unsurprisingly, Manasseh is not mentioned in Judg 5, contrary to Machir, a small tribal Manassite group which settled in Transjordan.

Seven names of Manasseh’s clans mentioned in the genealogy of Num 26 are found on an 8th-century BCE ostrakon from Samaria, but they refer to districts around Samaria rather than to tribal clans. Furthermore, Manasseh is almost entirely lacking in the old tribal sayings, although two thirds of the land’s Early Iron Age population may have inhabited the territory of Manasseh.

Manasseh, never mentioned in extrabiblical sources, figures in late literary contexts where a full presentation of all twelve Israelite tribes is in view. Nevertheless, the importance of the Manassite territory for the Northern Kingdom is attested by the fact that the Israelite capital was located on the Manasseh hills (Shechem, Tirzah, Samaria), although Ephraim – not Manasseh – stands for the Northern Kingdom (Hos 4:17).

2. Manassite Territory. The tribal allotment of Manasseh is rather indeterminate. According to Josh 17:7–10, West-Manasseh reached from the Jordan to the Mediterranean Sea. However, the western coastal plain was occupied by Canaanites and Philistines for a long time and could not be settled by Manassites. The northern boundary was defined by the tribal territories of Asher and Issachar, both living in the valley of Jezreel, whereas the southern border was set by that of Ephraim. Only a small portion of the southern border is described in more detail where Wādī Qānā (150.170) is a clear geographic feature. The border may have shifted to the north in later times, so that Ephraim included Shechem and other Manassite towns (1 Chr 7:28–29). There is no list of specific Manassite towns, but several Canaanite cities outside the traditional borders are attributed to Manasseh, such as the Issacharite towns Bethshan, Taanach, and Megiddo (Josh 17:11–13). In that respect, Issachar might be regarded as a Manassite faction. Only the border with Ephraim is clearly defined, while the other borders are difficult to determine due to the lack of clear topographic features and the proximity to Canaanite territory.

Manasseh may have been sparsely settled at the margins. Thus, exact borders cannot be easily defined, and as Manasseh may be a latecomer as an Israelite tribe, specific borders may not have been available. The Transjordanian allotment is even more imprecise, reaching from the territories of Geshur and Maacah near Mt. Hermon to the Jabbok (Josh 13:11, 30). Therefore, the borders of East-Manasseh seem to be defined by specific geographic features: the Yarmuk River in the north, the Jordan River in the west, the Jabbok River in the south. Thus, Gilead is divided in two parts with the Jabbok as border. The tribal territories of Gad and Reuben are south of this boundary (Deut 3:12–13). The eastern border of East-Manasseh cannot be determined. Two Solomonite districts are located in this territory around Ramot-Gilead and Mahanaim (1 Kgs 4:13–14). The presence of transjordanian next to cisjordanian Manassites can be explained either literally or geographically by infiltration of western Manassites in Gilead or vice versa.

3. Biblical Picture. The tribe of Manasseh, first mentioned in Num 1:10, had the smallest levy (Num 1:34–35); but later it nearly doubled, so that it surpassed six other tribes (Num 26:34). The territory of Gilead was given to the descendants of Manasseh’s son Machir (Num 32:39–40). Afterwards, East-Manasseh joined the Israelite forces to conquer the promised land west of the Jordan, delivering on their vow (Josh 1:12–18). West-Manasseh was not able to expel the Canaanites from some cities due to their superior armament (Josh 17:14–18), but constrained them to forced labor (Judg 1:27–28). After the conquest, East-Manasseh built an altar with

the sole purpose of commemorating the conquest (Josh 22:10).

Manasseh and Ephraim conquered Bethel after Joshua's death (Judg 1:22–26). The Manassites helped Gideon against the Midianites (Judg 6–8) and Jephthah against the Ephraimites (Judg 12). Several warriors from Manasseh joined David (1 Chr 12) who in return appointed administrators over this tribe (1 Chr 27). Manasseh took part in the revolt against Rehoboam and split off with the northern tribes to form the Northern Kingdom (1 Kgs 12). Manasseh participated in the cultic reform of Asa (2 Chr 15:9). In the reign of Jehu, East-Manasseh was captured by the Aramean king Hazael of Damascus (2 Kgs 10:32–33) and later reconquered by Jeroboam II (2 Kgs 14:25). East-Manasseh was deported by the Assyrian king Tiglat-Pileser III (1 Chr 5:25–26). West-Manasseh was likewise exiled by Sargon II after the conquest of the Northern Kingdom. Nevertheless, some Manassites took part in the cultic reform of Hezekiah (2 Chr 30).

It seems that later references to Manassites in the time of Josiah (2 Chr 34:9) and after the exile (1 Chr 9:3) point to inhabitants of the Manasseh Hills, but not to the Israelite tribe. According to the eschatological vision of the promised land, Manasseh will get a tribal allotment between Naphtali and Ephraim (Ezek 48:4–5). In later times, the Samaritans claim to be descendants of the Manassites as well as the Kuki-Chin-Mizo Jews living in North-east India.

4. Archaeology of Manasseh Hills. The hills of West-Manasseh are comprised of valleys and gently rising slopes with fertile soils suitable for pastoralists raising crops. Located in the area of Mount Ephraim, West-Manasseh can be divided into three landscape units: the western hilly region with forests, the central hill country with six interior valleys, and the eastern desert fringe. Since many springs became dry, the region declined in the Late Bronze Age. The campaigns of the Egyptian Pharaohs contributed to the decline, and the hilly western region became nearly devoid of population. In Iron Age I, the region was repopulated by semi-nomads with a distinctive material culture and settlement pattern. The overall increase in population points to an influx from outside. The Manassites settled rural sites alongside the indigenous population, who had already been living in towns since the Bronze Age. The small villages were either newly established or rebuilt after a period of abandonment.

The colonization spread gradually from the interior valleys to the surrounding hills. In the eastern fringes, primarily the valleys were settled. The settlement reached a peak in Iron Age II, with all parts of the Manasseh Hills settled. The Manassite villages relied mainly on animal husbandry and cereal growing. In that time, different site types were

used, from small farmsteads and simple encampments to fortified cities. The founding of new sites on virgin soil indicates not only a population expansion and a quest for new land, but also political stability and economic prosperity. The success of Israel under the Omrides may have led to population growth, security and development in this area. The eastern valleys especially were protected by fortresses built upon natural hills to secure incoming roads from the east; but also the roads from the north via the Dothan Valley and those from the south were guarded by fortresses.

After the Assyrian conquest and the transformation of the Manasseh Hills into the province Samaria, the population gradually decreased. The Assyrians destroyed some of the larger cities but left the villages mainly intact. Yet, many family farmsteads decayed and were given up bit by bit. The farmsteads and villages in the arid zones, in particular, were abandoned. The populace may have moved to the west; deportations also contributed to the general decline. New settlements were founded mainly in the region around Samaria. That immigrants came from other areas of the Assyrian empire is attested by different ceramic traditions and Mesopotamian building plans.

The settlement of Manasseh did not recover until the Persian Period. There is evidence of prosperity only in the Shechem syncline, whereas the eastern zones are sparsely settled. Even (semi)nomads are hardly present, since Persian Period ceramics are lacking in nomadic encampments there. The Samaritan revolt in 332 BCE led to another decline in settlement to about half of the size of that in the Persian Period.

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