

Manasseh (Person)

1. Son of Joseph

Manasseh is the firstborn son of Joseph and his Egyptian wife Asenath, daughter of Potiphar, the priest of On. In the few references which mention him in Genesis, Manasseh never appears without his younger brother Ephraim. Genesis 41:50–52 indicates the birth of the two brothers and the explanation of their names by their father. In the case of Manasseh, Joseph interprets the meaning of the name: “he who makes forget (i.e., the loss of a relative who has passed away)” (Noth: 222; Zadok: 125), with reference to Joseph’s own fate far from home. Genesis 46:20 repeats the birth notice in the context of the list of the sons of Israel in Egypt (Gen 46:8–27). Genesis 48 gives the only story in which Manasseh and Ephraim play a role; in Gen 47:31–49:33, which narrates the last moments of Jacob, Joseph presents to his father the two grandsons he has not yet seen. Jacob adopts them as his own sons by taking them onto his knees and blessing them, whereby once again the younger is given precedence over his elder brother. Finally, Gen 50:23 relates a similar incident regarding the blessings bestowed upon Manasseh’s grandsons by their great-grandfather Joseph, in the context of the latter’s death in Gen 50:24–26.

It is clear that none of these passages belong to any older source or stratum of a Joseph novella:

Genesis 41:50–52 interrupts the narrative flow of the episode concerning the seven years of plenty and famine. The mention of Asenath as the mother of the children might be yet another gloss (Ede: 155–56). Likewise, the list in Gen 46:8–27 disrupts the continuation of Gen 46:7 and 46:28. The list in Gen 46:8–27 refers back to Gen 29 and 38 and appears to be priestly-styled in the widest sense (Blum: 249–50). In Gen 48, even the earliest layer presupposes 41:50–52* (Blum: 250). Finally, Gen 50:23 belongs to the secondary epilogue after 50:21, perhaps trying to equate Num 26:29; Josh 17:1 (and 1 Chr 7:14) with Judg 5:14, where Manasseh is absent and Machir acts as if he were in his place (Levin: 316).

As to a possible reason for why the characters of Ephraim and Manasseh were inserted into the Joseph story in a second step, Giuntoli stresses the point that both are born of a foreign woman (even the daughter of a foreign priest) in a foreign country; but they are nevertheless made equal descendants of Jacob/Israel. They even receive their blessing before their uncles. Emphasized by the insertion of 48:3–6, 15–16, this would have been intended to support the claim of the Babylonian returnees in post-exilic times to take precedence over the inhabitants of the land (Giuntoli: 225–31). However, a reminder of the Egyptian diaspora rather than of the galuth (i.e., the exiled community) in Babylon might seem rather more natural in this case.

Be this as it may, it appears that the name Manasseh, though a personal name in the first instance, denoted the respective territory before it was personalized in the shape of one of Joseph's sons. The area in question is the central hill country in the north of Ephraim, comprising sites such as Shechem, Mount Ebal, Tirzah, and Dothan. The large-scale surveys undertaken by Adam Zertal have led to groundbreaking results. Accordingly, during Iron Age I, Manasseh was one of the most densely-populated areas of the region (Finkelstein: 80–91; Zertal).

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