

Menashe Joins Reuven and Gad

Introduction

Where was Menashe?

The tribes that settle on the eastern bank of the Jordan are often grouped as a threesome: Reuven, Gad, and half of Menashe. However, a close look at Bemidbar 32, in which they negotiate settling the lands, suggests that this picture might not be accurate. Throughout the discussions with Moshe, it is only Reuven and Gad who play a role,¹ while Menashe is conspicuously absent. It is only first in verse 33, after Moshe has already agreed to the request and apportions the lands, that the tribe of Menashe appears in the narrative:

וַיִּתֵּן לָהֶם מֹשֶׁה לְבִנֵי גָד וְלְבִנֵי רְאוּבֵן וְלַחֲצִי שִׁבְט מְנַשֶּׁה בֶּן יוֹסֵף אֶת מַמְלַכַת סִיחֹן מֶלֶךְ הָאֱמֹרִי וְאֶת מַמְלַכַת עֹג מֶלֶךְ הַבָּשָׁן הָאֶרֶץ לְעֵרִיָּהּ בְּגִבְלֹת עֲרֵי הָאֶרֶץ סָבִיב.

And Moses gave unto them, even to the children of Gad, and to the children of Reuben, and unto the half-tribe of Manasseh the son of Joseph, the kingdom of Sihon king of the Amorites, and the kingdom of Og king of Bashan, the land, according to the cities thereof with their borders, even the cities of the land round about.

If Menashe was part of the original petition, why are they not mentioned until the end? On the other hand, if they made no request of Moshe, why are they, too, settling the territories? Moreover, as a result of their gaining land on the eastern bank, their portion becomes disproportionately large.² Why is this justified?

More Conquests

Two other aspects of the narrative serve to differentiate Menashe from Reuven and Gad. After listing the lands which will be apportioned to each tribes, the chapter briefly describes a series of conquests by the clans of Menashe:

(לט) וַיֵּלְכוּ בְנֵי מַכִּיר בֶּן מְנַשֶּׁה גִּלְעָדָה וַיִּלְכְּדוּהָ וַיּוֹרְשׁוּ אֶת הָאֱמֹרִי אֲשֶׁר בָּהּ. (מ) וַיִּתֵּן מֹשֶׁה אֶת הַגִּלְעָד לְמַכִּיר בֶּן מְנַשֶּׁה וַיֵּשֶׁב בָּהּ. (מא) וַיֵּאִיר בֶּן מְנַשֶּׁה הֶלֶד וַיִּלְכֹּד אֶת חֻתִּיָּהֶם וַיִּקְרָא אֶתְהֶן חֻת יֵאִיר. (מב) וְנָבַח הֶלֶד וַיִּלְכֹּד אֶת קֶנֶת וְאֶת בְּנֵי תֵיָּה וַיִּקְרָא לָהּ נָבַח בְּשֵׁמוֹ.

(39) And the children of Machir the son of Manasseh went to Gilead, and took it, and dispossessed the Amorites that were therein. (40) And Moses gave Gilead unto Machir the son of Manasseh; and he dwelt therein. (41) And Jair the son of Manasseh went and took the villages thereof, and called them Havvoth-jair. (42) And Nobah went and took Kenath, and the villages thereof, and called it Nobah, after his own name.

Why does Menashe have to conquer their own territory? If all three tribes were settling lands previously taken from Sichon and Og, why do Reuven and Gad simply settle their lands, while Menashe must continue to fight? Finally, how are we to understand the mention of Yair and Makhir, the son and grandson of Menashe, who are presumably no longer alive at this stage of the story?

No Strings Attached?

A second difference between the tribes relates to the conditions negotiated to secure Moshe's agreement to settle east of the Jordan. Much of the chapter revolves around ensuring that Reuven and Gad will join in the Conquest of Canaan as a condition for attaining their desired territory.³ However, no similar condition is mentioned with regards to Menashe. Were they given their lands without the need to participate in the Conquest? If so, why were they exempted?

¹ See verses 1, 2, 6, 25, 29 and 31.

² For a map of the different inheritances, see here.

³ Moshe originally chides Reuven and Gad for thinking of not participating, the tribes then offer to head the campaign, and finally Moshe reiterates the terms of the agreement.

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Exegetical Approaches

This topic has not yet undergone editorial review

Individual Request

After Moshe finished negotiating with Reuven and Gad and acquiesced to their request to settle in the lands of Sichon, the tribe of Menashe approached with a personal, distinct request to settle the lands of Og. This position subdivides regarding when the lands requested were conquered:

Present Conquests

Menashe both asked for and conquered their territory in the fortieth year, after Reuven and Gad were granted their request to settle on the eastern bank of the Jordan.

SOURCES: Shadal¹

Why did Menashe need to conquer the land? When describing the conquests over Sihcon and Og in Bemidbar 21, the text shares that the lands of Sichon were not just conquered, but also settled by Israel (וַיָּשֶׁב יִשְׂרָאֵל בְּכָל עָרֵי הָאֱמֹרִי בְּחֶשְׁבוֹן וּבְכָל בְּנֵיהֶּ). No such statement is made regarding settling the lands of Og.² As such, there were likely areas in this northern region that still housed the original inhabitants. This would explain why Reuven and Gad request only the lands of Sichon. It is only Menashe who later adds a request for the lands of Og, as they are willing to finish conquering its cities.³

Why wait? This approach can offer one of two somewhat opposite approaches to this question:

- It is possible that the tribe of Menashe was wary of Moshe's reaction to a request to settle lands east of the Jordan, recognizing that he might find the petition problematic and a rejection of the Promised Land. They, therefore, decided to wait to gauge his response to Reuven and Gad before asking for their own territory.⁴
- Conversely, it is possible that Menashe intentionally separated themselves from the problematic petition of Reuven and Gad, since they viewed their own request, in contrast, as a legitimate one. Prof. Elitzur⁵ suggests that the lands of Sichon and Og had very different statuses. While the northern Bashan was considered part of the Promised Land (and thus not problematic to settle), the southern territory of Sichon was not.⁶

Why did they want the territory?

- **Cattle** – It is possible that, like Reuven and Gad, these clans of Menashe also had much cattle and desired the grazing land east of the Jordan.
- **Intended inheritance** – Prof. Elitzur suggests, instead, that the tribes knew of their future inheritances, and Menashe asked for the Bashan because it was his intended portion.⁷
- **Preempt later problems** – Menachem b. Yashar⁸ raises a similar possibility, but suggests that Menashe was aware only that the region around Shekhem was promised to them.⁹ Knowing that the area was hilly and not well-suited to agriculture, and, moreover, that the tribe were very numerous, Menashe thought to resolve the issue ahead of time, by requesting an extra inheritance.

Different conditions?

- It is possible that Moshe does not make Menashe's settlement contingent on joining the rest of the nation in the Conquest, since unlike Reuven and Gad, they were settling areas conquered by themselves and not simply asking to enjoy the benefits of everyone else's work.
- Alternatively, despite the text's silence, it is possible that Moshe also had Menashe promise to participate in the campaign against Canaan. This could be supported by the fact that in Sefer Yehoshua, they also go to war.¹⁰

Yair and Machir, the sons of Menashe – This position could explain, like Ibn Ezra, that the verse is referring not to Machir or Yair themselves, but rather to their descendants.

What if Reuven and Gad had remained silent? According to Prof. Elitzur, had it not been for Reuven and Gad, the lands of Sichon would probably not have been settled. The lands of Og, in contrast, would have been apportioned, but perhaps only later, together with the rest of Canaan.

Independence in the Wilderness – The variations of this approach makes one question the level of independence of the tribes in the Wilderness. Did they have permission to go off on their own and make personal conquests? How would such expeditions have affected the rest of the nation?



Previous Conquests

The cities Menashe requested had been conquered by the tribe of Menashe much earlier, during the era of Yosef's reign in Egypt.

SOURCES: Student of R. Saadia, opinion brought by Abarbanel

The original conquest

- According to the student of R. Saadia, the cities mentioned in Bemidbar 32 as being conquered by Menashe,¹¹ had actually been originally conquered centuries before, when Yosef was a vizier in Egypt.¹²
- Abarbanel brings a similar opinion that Yosef had bought these lands in the time of the famine. At some point, they were conquered by Ammon, and now that this land was returned to Israel's control, Menashe asked for their rightful inheritance to be returned.

Machir, Yair, and Novach – According to R. Saadia's student, the verses refer not to the descendants of these individuals, but to Menashe's literal sons and grandchildren, as they were the ones who had originally conquered the areas.¹³

Why did Menashe want the territory? Unlike Reuven and Gad, these families did not want the territory because it was good grazing land but rather because the region had been conquered by and belonged to their ancestors.

Why wait? Since Menashe's claim to the land and request of Moshe had nothing in common with that of Reuven and Gad, they did not join with them in their petition.

Disproportionate inheritance – The large portion of Menashe is understandable given that they had conquered their territory on their own.

Different conditions? Moshe did not make Menashe's inheritance on the eastern side conditional on joining the Conquest since their claims to the land were centuries old and they were not trying to benefit from the work of others. In addition, nowhere did they insinuate that they would not join the nation's campaign, and it might have simply been understood that they were planning to help the nation (and the rest of their tribe) in their conquests regardless.

Between Canaan and Egypt – This position raises fascinating questions regarding the mobility of the tribes when in Egypt. Did they really have the freedom to come and go to Canaan, hold possessions there, and even make conquests? If so, why did they stay in Egypt rather than returning to Canaan earlier?



Moshe's Initiative

Moshe, rather than Menashe, requested that some of the tribe join Reuven and Gad east of the Jordan.

SOURCES: Yerushalmi, Ramban, Ralbag, Abarbanel R. Avraham Saba #2, Netziv

Why did Moshe want Menashe to join?

- **Demographics** – Ramban¹⁴ claims that after Moshe agreed to Reuven and Gad's request, he realized that the land was too vast for just two tribes and therefore offered a portion to anyone who wished to join.¹⁵
- **Spiritual aid** – R. Saba and the Netziv assert that Moshe was motivated by religious concerns. R. Saba posits that Moshe worried that the two tribes were spiritually deficient (as proven by how their materialism led them to reject Canaan for the eastern bank), while the Netziv has him concerned about the lower level of Torah inspiration in their chosen lands. Moshe hoped that the presence of the tribe of Menashe, who were Torah scholars,¹⁶ would spiritually fortify the inhabitants.
- **Unity** – Alternatively, Moshe wanted to ensure the unity of the nation and prevent the possible alienation of the tribes of Reuven and Gad. By splitting Menashe and having one half settle on each of the two banks of the Jordan, he hoped to ensure that family and tribal ties would connect the two communities.

Different conditions? Moshe had no need to make Menashe's settlement conditional on joining the conquest since it was not they who asked to live on the eastern bank. They had never suggested that they would forsake their brethren, so Moshe had no need to emphasize that they must fight together with them.

Why did they need to conquer the land? Ralbag offers two explanations:

- **Extra-conquests post inheritance** – After Moshe had them join Reuven and Gad, and gave them their main inheritance, Menashe conquered other outlying cities and surrounding regions and annexed them to their portion.¹⁷
- **During the war with Og** – Though it is first mentioned now, in actuality Menashe conquered the territories earlier, when the nation as a whole fought against Og (Bamidbar 21). If so, it is possible that the reason Moshe chose them specifically to live in the region was because they were the ones who had previously conquered these cities.

Disproportionate inheritance

- According to Ramban, Moshe had opened the land to all the tribes equally, so whoever had wanted could have similarly claimed a larger inheritance. Thus, there was no injustice in the disproportionate

size of their territory.

- According to Ralbag, the larger size was due to the fact that they independently conquered more area.

Machir and Yair, the sons of Menashe – As above, this position could say that these refer to Menashe's descendants, and not to literal sons.

What if Reuven and Gad had remained silent? According to this position, had it not been for the request of Reuven and Gad, the lands east of the Jordan would not have been settled by the Israelites. It is not clear whether they would have remained a barren buffer zone, be used for commerce, or perhaps be shared by all the tribes equally as grazing land.



Part of Reuven and Gad's Petition

Despite the silence in the text, Menashe had been part of the negotiations from the beginning.

SOURCES: R. Avraham Saba #1

Why is Menashe not mentioned? According to R. Avraham Saba, the clans from Menashe were not mentioned earlier due to their relatively small numbers.

Different conditions? R. Saba would likely say that Menashe was given the same conditions as Reuven and Gad (as evidenced by their participation in the Conquest in Sefer Yehoshua) and the text simply did not want to repeat the fact.

Not Moshe's initiative – R. Saba maintains that Moshe was very reluctant to settle the eastern bank of the Jordan, viewing the land as impure and the desire to settle there as a rejection of the Promised Land.¹⁸ As such, he does not think that Moshe, on his own, would have ever forced one of the tribes to settle there against their will, leading him to conclude that Menashe themselves must have desired the territory.

Disproportionate inheritance – It is not clear, according to this position, why Menashe should have merited such a large portion. It is possible that Moshe did not want to penalize the other clans of the tribe for the deeds of their brothers. Since these clans had not rejected Hashem's Land, he did not want to minimize their portion, even if part of their tribe was inheriting elsewhere.

¹ Shadal touches just briefly on the topic, so much of what is developed below is not found in his commentary, though the points might work with his general approach.

² The verse simply states, "וַיָּרְשׁוּ אֶת אֶרֶץ... וַיָּכֻזּ אֹתוֹ וְאֶת בְּנֵי... וַיָּרְשׁוּ אֶת אֶרֶץ..." without mentioning that they also settled in the area.

³ See Y. Ben-Shem, "הלכה ומציאות בהתנחלות שבטי ישראל," who goes further to suggest that these conquests were done without the authority of Moshe and against his will, in an act of rebellion. This was taking place exactly as Moshe was negotiating with Reuven and Gad, and, in fact, influenced Moshe's agreement to that request. In his efforts to prevent civil war, Moshe made a compromise with the two tribes mainly so that he could have Menashe join in the agreement. Y. Ben Shem uses this theory to explain the disproportionately large inheritance of Menashe and further suggests that the later emphasis on equal inheritances in Bemidbar 33 and Bemidbar 35 are a direct reaction to this event.

⁴ Similarly, it is possible that the tribe could not come to agreement amongst themselves, leading them to wait to hear what Moshe had to say to Reuven and Gad.

⁵ See his article, "על אתר ד-ה (אלון שבות, תשנ"ט): 243-249 in "אנשים ונחלות במנשה ובשבטי ישראל".

⁶ Prof. Elitzur points out that the land of Sichon was conquered only because this was necessary in order to cross the Jordan and enter Israel, and, as such, had no inherent holiness. The lands of Og, on the other hand, did not prevent entry so conquering them served no utilitarian purpose, leading Prof. Elitzur to conclude that they had always been meant to be a part of Israel. He further posits that the tribes were aware ahead of time of the intended map of inheritances. Thus Menashe knew they were supposed to inherit the land of the Bashan. [As evidence he points to Machir's naming his son Gilad, and Gilad naming his son Shekhem, after the regions to be settled.] Reuven and Gad, in contrast, had originally been meant to inherit some place west of the Jordan, and thus should not have asked for different territory.

⁷ See previous note.

⁸ See his article, "על היאחזות השבטים בעבר הירדן".

⁹ According to this reading Menashe was unique in knowing their intended portion since Yaakov had told Yosef in Bereshit 48:22, "וַאֲנִי נָתַתִּי לָךְ שָׂכָם אֶחָד עַל אֶחִיךָ". The other tribes, in contrast, would not have known where they were to settle.

¹⁰ See Yehoshua 1:12-14 and Yehoshua 22:1-3.

¹¹ He actually comments not on the verses in Bemidbar but on Divrei HaYamim I 2:21-23 which also speaks of Chavot Yair and the lands of Menashe in Gilad. The implication of his remarks, though, is that all these lands had previously belonged to the family of Yosef.

¹² See also R. Yehuda HeChasid who suggests that all of the tribes had portions that they had conquered in Israel and that during the sojourn in Egypt they would go back and forth periodically to check on their fields and vineyards. He proves from Divrei HaYamim I 7:20-24 that throughout the period, the sons of Ephraim would return to build cities and collect taxes on their portions in Canaan. [Bavli Sanhedrin 92b similarly points to these verses as proof that the tribe of Ephraim returned to Israel before the period of enslavement had ended. Cf. Radak who, in contrast, suggests that the verses are referring to an event that happened in the Wilderness period.]

¹³ Cf. Seder Olam Rabbah who, in contrast, suggest that these figures simply lived an extremely long life, having been born in the time of Yaakov but dying only after Moshe.

¹⁴ See also Ralbag.

¹⁵ Abarbanel explains similarly but suggests that Moshe chose Menashe, rather than offering it to anyone who would like to join. These two commentators do not present Moshe as viewing settlement on the eastern bank as a rejection of the land, and thus do not find it problematic that Moshe could offer the land to another tribe. For elaboration on how they read the petition of the two tribes and Moshe's reaction to it, see Petition of the Two and a Half Tribes.

¹⁶ The Netziv brings evidence of their knowledge from Devorah's song where she speaks of Machir as being, "מְחַקְקִים", a term which is parallel to "מְשָׁכִים בְּשָׂבֶט סִפָּר" (Shofetim 5:14)

¹⁷ Ralbag compares this to Yehoshua's advice to the tribe of Yosef in Sefer Yehoshua. He tells them that if they are too numerous for their territory, they should go and conquer surrounding areas (Yehoshua 17:15). From this, Ralbag concludes that each tribe was allowed to conquer regions near their inheritance and claim them for themselves.

¹⁸ See Petition of the Two and a Half Tribes for elaboration on R. Saba's position.