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Moses and Manasseh: Arguments against a common emendation of Judges

18:30

Norman Simon Rodriguez

Abstract

Based on a fresh review of the available evidence, this article challenges the scholarly consensus that “Moses” should be replaced with “Manasseh” in Judges 18:30.

Keywords

Judges, textual criticism, emendation, Moses, Manasseh

The emendation of Judg 18:30 is one of the best-known text critical conjectures in the Hebrew Bible. It is part of a passage that describes how the tribe of Dan started to conquer the area north of the Sea of Galilee and how a priestly lineage was instituted for it. The initiator of the lineage was a “Jonathan, son of Gershom, son of Moses” according to most modern translations. The masoretic text, however, states that Gershom was the son of *Manasseh*, not of Moses. There is a wide consensus that the “Moses” reading is original, with “Manasseh” being a theologically-motivated alteration,¹ and this view is taken for granted in com-

¹ Dominique Barthélemy, *Critique Textuelle de l'ancien Testament: 1. Josué, Juges, Ruth, Samuel, Rois, Chroniques, Esdras, Néhémie, Esther*, vol. 1 (Academic Press Fribourg, Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht Göttingen, 1982) 116; J. Treballe Barrera, ‘La Aportación de 4QJueces a Al Estudio de La Historia Textual y Literaria Del Libro de Los Jueces’, *Miscelánea de Estudios Árabes y Hebraicos. Sección Hebreo* 40 (1991): 5–20 15; Carmel McCarthy, *The Tiquene Sopherim and Other Theological Corrections in the Masoretic Text of the Old Testament*, *Orbis Biblicus Et Orientalis* (University of Fribourg Switzerland; University of Münster, 1981) 225-229; Karl Budde, *Das Buch Der Richter* (Freiburg: Mohr, 1897) 124-125; George Moore, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on Judges* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1918) 400-403; Emanuel Tov, *Textual Criticism of the Hebrew Bible*, 2nd ed. (Fortress

mentaries and specialised treatments², as well as in *BHQ*. The present article aims to challenge this consensus and argue for “Manasseh” as the preferred alternative.

The masoretic text displays a curious feature, as it is the only instance of a suspended (hanging) *nun* in the Tanakh³ (see [Figure 1](#)). In contrast to the other three instances of suspended letters in the masoretic text (all of suspended *ayin*),⁴ which are usually explained as phonetic corrections,⁵ the suspended *nun* of Judg 18:30 is thought to be the result of a pious emendation that changed “Moses” (משה) into “Manasseh” (מנשה) to protect the prophet’s reputation and hide the Danite priesthood’s links to Moses’ descendants.⁶

Press, 2001) 57; Christian Ginsburg, *Introduction of the Massoretico-Critical Edition of the Hebrew Bible* (London: Trinitarian Bible Society, 1897) 335-338; *BHQ*.

² Examples are Jason Bray, *Sacred Dan: Religious Tradition and Cultic Practice in Judges 17-18* (New York, London: T&T Clark International, 2006) 22; Steve Weitzman, ‘Reopening the Case of the Suspiciously Suspended Nun in Judges 18:30’, *The Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 61.3 (1999): 448-60; Barry G. Webb, *The Book of Judges* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2013); Judit Targarona, ‘Dobletes En El Texto Representado Por Los MSS. KZgln(o)w(dptv) de La Septuaginta de Jueces’, *Miscelánea de Estudios Árabes y Hebraicos. Sección Hebreo* 26-28 (1977): 241-46 243; Emanuel Tov, ‘Paratextual Elements in the Masoretic Manuscripts of the Bible Compared with the Qumran Evidence’, in *Antikes Judentum Und Frühes Christentum*, ed. Bernd Kollmann, Wolfgang Reinbold, and Annette Steudel (Berlin; New York: De Gruyter, 1999), 73-83 80; Budde, *Das Buch Der Richter*, 124-25; K. Lawson Younger, *Judges, Ruth, The NIV Application Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Academic, 2021) 428; Mark J. Boda and George Schwab, *Judges, Ruth*, ed. Tremper Longman III and David E. Garland, *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary Series* (Grand Rapids: HarperCollins Christian Publishing, 2017).

³ The three Tiberian manuscripts contain the suspended *nun* (Barthélemy, *Critique Textuelle de l’ancien Testament*, 1:115). Giovanni Bernardo De Rossi, *Variae Lectiones Veteris Testamenti Librorum* (Amsterdam: Philo Press, 1969), 2:129 non-exhaustively lists 17 codices that include the suspended *nun* and 38 codices that read ‘Manasseh’ without suspending it.

⁴ Psa 80:14, Job 38:13, 15.

⁵ Petr Tomášek, ‘The Text of the Masoretes Its Character, Historical Setting, and Relationship to Jewish Biblical Exegesis’ (PhD thesis, 2011) 26-27; Ginsburg, *Introduction of the Massoretico-Critical Edition of the Hebrew Bible* 338-341. Tov, ‘Paratextual Elements in the Masoretic Manuscripts of the Bible Compared with the Qumran Evidence’, 80 mentions that there is one tradition that considered that the *ayin* of Psa 80:14 marked the middle of the Psalms.

⁶ McCarthy, *The Tiquene Sopherim and Other Theological Corrections in the Masoretic Text of the Old Testament*, 225-29.

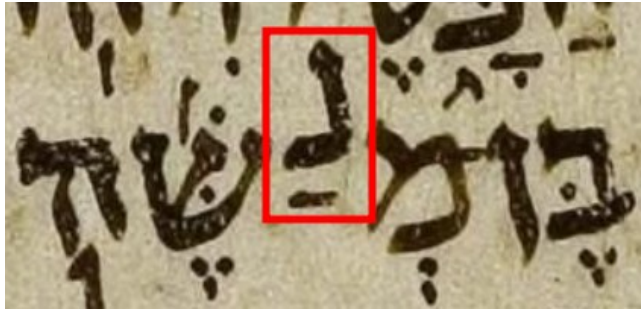


Figure 1: The suspended *nun* in the Aleppo Codex.

Suspended letters are a common feature in the Judean Desert scrolls, typically appearing as corrections.⁷ The second word of the Great Isaiah Scroll (1QIsa, see Figure 2) includes a suspended letter already (the *ayin* of ישעיהו in 1:1) and there is a suspended *yod* in the same verse (the first letter of יהזקיה). There are many more suspended letters in this scroll alone. More examples can be found in other scrolls like 4QJer^a, where there are at least 12 supralinear corrections in the space of only 19 verses (Jer 17:8-26),⁸ including a suspended *nun* in verse 16 (in the word פניך). Unfortunately, neither Judg 18:30 nor any of the passages where there are suspended letters in the masoretic text are extant in the Qumran corpus. It is clear, however, that the suspended *nun* of Judg 18:30 is pre-masoretic.⁹ As for the versions, the *Vetus Latina* and the Vulgate say “Moses,” while the LXX is divided.¹⁰ The Peshitta and the Targum favour “Manasseh,” but Ephrem in his commentary witnesses to “Moses”.¹¹

⁷ Tov, ‘Paratextual Elements in the Masoretic Manuscripts of the Bible Compared with the Qumran Evidence’, 80.

⁸ Emanuel Tov, ‘4QJera’, in *Qumran Cave 4 x the Prophets*, ed. Eugene Ulrich et al., vol. 15 of *Discoveries in the Judaean Desert* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 163–65.

⁹ McCarthy, *The Tiqqune Sopherim and Other Theological Corrections in the Masoretic Text of the Old Testament*, 225.

¹⁰ Barthélemy, *Critique Textuelle de l’ancien Testament*, 1 115; Alan England Brooke and Norman McLean, *The Old Testament in Greek* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1906) 870; Treballe Barrera, ‘La Aportación de 4QJueces a Al Estudio de La Historia Textual y Literaria Del Libro de Los Jueces’ 14-15.

¹¹ Barthélemy, *Critique Textuelle de l’ancien Testament*, 1:116; Tomášek, ‘The Text of the Masoretes Its Character, Historical Setting, and Relationship to Jewish Biblical Exegesis’, 26–27.



Figure 2: Suspended *ayin* (ישעיהו) and *yod* (יחזקיה) in Isaiah 1:1, 1QIsa. Source: The Israel Museum, Jerusalem. Image used under the terms of fair use.

A priori, either Manasseh or Moses seem to fit the context, as Moses, like Jonathan, was also a Levite. There is no recorded grandson of Moses whose name was Jonathan, however, with 1 Chr 23:16 listing only “Shebuel the chief” as a son of Gershom. This Jonathan could have been an otherwise unknown descendant, or he could have been unrelated to Moses.

Most commentators rely on rabbinical sources in order to support the idea that “Manasseh” is the secondary reading, most notably the report of *Bava Batra 109a*. It records an exposition of rabbinical ideas about inheritance laws, specifically about legally binding kinship. At one point, the question is raised about whether one’s mother’s family should be reckoned as one’s own family, and Judg 17:7 is brought up as a potential example of a man whose mother’s family was considered to also be the man’s family. Here the man is the young Levite who was from Bethlehem in Judah. One of the hypotheses is that the young man was from the tribe of Levi on his father’s side and from the tribe of Judah from his mother’s side, which, together with the scriptural statement that he was a Levite, would prove the point (from a modern scholarly perspective, this hypothesis is *ad hoc* and lacks any confirmatory evidence, as a straightforward reading of the verse would indicate that the most likely interpretation is simply that the man was a Levite who resided in Bethlehem). Rabbi bar Rav Ḥanan puts forward a different hypothesis, namely that the man was actually called Levi. Aware that Judges 18:30 explicitly states that the man’s name was “Jonathan the son of Gershom, the son of Manasseh” (here the Talmud agrees with the masoretic text), the rabbi posits that what could have happened was a name change, with Levi being the real name and

Jonathan being a nickname given to him by the author of Judges. Such name change would have not been unheard of, according to the rabbi, as it could also be seen, allegedly, in the man's genealogy. Here is *Bava Batra 109b* (our translation):

Was he really a descendant of Manasseh? Was not he a descendant of Moses, as it is written, "the sons of Moses were Gershom and Eliezer"? Rather, because he did the deed of Manasseh, the scripture linked him with Manasseh. What's even more, because he did the deed of Manasseh, who came from Judah, the Scripture also linked him to Judah.

That is, the rabbi says that just as Scripture had called Jonathan a descendant of Manasseh, being in reality a descendant of Moses, it called him Jonathan instead of Levi. And, as an additional hypothesis, he opines that Jonathan was said to come from Judah because Manasseh was from Judah. This Manasseh of course is the wicked king Manasseh of the late monarchical period, an idea that is an anachronism if one adopts the view that the book of Judges was written before that period. Thus, in Rabbi bar Rav Ḥanan's opinion, "Jonathan the son of Gershom the son of Manasseh" was in reality a man called Levi who was a Levite, the name and genealogy being changed by Scripture in order to emphasise his apostasy.

In support for his name change theory, the rabbi interprets a collective mention of Adonijah and Absalom in 1 Kgs 1:6 as implying that both men were portrayed as sons of the same mother in order to emphasise the rebelliousness that was common to both. Thus, the argument goes, it would be normal to expect Scripture to replace the name of a Biblical character with the name of another character who was equally despicable. The rabbi knows that Adonijah and Absalom were not full brothers, but maintains that 1 Kgs 1:6 says so, and interprets it in favour of his theory (in reality, 1 Kgs 1:6 does not say that Adonijah and Absalom were full brothers, so the rabbi is mistaken in invoking it as evidence for his case).

This leaves the rabbi with the last loose end of his theory, the very name Jonathan. What Jonathan was the Levite named after? After proposing that the man was a descendant of Moses through Zipporah, the daughter of the idolatrous priest Yitro, (which would explain his ill behaviour), he suggests (110a) that his actual name, again, is not Jonathan, but rather Shebuel. He would be the "Shebuel, son of Gershom, son of Moses" of 1 Chr 26:24. The rabbi interprets the name Shebuel as meaning that Jonathan returned to God after his rebellion. In the end, however, the rabbi's argument does not explain why the name Jonathan was

chosen for this man doubly named Levi and Shebuel, and the discussion about inheritance regulations moves forward.

The evidence from the *Bava Batra*, then, is not at all conclusive for the idea that “Manasseh” is a scribal corruption of an original reading “Moses”. What we see here is a rabbi trying to make an identification between two Biblical characters based on a theory of name changes that would in any case *precede* scribal transmission, as the names would have been changed by the author of Judges (and also by the author of 1 Kings), not by the copyists. In other words, we gather that the rabbi thought that “Manasseh” *was* the original text, but that the *actual* ancestor of Gershom was Moses. Notably, the wider discussion was not motivated by theological or text-critical considerations, but was rather elicited by a specific question about inheritance laws.

Similar traditions equating Jonathan and a repenting Shebuel and proposing an allusion to king Manasseh are present in *Shir HaShirim Rabbah* (2.5.3) and the earlier Jerusalem Talmud (*Sanhedrin* 11.5, *Berakhot* 9.2.12),¹² which make explicit mention of the suspended *nun* (thus the suspended *nun* is pre-Masoretic). The *nun* is thought to be a device allowing one to call Jonathan a son of Moses or a son of Manasseh depending on which feature of his personality one wants to highlight. If his apostasy, he is a son of Manasseh; if his repentance (his “Shebuel side”), he is a son of Moses. *Berakhot* 9.2.12 (our translation) says:

“Jonathan son of Gershom son of Manasseh”, a hanging *nun*. If he is worthy, a son of Moses. If he is not worthy, a son of Manasseh.

Later in the same passage, Jonathan is also identified with the “old prophet” of Beth-El (1 Kgs 13:11), even though this is also an anachronism.

In all, the rabbinical writings offer a picture of a text with *no* textual variants that could nonetheless be interpreted as stating that Moses was Jonathan’s ancestor. The tradition is at least as old as the Jerusalem Talmud. We cannot conclude that a *Hebrew* variant that said

¹² McCarthy also mentions the Targum Chronicles, which identifies Jonathan and Shebuel (see also Leor Gottlieb, *Targum Chronicles and Its Place Among the Late Targums* (Brill, 2020), 371–75), in support of the “Moses” theory. The evidence from this Targum however must be heavily discounted given its late date of composition, which is the twelfth century at the earliest (Gottlieb, *Targum Chronicles and Its Place Among the Late Targums*, 493–95).

“Moses” was known to the rabbis, and therefore any proposals that assume its existence¹³ are unsubstantiated, regardless of whether they presume that “Manasseh” gave rise to “Moses” or vice versa. The rabbis may have known a “Moses” variant from the versions, but we do not have any evidence that could point to that conclusion, and the “Moses” variant in the versions could have easily been caused by attempts to interpret the suspended *nun*.

At any rate, the attestation of the “Manasseh” reading in the Hebrew, Greek and Syriac corpora indicates it was probably much earlier than the rabbis, who are at a loss trying to explain the meaning of the suspended *nun*. Additionally, the fanciful nature of their theories can be used to cast serious doubts on their judgement and knowledge about the original text of the verse. A stance that takes the rabbis’ theory at face value is not tenable.

Regarding internal evidence, a point worth mentioning is that the text of Judg 17 does not explicitly tell us that Micah considered the Levite’s pedigree as something of great importance, which would have been the case if Moses was indeed his grandfather (or ancestor). Micah and Jonathan became acquaintances in an unplanned, spontaneous manner, not in a way that would suggest that Micah was expressly looking for a Levite from the house of Moses, and the chances of a random wandering Levite being precisely from Moses’ family were presumably low. The men of Dan, also, failed to make any notice of Jonathan’s ancestry (Judg 18:19). Ginsburg notes that verse 20:28 mentions that Phineas, Aaron’s grandson, was ministering as a priest, which prompts him to suggest that “the two second cousins, therefore, lived about the same time.”¹⁴ The two alleged cousins are mentioned in different stories, however. Phineas appears in a story that starts in chapter 19 (the narrative about the Levite and his concubine), and thus, at least in principle, the two passages need not be contemporary, even if we take into account the introductory material of verse 19:1 (“in those days, when there was no king in Israel”), as it could refer to the entire period of the Judges, not necessarily the period around the time of the Micah episode.

In conclusion, the lack of evidence for the existence of an early Hebrew “Moses” variant, the pre-masoretic character of the suspended *nun*, the early attestation of both “Moses” and “Manasseh” in the versions, the literary context and the unreliability of the rabbis’ theories

¹³ Like Tomášek, ‘The Text of the Masoretes Its Character, Historical Setting, and Relationship to Jewish Biblical Exegesis’, 25–28.

¹⁴ Ginsburg, *Introduction of the Massoretico-Critical Edition of the Hebrew Bible*, 335–38.

significantly weaken the case for the originality of “Moses”. The masoretic suspended *nun* was likely an ordinary pre-masoretic scribal correction of a first hand that inadvertently dropped the letter *nun*. Alternatively, the formatting of the letter could have been adjusted in order to call the scribe’s attention to it so that the reading “Moses” was not created by accident. There is little to suggest that the *nun* was intentionally added in order to alter the original meaning.

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