



Menasseh ben Israel

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Introduction

Menasseh ben Israel (1604–1657; variant spellings are ‘Manasseh’ and ‘Menasse’) was one of the most important rabbis in seventeenth-century Europe. Having escaped the furnace of the Inquisition in Portugal in his youth, he settled in Amsterdam and spent the rest of his life teaching Judaism. He produced a prodigious literary output which included close studies of the biblical texts, philosophical treatises, and, in particular, eschatological works in which he outlined the timeline of imminent events relating to the coming of the Messiah. His Messianic activism also inspired him to persuade Oliver Cromwell (1599–1658) to readmit the Jews to England in 1655–1656. This dictionary article considers Menasseh’s life with a particular focus on his eschatology. It focuses in particular on a survey of four of his major works: *De Resurrectione Mortuorum* (1636), *The Hope of Israel* (1650), *Piedra Gloriosa* (1655), and *Humble Addresses* (1655). I demonstrate that Menasseh’s apocalyptic thought inspired political action and helped facilitate a Jewish-Christian intellectual encounter in which shared apocalyptic visions led to an exchange of ideas between Menasseh and millenarian Christians.

Biography

Menasseh ben Israel was born in 1604 in Lisbon. He was baptised and given the Christian name Manoel (Emmanuel) Dias Soeiro. Menasseh’s parents were Portuguese *conversos*. As *conversos*, or *marranos*, they were ostensibly loyal Roman Catholics, but in reality, they practiced their Jewish faith secretly. However, from at least 1591, the Inquisitors had suspected that members of Menasseh’s family were Jews and Menasseh’s father Gaspar experienced severe torture at their hands (Nadler 2018, 5–11).

Like other Sephardic Jews before them, Menasseh’s family fled to the relative safety of La Rochelle, France, where they stayed for a year. Finally, in 1613 or 1614, Menasseh arrived in Amsterdam, which was then known as the ‘Jerusalem of the North’ because it was a tolerant city which offered refuge for many religious minority groups. Menasseh’s family were now free to convert to Judaism and adopted Jewish names.

Enjoying both the economic prosperity of the Dutch Golden Age and the tacit acceptance of Judaism in the city, the children of the burgeoning community of Dutch Jews of the Portuguese nation were able to receive a traditional rabbinic education. Menasseh particularly excelled in Hebrew and Judaism. Following the death of the Spanish Talmudist Isaac Uziel (d. 1622), Menasseh was appointed rabbi of the *Neveh Shalom* synagogue, despite being only around eighteen years of age. Menasseh also taught the

community's youth, likely teaching Baruch Spinoza (Roth 1945, 71).

In October 1622, both of Menasseh's parents died in quick succession. The following year, he married Rachel Abravanel. She bore him three children: Hannah, Joseph, and Samuel. Menasseh continued teaching, preaching, and ministering to Amsterdam's Jewish congregation. However, to help make ends meet, he entered the printing industry in 1626. In so doing, he formed the first Jewish printing house in Amsterdam. Menasseh worked closely with Christians in this endeavour. For example, the Protestant Nicolas Briot cut a Hebrew type for him, and Hendrik Laurensz, Johannes Janssonius, and the Blaeu family provided finance. From the period 1626 to 1643, when he operated his press, he printed over seventy-five works in Hebrew, Yiddish, Latin, and Spanish, including Psalters, prayer books, and Bibles. His sons Joseph and Samuel took over printing operations in 1643, running it until 1656. Menasseh was also a bookseller and made sales to such illustrious personalities as John Selden (1584–1654) and Queen Christina of Sweden (1626–1689).

However, Menasseh's fame amongst the Republic of Letters in Europe rested not upon his printing but upon his writing. He wrote fifteen works in his lifetime. Menasseh began to build his reputation amongst scholars when, in 1632, he published his first volume of the *Conciliador*. In this volume, and the three other volumes which followed in 1641, 1650, and 1651, Menasseh offered reconciliations to apparent contradictions in the Hebrew Bible. The *Conciliador*, which was written in Spanish and translated into Latin, gained Menasseh great esteem amongst the literati of Europe. The renowned Dutch Humanist scholar Hugo Grotius (1583–1645) wrote to Gerhard Johann Vos (1577–1649) in a letter dated 30 October 1638: 'Menasseh has all my good wishes. He is a man of the highest utility both to the state and to the advancement of knowledge' (Roth 1945, 147). He wrote in another letter to Vos on 6 September 1639:

I have the utmost respect for Menasseh's learning and for his intellect. He follows with conspicuous success the path of Ibn Ezra, Maimonides, and Abrabanel. His books, with which I am acquainted, are much read and highly appreciated here, in Paris. (Roth 1945, 147)

Thus, Menasseh was placed by contemporaries at the end of a long line of learned Jewish rabbis. Menasseh was also well known locally in the Jodenbreestraat in Amsterdam and was even personally acquainted with the great painter Rembrandt van Rijn (1606–1669).

Menasseh's Beliefs, Their Evolution over Time, and Their Intellectual Origins

Menasseh's Messianism was perhaps *the* key theme throughout his writings. As such, he believed in the coming of a Messiah who would redeem Israel and reinstate the Jewish people both to their Land and to the pure worship of God. His Messianism certainly contained strong apocalyptic and millenarian themes. His Messianism resembles a form of proto-premillennialism. In other words, Menasseh believed that the Messiah would come after a time of catastrophe to save Israel and inaugurate a Messianic Golden Age upon earth. Menasseh's beliefs are deeply rooted in the Jewish tradition dating back to the Hebrew Bible. Menasseh was also greatly influenced by *converso* Messianism, particularly that of Don Isaac Abravanel (1437–1508). Let us consider what some of his key works reveal about his theology.

De La Resurreccion de los Muertos (1636)

In 1636, Menasseh wrote *De La Resurreccion de los Muertos*. In the same year, it was translated from Spanish into Latin (*De Resurrectione Mortuorum*), thereby making his work accessible to a Gentile audience. The book was certainly deemed important in its time: in 1656 it was placed on the Roman Catholic Church's Index of Forbidden Books (Roth 1945, 94). We also know that Hugo Grotius greatly appreciated it (Rauschenbach 2019, 86). Menasseh wrote it in response to heterodox ideas circulating in the community by heretics such as Uriel da Costa (1585–1640). Da Costa's book, *Exemplar Humanae Vitae* (1640), reveals that he came to doubt both the resurrection of the dead and the immortality of the soul. Menasseh, as a voice of orthodoxy, set out to defend traditional Jewish doctrine concerning the afterlife.

De La Resurreccion is divided into three books. The first book defends the resurrection of the dead on scriptural grounds. Menasseh begins by showing how the resurrection is presented in the Torah, then in the Prophetic books, and then in the Hagiographa (writings). Menasseh also pre-empts the criticisms alleged by the 'Sadducees' (an allusion to Uriel Da Costa) and refutes their interpretations of biblical texts.

The second book of his treatise is more philosophical and explains *why* the miracle of the resurrection will occur. Menasseh begins by referring to Deuteronomy 32:39 as containing the primary cause for the resurrection, namely God himself: 'See now that I, even I, am he, and there is no god beside me; I kill and I make alive.' Menasseh then goes on to show that the resurrection will be general and will not take place only in the Land of Israel (Israel 1636, 78–79), in support of which he cites Ezekiel 37:12–14 (Israel 1636, 78). Menasseh also cites Zephaniah 3:9 to show that God 'will be famous in the mouths of the nations' and speaks of a coming 'general peace', which he says will come about 'by means of the Resurrection' (Israel 1636, 78). Menasseh then notes that the resurrection will happen first in the Holy Land (Israel 1636, 80). He also argues that people's bodies will rise in the same condition as they die and he cites as proof of this how, in 1 Samuel 28:14, Samuel appears to Saul as an old man when he is consulted by the witch of Endor (Israel 1636, 85). Menasseh also argues that the dead will be raised with the same shrouds in which they were buried (Israel 1636, 89–93). He adds that both the righteous and the unrighteous will be raised, though he notes that the Sages have differed on this issue, although, ultimately, he sides with Abravanel's view of a general resurrection (Israel 1636, 96–99). Menasseh then goes on in the third book of *De la Resurreccion* to argue that the coming of the Messiah is synonymous with the resurrection of the dead (Israel 1636, 134). Such a detailed analysis of the resurrection of the dead shows that Menasseh was deeply imbued with a longing for Messianic redemption. This redemption would take place on earth on the historical plane and those who died in faith longing for the Messianic kingdom would rise from the dead to enjoy their place in this kingdom.

The Hope of Israel (1650)

Menasseh's defence of the resurrection of the dead as a doctrine found throughout the Hebrew Bible endeared him to English Puritans. Later, in 1650, he published another book, primarily for a Gentile audience. *The Hope of Israel* was published simultaneously in English and Latin, under the title *Spes Israelis*. This Messianic treatise explains the motivation behind Menasseh's petitioning of the English nation for Jewish readmission. Menasseh understood that Israel's scattering and subsequent regathering to the Land required the Jews to be admitted first to England (Israel 1650, sig. A3v–sig. A4v). The treatise asserts that the Messiah is the Hope of Israel, and also that the ingathering of the Jews from their nations back to the Land of Israel will precede the coming of the Messiah (Israel 1650, sig. B1v, 62–67). It sold well and

according to Arise Evans, a Welsh prophet who later met Menasseh in 1656, copies sold out completely in London during the summer of 1652 (Evans 1652, 105-6).

Menasseh was inspired to write *The Hope of Israel* because of two letters he received late in 1648 from the millenarian John Dury (Guibbory 2010, 112). Dury asked Menasseh about his views on reports penned by Antony Montezinos that were circulating in millenarian circles about the Jewish Indian theory, in which recently discovered South American tribes were identified as Jews from the Ten Lost Tribes. Dury was 'a close friend of Menasseh's' and gained Menasseh's trust as a genuine sympathiser of the Jews, having previously corresponded with Menasseh and, in 1644, having planned to open a Jewish studies college in London with Menasseh as a professor (Popkin 1989, 67-69). Dury requested only a letter from Menasseh about his thoughts on Montezinos's claims, but Menasseh wrote *The Hope of Israel*. Thus, Menasseh was inspired to write *The Hope of Israel* because of his dialogue with English millenarians. Menasseh realised that geopolitical events were coming together to give him a favourable moment to petition for readmission. The publication of *The Hope of Israel* was the literary highpoint of the crossover between Menasseh's Messianism and Puritan millenarianism. Moreover, for over a decade after publication, it continued to arouse Messianic interest amongst both Jews and Gentiles and contributed to the intensification of Messianic expectation that culminated with Sabbatai Zevi's self-proclamation as Messiah in Smyrna in 1666.

Piedra Gloriosa (1655)

In April 1655, just five months before he came to England to petition Cromwell, Menasseh published in Spanish an exposition of Daniel 2 entitled *Piedra Gloriosa*. This book highlights how important the interpretation of Nebuchadnezzar's dream was in Menasseh's theology because he maintained that the theme of this chapter permeates the whole of scripture. *Piedra Gloriosa* seems to have been intended for both a Jewish and a Gentile audience as it was dedicated to Isaac Vossius and contained a number of etchings by Rembrandt.

It is worth giving some background on the biblical passage upon which Menasseh based *Piedra Gloriosa*. Nebuchadnezzar saw in his dream a statue with a gold head, a chest and arms of silver, a middle and thighs of bronze, legs of iron, and feet partly of iron and partly of clay (Daniel 2:32-33). A stone struck the statue at its feet, bringing the statue down (verse 34). We are then told that 'the stone that struck the image became a great mountain and filled the whole earth' (verse 35). In the interpretation given by Daniel, the statue represents five monarchies that will follow in succession (Daniel 2:37-45). The final monarchy has often been interpreted throughout the history of Jewish and Christian exegesis as the Messianic kingdom.

Piedra Gloriosa surveys large swathes of biblical history as Menasseh argues that the lives of biblical characters illustrate the Messianic schema of the five monarchies of Daniel 2. He thus argues that the coming of the Messiah and his kingdom is *the* key overarching theme of scripture. The treatise's Hebrew title is '*Even yeqarah*, which is taken from Ezekiel 28:13, and immediately Menasseh makes it clear that this stone is the Messiah (Israel 1655a, sig. A5r). The first part of the book is a verse-by-verse exposition of Daniel 2:31-45 (Israel 1655a, 8-31). Menasseh deploys his grasp of ancient history to give the *peshat* of each verse and asserts that 'the fifth monarchy is that of the people of Israel' (Israel 1655a, 25). For Menasseh, this 'final kingdom' will be 'in Judah' as the people of Israel will become 'the lords of the world, with temporal, terrestrial, [and] eternal power' (Israel 1655a, 27). Menasseh concludes his exposition by citing Ezekiel 28:26 as proof that Israel will 'live in the land in peace, in great tranquillity' (Israel 1655a,

29). Finally, he states that the first three kingdoms are already past (Babylonia, Persia, and Greece), that the fourth kingdom (Rome) is continuing to this day (through the Christian kingdoms), and that the final kingdom (Israel) will follow (Israel 1655a, 30-31).

Menasseh then discusses Israel's dispersion by describing how the life of the patriarch Jacob also reveals the telos of human history revealed in Daniel 2. For Menasseh, Jacob's life is typological of the unfolding drama of Israel's history (Israel 1655a, 80). He states that just as Jacob divided his family and flocks up as a safeguard when he met Esau for the first time since his exile in Haran (Genesis 32:13-20; 33:1-3), so the Jews have been dispersed throughout the world as a survival mechanism (Israel 1655a, 72-73). Menasseh then refers to Genesis 28:14, where God tells Jacob in his dream at Bethel that 'you shall spread abroad to the west and to the east.' For Menasseh, this was fulfilled at the destruction of the first temple (Israel 1655a, 91). Menasseh quotes Ezekiel 5:10, 12:15, 36:17-19, 20:23, and Psalm 106:26 in order to argue that this dispersion was 'the punishment that the people of Israel deserved for their idolatry' (Israel 1655a, 92).

Commenting on the divine promise in Genesis 28:14 that 'all the families of the earth will be blessed in you and your seed,' Menasseh refers to *Yalkut Shimoni* (2:491) to show that Israel has been dispersed in order to spread the knowledge of God to the Gentiles so that they might join 'the faith of Israel' (Israel 1655a, 93-94). Menasseh also cites *Yalkut Shimoni* (2:363) and explains that those who have not treated the Jews badly will be received by the Messiah and will come to Jerusalem to worship God at the Feast of Tabernacles (Israel 1655a, 94-95). Hence, we see Menasseh's sense of Jewish mission, believing in Israel's call to spread the knowledge of the true God to the nations.

Menasseh also expresses belief in the late rabbinic idea of two Messiahs. In discussing how Joseph's life correlates with the five monarchies in Daniel 2, he refers to the episode when Judah pleaded with Joseph in order to liberate Benjamin (Genesis 44:18-34). For Menasseh, this scene embodies the coming together of the 'stick of Joseph' with the 'stick of Judah' in Ezekiel 37:15-23, which prophesies 'the reunion of the ten tribes with the other two, at the future time of redemption' (Israel 1655a, 126). The ingathering of the Lost Ten Tribes is thus integral to Menasseh's Messianism. Furthermore, for Menasseh, Messiah ben Joseph (or Ephraim), who dies in battle, will fulfil Isaiah 53:1 and Zechariah 12:10 (Israel 1655a, 138). Menasseh also interprets Judah and Joseph's reunion as prefiguring the reunion of 'the two kings, the Messiah ben David and the Messiah ben Joseph' (Israel 1655a, 126-27). Finally, he sees Joseph's revelation of his identity to his brothers as illustrative of how the Twelve Tribes will rejoice when Messiah is revealed, as outlined in Jeremiah 31:9 (Israel 1655a, 127). To root his interpretation within rabbinic tradition, Menasseh cites *Midrash Tanhuma* on *Parashat Vayigash*. This text parallels all that Joseph suffered with all that Zion suffers, and all the blessings enjoyed by Joseph with all the blessings which Zion enjoys (Israel 1655a, 131-33).

Overall, *Piedra Gloriosa*, which began with a literal exposition of Daniel 2, moves into an increasingly allegorical approach to scripture, from *peshat* to *derash*. For Menasseh, the Messiah is the *dramatis personae* in the complex saga of human history. Daniel 2 and the coming of the Messiah are seen as *the* central themes in scripture and his coming is the much-anticipated event to which history is building up to. What is so fascinating in the life of Menasseh is that his Messianism had a very practical outworking. In the same year, he published *Humble Addresses*, in which he petitioned the Commonwealth for Jewish readmission to England.

Humble Addresses (1655)

Menasseh arrived in London just before Rosh Hashanah in September 1655, marking the Jewish New Year and the Day of Atonement in the English capital. Menasseh had already written and printed *Humble Addresses* in Amsterdam and, on 31 October 1655, he presented this pamphlet in person to the Council of State at Whitehall. This presentation of *Humble Addresses* began the process that led to the convening of the Whitehall Conference.

Composed of four sections, *Humble Addresses* contains:

- an address to Oliver Cromwell
- an address to the Commonwealth of England
- a treatise entitled 'How Profitable the Nation of the Iewes are'
- a treatise entitled 'How Faithfull The Nation of the Iewes are'.

Humble Addresses begins with an allusion to the book of Daniel as Menasseh explains to Cromwell that:

the great God of Israel, Creator of Heaven and Earth, doth give and take away Dominions and Empires, according to his owne pleasure; exalting some, and overthrowing others: who, seeing he hath the hearts of Kings in his hand, he easily moves them whithersoever himselfe pleaseth. [Citations of Daniel 2:21; 4:17 follow] (Israel 1655b, sig. A1r).

The second point of Menasseh's petition is also richly Messianic as he observed that 'the opinion of many Christians and mine doe concurre herein, that we both believe that the restoring time of our Nation into their Native Countrey, is very neer at hand.' Menasseh then quotes Daniel 12:7, adding that the Jews have been dispersed to all parts of the earth except England. He thus concludes: 'And therefore this remains onely in my judgement, before the MESSIA come and restore our Nation, that first we must have our seat here likewise' (Israel 1655b, sig. A4r). Menasseh ends his declaration on his motives for coming to England by stating that he wants to come and live in England and that he 'expect[s] with you [the Commonwealth of England] the hope of Israel to be revealed' (Israel 1655b, sig. A4v). Here, Jew and Puritan unite in common eschatological hopes.

As the title suggests, the following section of *Humble Addresses*, 'How Profitable The Nation of the Iewes are,' focuses primarily on economic reasons favouring readmission. Yet even these reasons were not detached from a *Weltanschauung* steeped in scripture. For example, Menasseh wrote:

merchandizing is, as it were, the proper profession of the Nation of the Iews. I attribute this in the first place, to the particular Providence and mercy of God towards his people [...] he hath given them, as it were, a naturall instinct [...] that they should also thrive in Riches... (Israel 1655b, 1)

In the same context, Menasseh quoted the final verse of the book of Zechariah, which states that 'in that day [...] there shall be found no more any merchant amongst them in the House of the Lord.' In light of the

eschatological context in which this passage is found, Menasseh asserted that Jews would subsist through trade until this verse is fulfilled, when the Jews 'shall returne to their own Country' (Israel 1655b, 2). Menasseh thus linked scripture and Messianism with his economic arguments for readmission. He closed his section on the economic benefits which the Jews could bring to England by noting that whenever one nation expels Jews, a door opens for them to enter another country. This was in fulfilment of the prophecy that 'the staffe (to support him) shall not depart from Iacob, until the Messias shall come' (Israel 1655b, 9). Hence, far from shying away from religious arguments, Menasseh argued that the economic benefits, which the Jews could bring to England, resulted from a divine blessing bestowed upon Israel. Menasseh had no qualms referring to Genesis 49:10, a Messianic prophecy which he did not interpret Christologically, despite writing explicitly for a Christian audience. Overall, *Humble Addresses* demonstrates Menasseh's importance as both a spiritual and political Jewish ambassador to England. Though at the end of his life he was petitioning the political arm of the English State for readmission, Menasseh's reasoning was rich in apocalyptic Messianism.

Menasseh's Understanding of Prophecy, Inspiration, and Revelation

Menasseh's fervent belief in the imminence of redemption was rooted primarily in the biblical text. He wrote in *De Fragilitate Humana* (1642):

Thus all writings are true or false to the extent that they are in agreement or disagreement with divine literature. From there it follows that one can argue against all sorts of writings using the authority of the Bible and the authority of all the other writings have no strength or vigour against that of the Bible. And thus, it is therefore obvious that we should always bring the Talmud in line with Holy Scripture, and not Holy Scripture with the Talmud. (Israel 1642, 109-10)

As this quotation notes, Menasseh's biblio-centric apocalyptic thought was based upon prophetic books of the Bible, notably Daniel. Menasseh's Messianism was not particularly mystical or kabbalistic, though he was aware of these sources; rather, he believed that the coming redemption would take place on the historical plane and not solely in the spiritual realm. It is also important to note that Menasseh was not a prophet who gave supernatural knowledge or inspired knowledge. Rather, he was a rabbi who interpreted the scriptures and Jewish tradition. Notably, no group of disciples emerged who considered Menasseh as their leader: he did not point followers to himself, but rather to the scriptures. Nonetheless, Menasseh became the authoritative voice of European Jewry so much so that, according to Cotton Mather (1663-1728), people in the mid-seventeenth century would believe almost anything 'if a Report of *Menasseh ben Israel* be to back them' (Mather 1702, 193).

Readmission and Menasseh's Death

Menasseh's petition for readmission led, in December 1655, to the remarkable Whitehall Conference in which leading divines, merchants, and lawyers met to discuss the question of readmitting the Jews to England. The lawyers saw no legal reason why Jews could not settle in England. By contrast, the merchants were largely opposed to readmission, whilst the clergy were divided on the merits of readmission. In the

end, the outcome of the Conference was inconclusive, though Cromwell gave a strong speech at the end in favour of readmission (Wolf 1901, xlvii–lix).

Menasseh was troubled by the anti-Judaism that debates over readmission had stirred up and, in 1656, wrote his final book, *Vindiciæ Judæorum*. Written in English, Menasseh confuted six anti-Jewish myths: the blood libel; the charge that Jews are idolaters; the charge that Jews curse Christians in the Talmud and Synagogue; the charge that Jewish prayers are blasphemous; the charge that Jews are out to convert others; and the charge that Jewish traders in England would harm the economy (Israel 1656). Moses Mendelssohn later republished this book in German (Israel 1782).

Menasseh never lived to see a formal declaration of readmission. Nevertheless, by December 1656, a synagogue was established in a house in Cree-Church Lane and the Sephardi Velho cemetery opened on Mile End Road in 1657. Menasseh's two years in London were spent meeting some of the leading scholars of England, including Robert Boyle (1627–1691) and Brian Walton (1600–1661). Menasseh set off from London to return to Amsterdam in October 1657 but he never arrived home. He died on 20 November 1657 in Middleburg. His body was subsequently brought to Amsterdam and he was buried in the Jewish cemetery at Ouderkerk.

Menasseh left a legacy of writings that expound a rich form of Messianism rooted in the Hebrew Bible and rabbinic tradition. He rightly has a place of first importance in the history of Anglo-Jewry, not least because he engaged in a genuine dialogue with Christians and shared Jewish Messianic expectations with Gentiles. His Messianism is very strong and contains numerous apocalyptic elements such as an emphasis on catastrophe and the ingathering of the Jews to the Land of Israel followed by the inauguration of a Messianic reign of peace. It is noteworthy that he had more of an impact on the Gentile world than the Jewish world and that he is best remembered today not for his theology but for his political action.

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<https://cf.uba.uva.nl/en/collections/rosenthaliana/menasseh/collectie.html>.

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