

Joseph and Aseneth

NINA V. BRAGINSKAYA

This Jewish apocryphon tells the story of a **CONVERSION** to the true God of Israel prompted by love. Being an elaboration of Genesis 41:45, 50–2, and 46:20, Joseph and Aseneth explains how the patriarch Joseph could marry a Gentile, Aseneth, the daughter of Pentephres, priest of Heliopolis/On (*see* HELIOPOLIS, AIN SHAMS/MATARIYA). A fairy-tale exposition (beautiful virgin secluded in an ornate tower guarding her against suitors) is followed by an account of Joseph's visit. He appears as the Sun God and Messiah, who spurns Aseneth's immediate love for him because of her idolatry. Aseneth destroys her idols and a week-long repentance follows, during which she prays to the Lord to renew her. A heavenly Man (Anthropos) descends to initiate her into the Mystery of the Most High. She eats of the miraculous honeycomb (a symbol of the bread of life, cup of immortality, and an ointment of incorruptibility) made by bees of paradise. The transfiguration follows and Aseneth, now an angelomorphic creature, is invested with eternal youth, and receives a new name: the City of Refuge. Her name is now inserted into the Book of Life and she is revealed as the mother-city for all believers and **PROSELYTES**, with the Lord reigning eternally over it. Joseph marries Aseneth. Their wedding wreaths have been kept in the Pharaoh's palace since the creation of the world. Aseneth gives birth to Manasseh and Ephraim. In the story's second, "adventurous" part, Pharaoh's son and four of Joseph's brothers conspire to murder the Pharaoh and Joseph, and abduct Aseneth. Seven other brothers take Joseph's side and, aided by divine intervention, foil the plot. Pharaoh's son perishes and his father dies of grief. Aseneth, Levi, and Joseph demonstrate magnanimous mercifulness to their enemies, and Joseph becomes king of Egypt for 49 years.

Joseph and Aseneth is mainly regarded as a Jewish Hellenistic work roughly dating to the two centuries surrounding the turn of the

era, the earliest date proposed being circa 150 BCE (Bohak 1996), the latest the fourth century CE (Kraemer 1998). The book was written in Egypt in the Greek of the **SEPTUAGINT**, which does not preclude a Semitic origin of some of the plot's components and paronomastic puns, based on Hebrew. Its traces in Jewish tradition are discernible in later periods too, up to the tale of Yussuf and Zuleikha and medieval Jewry's kabbalistic works (Schneider 1998). Joseph and Aseneth had an impact on Christian hagiography (*see* HAGIOGRAPHY, LATE ANTIQUE AND BYZANTINE), and has been considered Christian up to recent times. But the story's peculiarities (including its openness to proselytes and pious gentiles, conversion personified as the always laughing heavenly virgin Metanoia) may be better explained by the hypothesis of it being an apology for the schismatic temple of Onias (*see* ONIAS, TEMPLE OF) near Heliopolis (Bohak 1996).

Being a love and adventure story, Joseph and Aseneth is usually seen as influenced by the Greek novel, a problematic supposition since the work precedes other novels, and none of its images or ideas are necessarily borrowed from Greek literature; its dominant literary source of plot, conflict, images, and allusions seems to be the septuagint (Braginskaya 2012). Viewed as a specimen of Jewish Hellenistic literature, it fits in with other expansions of biblical stories of the period and with the **APOCALYPSES**, but is still unparalleled for its enigmatic images and unique qualities. Unlike other apocalypses, the revelation of Aseneth is recounted not by the seer but by the omniscient author, does not mention the punishment of sinners, and is the only one preceding the Book of Revelation (*see* REVELATION, BOOK OF) to declare humanity's salvation as having already occurred in the present through a transformed human being. Joseph and Aseneth is exceptional among the Old Testament apocrypha for its literary qualities and its tolerant and magnanimous mood.

SEE ALSO: Apocrypha and Pseudepigrapha, Jewish; Diaspora, Jewish; Mysteries.

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