

The Lost Gospel – the Background Analysis of a Mysterious Ancient Writing

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Scholars have been perplexed by an ancient writing – dubbed *Joseph and Aseneth* – ever since it came to light in the late 19th century. What was this mysterious manuscript all about, preserved and copied in Christian circles in the early days of Christianity? Should it be read, superficially, as a love story between two ancient Israelite figures? If so, why would that have been of interest to ancient eastern Roman Empire monks who translated and preserved the narrative? Or was it an encoded text, one that contained a truth too dangerous to reveal in days when failure to espouse the orthodox faith could result in excommunication, or worse, death?

Encoded texts are not unknown in biblical circles. Jesus' key concept, the Kingdom of God, is told in an encoded format, parables. Its seditious message was too dangerous for him to reveal to an audience where Roman soldiers stood on the edge of the crowds. Was the world really going to change so dramatically that the Roman occupiers would be swept into the dustbin of history?

The Song of Songs is also encoded, much more than a love story between Solomon and an unknown beautiful woman, a deeper story which Rabbi Akiva said held the key to scripture. The Book of Revelation encodes a powerful battle between the forces of light and the forces of darkness, in the mid to late 1st century CE.

Is *Joseph and Aseneth* a similar document, shrouding a truth?

Let's look at what we know about this manuscript and see where it leads.

J.P.N. Land published a transcription of *Joseph and Aseneth* in the third series of *Anecdota Syriaca* in 1870. *Joseph and Aseneth* forms part of British Library Manuscript #17,202. This is the manuscript Land used as the basis for his transcription. In making this transcription, Land set in motion a 145 year effort to unravel its meaning.

Manuscript History

We know the history of this manuscript better than most from antiquity. Here's its history going backwards. The British Library acquired Manuscript #17,202 from the British Museum. That institution purchased it on November 11th, 1847 from an Egyptian merchant by the name of Auguste Pacho, a native of Alexandria. It had come from an ancient Syrian monastery, St. Mary Deipara, in the Nitrian desert in Egypt where it had been housed for over 900 years. Its 10th century abbot, Moses the Nisibene, had acquired for the monastery's library over 250 manuscripts from Mesopotamia and Syria, one of them being what we know as #17,202.

From the 10th through the 6th century CE, the manuscript was in Mesopotamia. In the 6th century, we can pick up the trail. Manuscript 17,202 is an anthology, a collection of a number of important writings compiled by an anonymous Syriac author. Scholars call him Pseudo-Zacharias Rhetor. He labelled it "*A Volume of Records of Events Which Have Shaped the World.*" It dates from around 570 CE. This manuscript contains the oldest existing version of *Joseph and Aseneth*.

Pseudo-Zacharias Rhetor did not write these documents: he compiled them. In the case of *Joseph and Aseneth*, he used a Syriac translation that had been made by Moses of Ingila, around 550 CE. We know how this document came to be translated into Syriac from the Greek and it's an interesting story. An anonymous Syriac individual, probably a monk, had been looking at manuscripts in Resh'aina in a library belonging to the line of bishops who had come from Aleppo. Resh'aina was located in the extreme eastern portion of the Roman Empire, close to the Persian border. This individual came across what he termed "a small, very old book written in Greek called '*Of Aseneth.*'" A copy of the letter that he wrote to Moses of Ingila still exists. He asks Moses of Ingila to do things: to translate it into Syriac, his Greek being rather rusty, and to tell him its 'inner meaning.'

But how old was this "very old book"? How much prior to 550 CE was this Greek manuscript made? Did it go back to the 450's, 350's or ever earlier? And was it original? Or, more likely, was it a copy of a much older work? Here the manuscript trail peters out.

Joseph and Aseneth: Manuscript Tradition

British Museum/Library Manuscript #17,702 – 1847-

St. Mary Deipara Monastery (Egypt) – 932-1847

Secured by the monastery's abbot, Moses the Nisibene from Mesopotamia

Mesopotamia -- prior to 932 CE

...

Pseudo-Zachariah Rhetor's Anthology

"A Volume of Records of Events Which have Shaped The World" – around 570 CE

Translation of very old Greek manuscript, 'of Aseneth' into Syriac by Moses of Ingila – around 550 CE

"Very old Greek Manuscript" -- Library of the Bishops of Beroea (Aleppo) in Resh'aina – 550

...

-- How old is "very old"?

So, in 1870, *Joseph and Aseneth*, still in Syriac, made its debut on the modern world stage. But what to make of it? What's its dating? Genre? Message? Importance? Relationship to other literature?

Seven years ago, July 2008, Simcha and I were in Ephesus. We were filming an episode on Paul for the Associated Producers' History Channel documentary series, *Secrets of Christianity*. As part of our research we had been mulling over puzzling texts from the early days of Christianity, what they might mean and what new insights they could shed about the various groups that followed Jesus. Our discussion included a little-known text that highlighted two figures from the Hebrew Bible. One was Joseph, the Israelite patriarch who gets sold by his brothers into slavery and ends up as a ruler in Egypt. The other was Aseneth, his obscure Egyptian wife. In our discussion over dinner in Ephesus, we knew that most scholars didn't know what to make of this narrative. We wondered, could we make sense of it? We knew it had been preserved in Christian contexts, not Jewish ones. And we knew that Joseph in the story is depicted as a savior-figure. Could Joseph be a stand-in for Jesus? We were delighted later on to discover that Kristian S. Heal had written on the identification of Joseph as Jesus.¹

But we weren't yet there. All we wondered at dinner was: could there be more to the story than simply a midrash on two ancient biblical figures?

So our investigation began and our collaboration culminated in our publication in November 2014, *The Lost Gospel: Decoding the Ancient Text that Reveals Jesus' Marriage to Mary the Magdalene*.² I'm not going to attempt to summarize this detailed 450 page work.

Instead I'll focus on the background context we uncovered for making sense of *Joseph and Aseneth*. As you will see, we proceeded systematically to uncover its true environment.

Step #1. The Manuscript: Translation and Restoration

The Syriac version is the oldest existing version of *Joseph and Aseneth*. While several English translations had been made of *Joseph and Aseneth* based on later Greek manuscripts, we were surprised that no one had made an English translation based on this, the oldest manuscript.³ Accordingly, Associated Producers commissioned a colleague of mine at York University, Dr. Tony Burke, to make a translation. In this task he was assisted by Dr. Slavomir Čéplö, Comenius University, Slovakia.

We also visited the British Library on several occasions to see the manuscript first-hand. We quickly noticed that this 1450 year old manuscript had shown some aging. There were smudges, indistinct areas and faintly preserved writing. Different colour ink was used in places, red as well as black. And we observed what appeared to be a cut line across an intriguing part of the manuscript....just at the point where Moses of Ingila was about to disclose its hidden meaning. Was it, we asked, perhaps deliberate? And, if so, why?

To recover the text as written, Associated Producers commissioned one of the world's leading digital-imaging specialists in ancient manuscripts, R.B. Toth Associates of Oakton, Virginia. With the cooperation of the British Library, Manuscript #17,202 was subjected to intense page by page spectographic analysis -- thirteen images were made of each page in order to see through the smudged and damaged portions of the writing to the original ink beneath. In this way, the oldest existing manuscript of *Joseph and Aseneth* was digitally restored – the closest to the way it was originally written as modern technology permits. No other scholar or institution has this pristine copy.

So, step #1 complete. The digitally restored text was the basis for our translation.⁴

As we made proceeded with our translation, we made a number of important discoveries.

Step #2. The manuscript environment

As mentioned previously, *Joseph and Aseneth* is found in an anthology of 6th century Syriac writings -- "*A Volume of Records of Events Which have Shaped the World.*" Here's what that anthology includes:

- Sylvester, Bishop of Rome's work on the Conversion of Constantine
- A writing concerning the discovery of relics of two important 1st century individuals -- Stephen (the first Gentile martyr) and Nicodemus (the Pharisee who helped bury Jesus)
- A miracle narrative, the Seven Sleepers of Ephesus
- An important church history, by the real Zacharias Rhetor

All these writings have to do with events central to 6th century Christian faith...the emperor who changed the face of the Roman Empire; proof of eternal life; relics of early saints, one Gentile, one Jewish; and a church history still consulted today for its account of the councils that debated the nature of Jesus and his relation to the Godhead.

But *Joseph and Aseneth*? This would seem an unlikely candidate for inclusion into this impressive anthology. We wondered...how does this fit into an anthology of events? How did this event shape the world? That, after all, is what the compiler had entitled his work. Why had he chosen it?

So the mystery is compounded...why was *Joseph and Aseneth* included in this literary environment? The superficial story is that Joseph the Israelite falls in love with an Egyptian woman, the 18-year old virgin daughter of an Egyptian priest. After an initial period when she rejects Joseph, Aseneth changes her mind. She repents, throws away her Egyptian idols and embraces a monotheistic faith. She prepares herself to be wed to Joseph. There ensues a strange ceremony. A heavenly Joseph-look-alike appears in her bed chamber, never ever before visited by a male. He gives her a honeycomb with the sign of the cross etched in blood. He says to her, "So now you have eaten the bread of life and drunk the cup of life and have been anointed with the ointment of incorruptibility." (16:14) They become betrothed, enjoy a huge wedding feast, marry, and in time have two children. But that's not the end. The son of the pharaoh hatches a plot aided by some dissident family members of Joseph. They plan to abduct and rape his wife, kill his kids in front of him, and then to murder Joseph. This plot is foiled.

So what's an ancient Israelite's courtship, marriage and family got to do with anything a 6th century Christian would be remotely interested in?

Step #3: The manuscript environment, continued

We returned to Manuscript #17,202. We were startled to discover that the Syriac manuscript of *Joseph and Aseneth* is prefaced by two covering letters that put the writing in context.⁵ We waited impatiently for our translator to give us the English. No one had ever provided a translation of these covering letters and so we were seeing them for the first time in centuries. Clearly Pseudo Zachariah Rhetor, the compiler, thought they were important and included them as part of his anthology. This was a significant game-changer, a 'eureka moment' in scholarship. "Wow, we thought....these covering letters show that the writing is much more than an elaboration of an ancient tale: it is a disguised narrative of something tremendously important, and dangerous."

The first letter is from an anonymous individual to Moses of Ingila. Significantly he begins by quoting from the *Book of the Wise* -- namely selections from Proverbs, the Wisdom of Solomon, Koheleth and Sirach -- concluding with "For a wise man does not ignore hidden wisdom: rather he searches for it intensely." So he is positioning *Joseph and Aseneth* as a work of wisdom. Wisdom is not something self-evident: Wisdom or deeper understanding is disguised and it requires deciphering, investigation and persistence in order to discern the hidden meaning. He then states the purpose of his letter. He had found "a small, very old book written in Greek called "Of Aseneth" in the library of the bishops of Beroea (Aleppo) in the city of Resh'aina. He says that he does not understand what he calls "the inner meaning." As mentioned before, he asks Moses to translate it into Syriac and to explain its hidden meaning. So he suspects that this work contains something worth pursuing. He then indicates that he will make use of the translation and hidden meaning to praise the works of the Lord. So, clearly he thinks this deeply embedded writing has something to do with Jesus.

The second letter is Moses of Ingila's reply. Moses starts by contrasting a preoccupation with the earthly, which he disparages, in favour of a focus on knowledge of the truth. In the neo-Platonistic context of his time, he is praising this anonymous letter writer in his desire to move beyond the merely superficial -- the level of appearance -- to the reality beyond. He too cites the *Book of the Wise*. Immediately he selects passages that encourage caution. For example, he quotes, "the babbling mouth draws ruin near," the ancient equivalent to "loose lips sink ships." Why caution? What's the danger? Moreover, he notes that "it is the glory of God to conceal things." Not everything is self-evident and sometimes God hides the truth. Nonetheless, in spite of his words of caution and the hiddenness of wisdom, he agrees to make the translation and confirms that "there is an inner meaning in it." This was an exciting moment for us....just like that ancient inquirer, we, too, were to hear what Moses thought was the hidden truth. He elaborates on this, saying that "to tell the truth: our Lord, our God, the Word

who...took flesh and became human and was united to the soul with its senses completely.....
{and here the manuscript breaks off}.”

And here the manuscript is deliberately cut off, just at the point where Moses of Ingila is about to disclose the narrative’s inner meaning. It was the view of the digital imaging experts that the cutline was deliberate. It wasn’t a neat line underneath the text: it sliced right through a line of Syriac writing. This deliberate act likely occurred in the 12th century.⁶

So, in terms of the manuscript’s environment, we find that it was housed in an anthology of important writings that deal with events, events which played a role in shaping the compiler’s 6th century world. It was prefaced by two letters indicating that the text is a work of wisdom, containing a hidden meaning that must be ferreted out. We suspect that this inner meaning would not have conformed to later theological sensibilities since the section of the letter disclosing this meaning was deliberately excised.

Step #4: The Interpretive Scan

Armed with a restored text and a knowledge of the manuscript’s environment, we examined the secondary literature.

Two English anthologies of Old Testament Apocrypha/Pseudepigrapha included *Joseph and Aseneth*. An introduction and translation by C. Burchard is included in James H. Charlesworth’s *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha*, volume 2.⁷ At the same time, D. Cook included a translation in H.F.D. Sparks, *The Apocryphal Old Testament*.⁸ Both translations are based on later Greek manuscripts. The inclusion of *Joseph and Aseneth* within these anthologies seem to suggest that the editors and translators were under the impression that the author was Jewish and that the work had something to do with Jewish apocryphal literature.

As to dating and provenance, Burchard in 1985 writes: “Every competent scholar has since {Batiffol has maintained} that *Joseph and Aseneth* is Jewish, with perhaps some Christian interpolations; none has put the book much after A.D. 200, and some have placed it as early as the second century B.C. As to the place of origin, the majority of scholars look to Egypt.”⁹

A date between the 1st century BCE and 2nd century CE leaps four or five centuries over the manuscript trail, well beyond 550, and places the text well within the boundaries of Jewish apocryphal writings. But it also places it within early Christianity. We had suspected that the writing originated at least in nuclear form in the first two centuries of the Common Era and

were pleased to learn that, according to Burchard, this was the dating that “every competent scholar” affirmed.

Both Burchard and Cook surveyed possible locations and circumstances for the writing of *Joseph and Aseneth*. These include:

- Israel, by an orthodox Jew (Aptowitz)
- Israel, written by an Essene (Riessler)
- Egypt, composed by a member of the Therapeutae in Alexandria (K.G. Kuhn)
- Egypt, concerning an obscure Jewish temple during the Maccabean period (Bohak)

Cook endorsed a different view. He agreed with an earlier French scholar, Marc Philonenko, who thought that it was written by a Jewish author around 100 CE. Its purpose, he maintained, was twofold, to present inter-faith marriages between Gentiles and Jews in a positive light, and, secondly, to persuade Jews as to the advantages of such unions. Cook thought this view was “likely.”

All these authors contended that the author was Jewish and written around the dawn of the Common Era. And the anthologizers Charlesworth and Sparks seemed to concur. Charlesworth labeled the translation, “First Century BC. – Second Century A.D.)¹⁰

While the early dating appealed, none of the interpretive frameworks – interpretive homes -- made sense to us. First, the text didn’t seem at all Jewish to our Jewish sensibilities. Just because the text seems to be about figures from the Hebrew Bible doesn’t make the story Jewish. We are well aware of the Christian use of Jewish scriptures....Paul’s use of the Sarah-Hagar family lineages for instance, or the Song of Songs interpreted as God’s love for the Christian Church. Secondly, and I’ll discuss this shortly, a Jewish author wouldn’t use many of the phrases or liturgical elements present within the work. Just not part of the Jewish landscape. Thirdly, it made no sense in light of its 6th century environment. If it’s just a tale about something that happened 1500 or 2000 years earlier, why would a 6th century monk ask about its hidden meaning? Why would the translator hint at an encoded message that was Christological in nature? And why, if the text is about inter-faith marriages, would a 6th century compiler have had the least interest in it? There is no evidence that mixed marriages was a hot 6th century topic. And, finally, if Jewish in terms of authorship, provenance and message, why was it preserved exclusively in Christian circles?

We set these interpretations based on arbitrary placements aside and looked elsewhere.

Step #4: Its Christian Provenance

One scholar who had been overlooked by Burchard and Cook was a British scholar by the name of E.W. Brooks. In 1918 he published a translation and introduction to *Joseph and Aseneth* in which he wrote the following: “that the book in its present shape is the work of a Christian writer will be at once recognised by any reader.”¹¹ In this he was agreeing with one of the first scholars to have examined the text, Pierre Batiffol in 1889.

In 1998 Ross Shepard Kraemer published a remarkable book, *When Aseneth Met Joseph*.¹² In this work she set aside the scholarly interpretive detour that occurred throughout most of the 20th century, arguing instead that “the arguments for its Jewishness are largely without foundation...In particular a strong case can be made for Christian composition and redaction.”¹³ This was followed in 2012 by another remarkable book, Rivka Nir’s study, *Joseph and Aseneth* who subtitles it “A Christian Book.”¹⁴

We agree that the work is Christian. Its language is Christian. Joseph is said to be the “the Son of God” (J&A 6: 3 Also 6: 5). Aseneth is said to be the “Bride of God” (J&A 4:1). She is blessed as follows: “The Lord God of heaven truly chose you to be the bride of his firstborn son” (J&A 18:13). That’s not Jewish talk. Moreover, the central liturgical element is Christian as anyone familiar with the Anglican Eucharist or Catholic Mass would immediately recognize. The structure of the ceremony is the same as Holy Communion liturgy. The first part of the Mass begins with repentance, absolution, insight or understanding (through the lessons) and affirmation (through the recital of the creed). That’s the first part of the Catholic, Orthodox, Anglican, Lutheran Eucharistic liturgy. This corresponds to Aseneth’s transformation as she repents and comes to discern the true nature of God, abandoning her idols, and affirming the true identity of Joseph, namely as God’s son (13:9). The heavenly liturgy then continues on into the central actions of the Eucharist itself: the taking of the symbolic elements, giving thanks, breaking the bread (or honeycomb as in the case of *Joseph and Aseneth*) and then eating. The heavenly figure eats a piece of the honeycomb, just as the priest does at Mass. Then he gives a piece to Aseneth, placing it in her mouth, just as priests do in parishes today and have done throughout history.

The work is Christian.

Step #5: Its Syriac Christian Context

But what Christian context?

We wanted an indigenous hermeneutic. Not allegory as in Alexandrian Christianity and certainly not American Evangelical literalism. We looked for a method of interpretation rooted in the culture within which the manuscript was found and valued.

We scoured Syriac Christianity, especially its sermons to find out how those who read *Joseph and Aseneth* in the 6th century would have understood the writing. We quickly discovered that Joseph was regarded as a type or surrogate for Jesus, and that confirmed our initial hunch that both were saviour figures. Aseneth, too, was regarded as a type, for the church, for tower and for Mary Magdalene. Here we had a fit, and so we decoded using typology.

Typology isn't allegory. Typology is a theory of history: one historical event or person prefigures another later one. Thus the Hebrew Bible was, for Christian typologists, a foreshadowing of the Christian scriptures. Example: Moses leading the children of Israel out of Egypt through the Red Sea into the Promised Land became the type for Jesus leading humanity out of the realm of sin through baptism into the Kingdom of God. One prior historical event indicating the other. Thus, the historical Joseph and Aseneth, their courtship, marriage and family prefigured another, that of Jesus and Mary Magdalene, their courtship, marriage and family. On this view, we wouldn't engage in archeological research of the Sinai to find evidence of the Exodus; rather we'd turn to the pages of the Christian Scriptures to unearth the narrative's true, hidden meaning.

Just in passing note that Joseph married an individual; so, too, Jesus married an individual. Some have suggested that perhaps Jesus married the church, whatever that might mean. But this changes a person for an institution. That typological inconsistency makes nonsense of our text. Jesus could be said to have married the church only if Joseph had married a shul. But he didn't. So, too, it would make nonsense of the imagery we find in *Joseph and Aseneth*: Jesus placing his hands between his betrothed's breasts and having intercourse with her.

So ... here was the interpretive home for making sense of *Joseph and Aseneth*, one that took the language, symbolism, literary environment, cultural context and prefatory letters seriously.

As we decoded it, we discovered not only the marriage of Jesus to Aseneth but also how they were portrayed on the world stage, he as Helios, the Sun God, and she as the great Goddess Artemis, the nurturing mother. She was the virgin, the new Eve, the co-redemptrix, terms that were eventually transferred to Mary, Mother of Jesus. We also think we have discovered the 1st century roots of 2nd century Gnosticism, in the Community of Mary the Magdalene. But that's another story.

So what started as a casual conversation over dinner resulted in these discoveries. It's been an amazing journey.

¹ Kristian S. Heal, "Joseph as a Type of Christ in Syriac Literature," *Brigham Young University Studies* 41, no. 1 (2002), 29.

² Jacobovici, Simcha and Barrie Wilson, *The Lost Gospel: Decoding the Ancient Text that Reveals Jesus' Marriage to Mary the Magdalene*. NY: Pegasus, 2014; Toronto: HarperCollins Canada, 2014. French, Russian, Hungarian, Portuguese editions in preparation.

³ A Latin translation based on the Syriac manuscript exists. See Gustav Oppenheim, *Fabula Josephi et Asenethae Apocrypha*, 1886.

⁴ In making the English translation of the Syriac version of *Joseph and Aseneth* included in *The Lost Gospel*, pages 310-384, Dr. Tony Burke used Land's transcription, black and white photographs of the manuscript provided by the British Library, Marc Philonenko's *Joseph et Aseneth: Introduction texte critique traduction et notes* for a small portion missing in the Syriac corresponding to chapters 13:12-16:3, the Latin translation made by Gustav Oppenheim, and, of course, the restored text as provided by the digital imaging process conducted by R.B. Toth Associates. In making his translation Dr. Burke was assisted by Slavomir Čéplö, Comenius University, Slovakia. Associated Producers Ltd. owns the digitally-restored manuscript.

⁵ An English scholar mentioned these in 1918 but did not translate them or make use of them. See E.W. Brooks, *Joseph and Asenath* [sic]. London: SPCK, 1918. See page viii.

⁶ Since the first chapter of *Joseph and Aseneth* is written on the back of Moses of Ingila's letter and since the first page appears in a 12th century Syriac edition, we can infer that the 12th century copyist also had access to Moses' letter. We suspect, therefore, that it was probably this 12th century copyist who censored the text. Perhaps he found the hidden meaning too heretical for his 12th century theology.

⁷ James H. Charlesworth, *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha*, volume 2. New York: Doubleday, 1985, pages 177-247. Dating of *Joseph and Aseneth* is said to be 1st century BCE – 2nd century CE.

⁸ H.F.D. Sparks, *The Apocryphal Old Testament*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1984, pages 465-504.

⁹ Burchard, *op.cit.*, p.187.

¹⁰ Charlesworth, James H., *op.cit.*, pp. vi and 177.

¹¹ Brooks, E.W., *op.cit.*, page xi: “That the book in its present shape is the work of a Christian writer will be at once recognised by any reader the references to the sacred bread and cup and chrism, by which the ceremonies of the Eucharist and Confirmation are clearly meant, being sufficient to place the fact beyond doubt; but to this may be added the exaltation of virginity which we find throughout the book, and the prominence of the doctrine of forgiveness, which, though not unknown to the Jews, would hardly be made so conspicuous in a Jewish work.”

¹² Kraemer, Ross Shepard, *When Aseneth Met Joseph*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1998.

¹³ Kraemer, *op.cit.*, p. ix.

¹⁴ Nir, Rivka, *Joseph and Aseneth: A Christian Book*. Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2012.