

Assessing *The Lost Gospel*
Part 1: The Chronicle of Pseudo-Zachariah Rhetor
– Content and Context

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Jacobovici and Wilson have chosen to make their case that *Joseph and Aseneth* is a coded history of Jesus and Mary Magdalene not from study of any of the Greek recensions of the work, but from the Syriac version in the late sixth-century manuscript of the Chronicle of Pseudo-Zachariah Rhetor (British Library MS Add. 17202). This version was undoubtedly translated from a Greek original, but the manuscript is considerably earlier than any of the extant manuscripts of *Joseph and Aseneth* in Greek. It is also of special interest because of the context in which it is found in Pseudo-Zachariah, preceded by two letters that explain how it came to be translated from Greek and which speak of the ‘inner meaning’ of the work, though the concluding part of the second of these letters, where the ‘inner meaning’ was evidently explained, is now tantalizingly missing from the manuscript. Jacobovici and Wilson argue that both Moses of Ingila, who translated the work into Syriac and wrote something, now lost, about its inner meaning, and Pseudo-Zachariah himself, who included this material in his compilation of significant texts, knew that *Joseph and Aseneth* was a coded history of Jesus and Mary Magdalene. This means that several aspects of Pseudo-Zachariah’s work and of the context in which *Joseph and Aseneth* occurs in it are important for assessing the claims made in *The Lost Gospel*.

(1) The Title

In the manuscript Pseudo-Zachariah’s work has a title, which translators have rendered: ‘A Volume of Records of Events Which Have Happened in the World’ (Hamilton & Brooks 11) or ‘Volume of Narratives of Events That Have Occurred in the World’ (Greatrex 75). But Jacobovici and Wilson translate it thus: ‘A Volume of Records of Events Which Have Shaped the World’ (LG 1, 17).¹ This version of the title seems to have been adapted from Hamilton and Brooks, but the modification (‘Shaped’ for ‘Occurred in’) is not trivial. Indeed, it is highly tendentious, for Jacobovici and Wilson go on to describe the work as its author’s ‘attempt to preserve a record of events which, in his view, were earth-shattering in their import’ (LG 1, cf. 22). On this basis Jacobovici and Wilson argue that the author must have included *Joseph and Aseneth* in his compilation because he saw it as one of the writings ‘about events that transformed the world ... his world’ (LG 19). But the real title has no such implication. It says nothing about the importance of the events recorded, some of which the author must surely have regarded as far less important than others. What he does say is that he has collected and recorded the various components of his work ‘for the benefit of the faithful and those who have a concern for excellence and beauty of soul’ (Book I chapter 1: Greatrex 78).² He must have regarded *Joseph and Aseneth* as

¹ I make references to *The Lost Gospel* by the abbreviation LG and a page number.

² See also Book II chapter 5, where the author says he has transcribed the letter of Proclus (an extended exposition of Monophysite Christology) ‘for the benefit

instructive, but not necessarily because it recorded events of 'earth-shattering' importance.

(2) The Contents of Book I

Jacobovici and Wilson attempt to show that all of the rather miscellaneous contents of Book I (including *Joseph and Aseneth*) concern 'events that transformed the world.'

This is how the manuscript's own table of contents of Book I lists its contents:

First Chapter: An account of the commencement of the Book.

Second chapter: A Letter of request concerning the Table of genealogies in the Book of Genesis.

Third chapter: An apologia concerning the Table of genealogies, with the chronological canons, as set out below.

Fourth chapter: A letter of request concerning the translation of the Greek Book of Aseneth which turned up in the library of the family of Brw' [probably Beroea], the bishops from the town of Resh'aina.

Fifth chapter: The reply to the letter.

Sixth chapter: Translation of the story of Aseneth.

Seventh chapter: Translation of [the story of] Silvester, patriarch of Rome, which tells of the conversion and baptism of the believing emperor Constantine, and the disputes of the Jewish teachers.

Eighth chapter: The revelation of the treasure (consisting) of the bones of Stephen, Nicodemus, Gamaliel, and Habbib his son.

Ninth chapter: Concerning Isaac and Dodo (Dada), the Syriac teachers.
(Greatrex 75-76)

When Jacobovici and Wilson describe 'the anthology of important ancient documents' that Pseudo-Zachariah had compiled (LG 20, 22-23), they make no mention of the exchange of letters about the chronological differences between the Greek and Syriac versions of the early genealogies in Genesis (Book I chapters 2-3). Nor do they mention the brief biographies of the two Syrian Christian teachers Isaac and Dodo that comprise chapter 9. The lives of these two teachers were doubtless significant for the author and his readers, but there is nothing 'earth-shattering' about them. Jacobovici and Wilson do discuss the story in chapter 8 (an account by the priest Lucian of an event that took place in 415 CE), though there is no sign that they have actually read it, but they refer only to the discovery of the relics of Stephen and Nicodemus, ignoring Gamaliel and his son Habib. The considerable importance of Gamaliel in this narrative rather spoils Jacobovici's and Wilson's claim that, 'Pairing Nicodemus and Stephen is very significant' (22). All this looks like the selection of evidence to support a case and the ignoring of evidence that does not.

(3) A Monophysite Work

of the believing brothers.' Theological instruction seems to be more important to him than world-changing events.

Pseudo-Zachariah was a Monophysite³ Christian, i.e. he was one of those (numerous in Syria, northern Mesopotamia and Egypt in his time) who did not accept the decree of the Council of Chalcedon in 451. The difference between these anti-Chalcedonian Christians and those who accepted Chalcedon was over the language that most accurately describes the union of divine and human in the person of Jesus Christ. Briefly, whereas Chalcedon described the incarnate Logos as 'in two natures,' the Monophysites insisted on the formula that Cyril of Alexandria (claimed by both sides but especially a hero for the Monophysites) had used: 'out of two natures.' Both sides agreed that Jesus was fully divine and fully human and both agreed that divinity and humanity were united in one *hypostasis*. But the Chalcedonians thought the Monophysites confused the two natures, while the Monophysites thought the Chalcedonians denied the true union of natures in Christ. In view of the arguments of Jacobovici and Wilson, it is very important to state that this technical difference over Christology was *the only theological difference between the Monophysites and the Chalcedonians*. But this difference defined the Monophysites and the history of conflict it produced is largely what Pseudo-Zachariah's work is about. He himself was fully committed to the Monophysite position and frequently quotes documents in which Monophysite Christology is expounded at length.

It has to be said that Jacobovici and Wilson have not the first idea of what this debate was about. The kinds of issues they say were at stake in the debates of the fourth and fifth centuries (LG 23-24) were in fact decided (if they were raised at all) long before the fifth century, and Chalcedonians and Monophysites did not disagree about them. Astonishingly, writing about the real Zachariah Rhetor whose history of the period from 451 to 491 Pseudo-Zachariah incorporated in his own work, Jacobovici and Wilson write:

Zacharias seems to have leaned towards monophysite Christianity, meaning the belief in Jesus' *mono* or *single* nature.⁴ But this doctrine did not win out. The theological and power-politics debate led to the doctrine of the Trinity, the view that Jesus was fully divine and fully human, and that God is to be spoken of as three-in-one: Father, Son and Spirit (LG 24).

The doctrine of the Trinity was defined at the Council of Nicaea in 325 and subsequently accepted by all Christians except the Arians. The Monophysites not only accepted the Nicene doctrine of the Trinity as defined at Nicaea; they constantly insisted on it. All sides in the Christological debates of the fourth and fifth centuries presupposed the Nicene doctrine of the Trinity. As I have explained, the issue between Chalcedonians and Monophysites from 451 onwards was not whether Jesus was fully divine and fully human (they agreed he was both), but precisely how divinity and humanity should be said to be united in him.

This matters because the tactic of Jacobovici and Wilson in their not altogether coherent account of how one form of Christianity triumphed over all

³ This is the traditional term. Some writers, with a view to the reconciliation between Chalcedonian and non-Chalcedonian churches at the present time, prefer the term Miaphysite. I will use the traditional term.

⁴ Perhaps Jacobovici and Wilson take this to mean that he was only human, not divine. Merely the first paragraph of the Wikipedia article on Monophysitism would have put them right.

others (LG 24-25) is to imply that Athanasius' Festal Letter of 367, defining the canon of the New Testament and leading to the suppression of other literature such as the Nag Hammadi writings, somehow explains why Pseudo-Zachariah included an *encoded text* (*Joseph and Aseneth* understood as an encoded history of Jesus, Mary Magdalene and Christian origins) in his work. This is absurd because Monophysites like Pseudo-Zacharias were not at all sympathetic to divergences from the Christianity that triumphed in the fourth century. They fully identified with it. Their quarrel was *only* with the christological definition of the Council of Chalcedon (451). Pseudo-Zacharias's long work is full of expositions of Monophysite Christology but never, so far as I am aware, hints at any other controversial belief (and Jacobovici and Wilson do not claim that it does – apart from the case of *Joseph and Aseneth*). To suppose that he included *Joseph and Aseneth* in his compilation because he knew it encoded something so wildly divergent from Monophysite Christianity as the story Jacobovici and Wilson find encoded in it makes no historical sense at all.

In their attempt to connect *Joseph and Aseneth* with Syriac Christianity, Jacobovici and Wilson say that 'many Syriac Christians' refused to use the title *Theotokos* ('God-bearer' or 'Mother of God') that the Council of Ephesus in 431 attributed to Mary the mother of Jesus. They omit to say that these were Nestorian Christians, whereas Monophysite Christians were enthusiastic about this Marian title because of its christological implications. On the only issue that was truly in dispute – the relationship of the divine and the human in Christ – Monophysites and Nestorians were vehemently opposed. So it must be insisted that the context in which we find Syriac *Joseph and Aseneth* in Pseudo-Zachariah is very much Monophysite, even more opposed to Nestorian doctrine than to Chalcedonian doctrine.

(4) The Letters about *Joseph and Aseneth*

Jacobovici and Wilson attach considerable importance to the references to the 'inner meaning' (in Burke's translation) of the text in the two letters that Pseudo-Zachariah reproduces to introduce the Syriac version of *Joseph and Aseneth*. The letters explain the origin of the Syriac translation: an anonymous correspondent (perhaps Pseudo-Zacharias himself) writes to Moses of Ingila (the place-name also occurs as Aggel or Inghilene), sending him a copy of the Greek version and asking him to translate it into Syriac. But he requests more than just a translation, explaining that while he could read the story (*historia*, the Greek word used in the Syriac here), he could not understand the 'inner meaning' (*theōria*, also a Greek word). So he asks Moses, not only to translate the text into Syriac, but also, as far as he can, to explain its *theōria*.

It is significant that these words are Greek. They are used because they were technical terms in the Alexandrian tradition of allegorical exegesis of the Old Testament, where every Old Testament narrative (*historia*) is expected to have a corresponding Christian allegorical meaning (*theōria*). There was nothing particularly Syrian about this. Indeed, Moses of Ingila is known to have also translated a work of Cyril of Alexandria, the *Glaphyra*, a commentary on the Pentateuch in which Cyril applied allegorical exegesis to all the narratives in this

part of the Bible, including the Joseph story. This may well be why the anonymous correspondent thought Moses would be the man to help him.⁵

While allegorical exegesis was normally applied to canonical biblical texts, it is not too surprising that these two men should have thought that *Joseph and Aseneth*, a narrative about Old Testament characters set in Old Testament times, would also yield a deeper meaning if the proper sort of expertise were applied to it. This really tells us nothing about whether *Joseph and Aseneth* was originally intended to have a meaning beyond the surface meaning of the story.⁶ Nor does it tell us whether, supposing it was intended to have such a meaning, Moses accurately detected it. There was obviously no tradition of interpretation of this text on which Moses could draw. The book seems to be as new to him as it had been to his correspondent when the latter discovered the Greek manuscript. Moses attributes his discovery of the *theōria* of the text to his own inspired insight. So we may ask, would Moses of Ingila, given his background and context in sixth-century Monophysite Christianity, have been likely to discover an 'encoded history' of Jesus' marriage to Mary Magdalene? He would be much more likely to find the kind of allegorical meaning that Cyril of Alexandria found in the Pentateuch.

One other aspect of Moses' letter needs to be addressed. As both the letters illustrate, it was customary for religious people of this sort to adorn their letters with elaborate chains of biblical quotations chosen for their relevance to the topic of the letter. In part of Moses' letter he explains how, on the one hand, he hesitated to try to explain the inner meaning of *Joseph and Aseneth*, but, on the other hand, he felt it would be wrong to refuse his correspondent's request. Both sides of this dilemma are illustrated with a chain of biblical quotations. It is clear that his hesitation is a matter of modesty ('recognizing my own shortcomings'), and it was probably a necessary formality to declare his inadequacy for the task, before going on to say that love compelled him and Scripture encouraged him to attempt what his correspondent had asked.

Jacobovici and Wilson completely misrepresent this material when they claim that Moses' hesitation arises from fear 'that the nature of the truth revealed by the text may endanger them' (LG 377). Some of the texts he cites are conventional biblical warnings about the folly and the consequences of being too loquacious or confident in speaking (e.g. 'he who guards his mouth will preserve his life'), but the point Moses is making is that one should not be too quick to voice one's opinions, since all too often one has nothing worth saying.

(5) Censorship in the manuscript

Jacobovici and Wilson went to great lengths to apply the latest digital imaging techniques to the manuscript (i.e. to Book I chapters 4-6) (see LG 309). As a result, they say, they were able

to make sense of indistinct areas in the manuscript, simply worn down by time and handling over the centuries. Using these advanced techniques,

⁵ We do not know the respective dates of Moses' translation of *Joseph and Aseneth* and his translation of Cyril's *Glaphya*.

⁶ My own view is that it does have a symbolic dimension, but I do not think this because Moses of Ingila found an inner meaning in it.

we were also able to uncover the original lettering behind several smudges. More importantly, digital imaging revealed that a number of different inks and different colors were used in the smudged areas, as well as in other parts of the text (LG 312).

Here and elsewhere they hint that the 'smudges' may have been deliberate attempts to obscure the text (LG 309: 'words that may have been deliberately smudged or covered up'). Since they give no examples of the words subject to these smudges, it is impossible to assess this claim. Indeed, it seems extremely likely that none of the smudges actually provide evidence of censorship. If they did, Jacobovici and Wilson would certainly have told us clearly and explicitly, explaining why someone would have wanted to cover up these particular words. One has the impression that the digital imaging did not, in this respect, provide what they had hoped.

However, in another respect they believe it has turned up trumps. The text of Moses' letter ends, in mid-sentence, just as he is beginning to explain the inner meaning of *Joseph and Aseneth*. This occurs close to the bottom of a page and one might have supposed simply that the following page has been lost. But Jacobovici's and Wilson's 'visual inspection' 'suggested' that the manuscript had been 'deliberately cut.'

This cut line was subjected to intensive digital imaging and processing. By means of this technology, we could now discern that the cut line went right through a line of the text – right through the Syriac script – clearly indicating that this was an act of censorship (LG 312).

This is not as clear as it sounds. From the scans of this page of the manuscript that Tony Burke has kindly let me see, it appears that the manuscript has been cut so that the *lower part of the last two or three words of the bottom line* of the second column on the page has been cut through. (The text on the reverse side of this page has been similarly affected.) From my own observation of the photograph it looks as if this has been done through carelessness rather than in a deliberate attempt to obscure just those last two or three words on the page. I cannot really see how digital imaging would make any difference to this observation. Obviously, one cannot say that Jacobovici and Wilson are wrong about this without careful examination of the manuscript, but I think there is room for considerable doubt.

The next page of the manuscript, containing the rest of Moses' letter and, on its reverse side, the first part of the text of *Joseph and Aseneth* itself, is undoubtedly missing. But Jacobovici and Wilson themselves make a very interesting observation about this. There is another manuscript (British Library 7190), which is generally agreed to have been copied from the unique manuscript of Pseudo-Zachariah. The scribe was interested solely in making a copy of *Joseph and Aseneth* itself and so has copied only the text of *Joseph and Aseneth*, without the two letters that precede it in Pseudo-Zachariah. But the text of *Joseph and Aseneth* is complete. It includes the opening section that is now missing in the manuscript of Pseudo-Zachariah. So, when this copy was made, the page containing the final part of Moses' letter as well as the opening section of *Joseph and Aseneth* was still in place. This copy was made in the twelfth century, six centuries after the manuscript of Pseudo-Zachariah was written. So for *six centuries* no one thought the concluding part of Moses' letter was so shocking or dangerous that it ought to be censored. Even supposing the page was

deliberately removed, rather than accidentally lost, it will be very difficult to tell what an Egyptian monk (?) in the twelfth century or later would have thought worthy of censorship.

I conclude that, although the matter deserves further investigation, Jacobovici and Wilson have not made a convincing case for censorship.

References

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