Assessing *The Lost Gospel*
Part 2: Misinterpreting Ephrem

Richard Bauckham

In chapter 8 of their book, Jacobovici and Wilson endeavour to show that in Syriac Christianity, represented here mainly by the great fourth-century theologian-poet Ephrem (with some reference also to his third-century predecessor Aphrahat), Aseneth was understood to represent Mary Magdalene. The argument proceeds largely by these steps (a) Aseneth is a type of the church; (b) Mary Magdalene is a type of the church; (c) therefore Aseneth = Mary Magdalene. Let us see how these three steps are taken

(a) **Aseneth is a type of the church**
This is uncontroversial. The Syriac Fathers, who read the Old Testament in pervasively typological terms, took Joseph to be a type of Christ, as many other patristic writers also did. Joseph's bride Aseneth is then naturally understood as a type of the church, the bride of Christ. That Aseneth was a Gentile, the daughter of a pagan priest, made her especially appropriate as a type of the church viewed as 'the church of the Gentiles' (Ephrem, *Hymns on Virginity* 21, quoted LG 73). But this does not mean, as Jacobovici and Wilson suppose (LG 74-77), a particular community of Gentile Christians, to be distinguished from other early Christian movements, but simply *the* Church. These writers endorsed the supersessionist theology according to which the old people of God, the nation of Israel, had been replaced by the new people of God, the church of all nations (Murray chap 1).

(b) **Mary Magdalene is a type of the church**
Ephrem – or a writer close to Ephrem[1] - writes about the two Maries, the mother of Jesus and the Magdalene, as in different ways symbols of the church. The latter was like the church because she brought the good news of Jesus' resurrection (Murray 147, partially quote LG 74). It should be noted that it is much more common in Syriac Christian literature for Mary the mother of Jesus to be treated as a type of the church than for Mary Magdalene to be cited in this role, and in the case of the latter the symbolism is limited: she is like the church in that she saw the risen Christ and brought the news of his resurrection. Moreover, in the passage quoted by Jacobovici and Wilson (LG 74) it is clear that the coincidence of the name Mary, borne by both women, plays a part in the typology. As we shall see, Ephrem delights in associating biblical characters that bear the same name. It is part of his extensive search for parallels and connexions between different parts of Scripture. In the case of the two Maries, Murray sees a tendency in Ephrem even to fuse them (146-148). It looks as though the treatment of Mary

---

[1] LG 76 erroneously says that the lines they there quote are from 'another passage of Hymn 21.' They are taken from Murray 147 (as footnote 24, LG 391 indicates), who cites them from ' a passage in the *memre* for Holy Week' and indicates that Ephrem may not be the author. There is another mistaken reference in LG 391 n. 19, where the page in Murray's book should be 223, not 136.

the mother of Jesus as a type of the church has been extended to Mary Magdalene because of the coincidence of names.

(c) **therefore Aseneth = Mary Magdalene**

That both Aseneth and Mary Magdalene could be understood as types of the church does not mean that Aseneth and Mary Magdalene were themselves in any way connected in Syriac Christianity. Other women of the Old Testament, such as Eve, Rachel, the Queen of Sheba and Esther, were also treated as types of the church (Murray 135-138), but it does not follow that they therefore represent Mary Magdalene. Typology in Syriac Christian literature is wide-ranging, complex and variable, very dependent on the particular passages of Scripture a writer has in mind.

However, Jacobovici and Wilson think that the threefold equation between Aseneth, Mary Magdalene and the church is 'even more explicit' in a passage in Hymn 21 of Ephrem's *Hymns on Virginity*. (They call it 'The Clincher.') It reads, in Kathleen McVey's translation (and with the addition of two more lines than Jacobovici and Wilson quote):

> You [Ephrem] are the son of Asenath, the daughter of a pagan priest;
> she is a symbol of the Church of the Gentiles.
> She loved Joseph, and Joseph's son
> in truth the holy church loved.
> She had many children by the Crucified,
> and on every member the cross is engraved.
> By the symbol of Ephrem crosses are crowded into her,
> by birth from water. (McVey 353).

This hymn is the second of two on the *city* of Ephraim, where Jesus took refuge towards the end of his ministry (John 11:54), but at this point Ephrem (the writer) exploits the fact that the city has the same name as the son of Joseph, who was progenitor of the Israelite tribe of Ephraim (Ephrem). He also exploits the coincidence of name between Joseph the patriarch and Joseph the reputed father of Jesus. The third and fourth lines mean: Asenath loved Joseph and the church loved Jesus son of Joseph. Murray's translation of these lines is slightly clearer:

> she [Asenath] loved Joseph, and the Son of Joseph
> has holy Church loved in truth (Murray 136).

Just before this passage Ephrem (the writer) has used gematria to associate the name Ephrem with 'crucified' and 'cross'[2] ('on "crucified" and "cross" his name depends') and so the last four lines of our quotation pick up that association of the name. Ephrem, son of Joseph and Asenath, is the type of the many children borne to Jesus, the Crucified One, by his bride the church. ('She' in line 5 is probably 'the holy church,' though the subject might still be Asenath *as a symbol* of the church.) Every one of these children is marked with Ephrem's symbol, the cross, and they crowd into the church 'by birth from water,' an indisputable reference to baptism (cf. John 3:5).[3] It is perfectly clear that the 'many children'

---

[2] See McVey 352 n. 288. The numerical value of Ephrem in Syriac is equivalent to the combined numerical value of the words 'crucified' and 'cros.'
[3] McVey 353 n. 290, notes that 'Ephrem's understanding of baptism is closely linked with the crucifixion.'

of the Crucified are Christian believers, 'born' to him and his bride the church by baptism and marked with the sign of the cross. The passage is entirely intelligible without reference to Mary Magdalene, and there is nothing in it to suggest that we should think of Mary Magdalene.

Jacobovici and Wilson also quote McVey's translation, but with (unacknowledged) modifications:

> You [Ephraim] are the son of Aseneth, the daughter of a pagan priest;
> She [Aseneth] is the symbol of the Church of the Gentiles.
> She [Aseneth] loved Joseph, and Joseph's son . . .
> In truth, the Holy Church loved.
> She had many children by the Crucified,
> And every one of them is marked with the cross (LG 81).

The insertion of dots, normally used to indicate something has been left out of a text, at the end of the third line here is puzzling. Along with the comma inserted into the fourth line, it suggests that Jacobovici and Wilson have not understood the syntax, in which 'Joseph's son' is the object of the verb 'loved' in the next line. Alternatively, they have manipulated the text to suit their reading of it. Moreover, they have also conveniently ended the quotation before the indisputable reference to baptism ('by birth from water').

They claim that the passage only makes sense if we substitute 'Jesus' for 'Joseph' and 'Mary Magdalene' for 'Aseneth,' thus:

> Ephraim, you are the son of Mary the Magdalene,
> daughter of a pagan priest;
> Mary the Magdalene is the symbol of the Church of the Gentiles.
> She loved Jesus, and Jesus' son . . .
> in truth, the Holy Church loved.
> Mary the Magdalene had many children by the Crucified,
> And every one of them is marked with the cross (LG 81).

Having thus imported Mary Magdalene into the text, Jacobovici and Wilson propose it means:

> Mary the Magdalene is the daughter of a non-Jewish priest.
> Mary the Magdalene is the symbol of the Church of the Gentiles.
> Mary the Magdalene loved Jesus.
> Mary the Magdalene had many children by Jesus.
> The children were all marked for death (LG 82).

This is said to be 'the most natural reconstruction' and 'the plain meaning' (LG 82)!

I think the overwhelming case against such a 'reconstruction' should already be clear, but we may note especially
(1) It requires the entirely arbitrary addition of the three dots (. . .) at the end of the fourth line and the resulting unintelligibility of the fifth line (what or whom did Holy Church love? Why does this line intrude into the sequence of statements of which Mary Magdalene is supposedly the subject?).
(2) It ignores the wider context in which 'the cross' is the dominant topic, persistently associated with Ephraim, and clearly cannot be reduced to the notion that Jesus' biological offspring were 'all marked for death.'

Of the interpretation of 'the many children' as 'metaphorical' children 'marked by the sign of the cross,' Jacobovici and Wilson say that it is 'obviously theologically motivated. It asks us to look beyond the plain language at

metaphors that are not even hinted at' (LG 82). I suggest that anyone inclined to agree with this should read the whole hymn. It is nothing but deeply theological, metaphorical and symbolic throughout. Its author was a theologian and a poet. Metaphor and theology are precisely what he was about.

References

Ephrem the Syrian, *Hymns*, translated by Kathleen E. McVey (New York: Paulist Press, 1989).

Robert Murray, *Symbols of Church and Kingdom: A Study in Early Syriac Tradition* (2nd edition; Piscataway NJ: Gorgias, 2004).