Assessing *The Lost Gospel*
Part 3: Misreading *Joseph and Aseneth* (i)

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By the time we get to chapter 9, where Jacobovici and Wilson begin to 'decode' the story of *Joseph and Aseneth* as really a story about Jesus and Mary Magdalene, we readers are expected to have been convinced that Aseneth is a mere code name for Mary Magdalene. On the basis of their arguments about the context in Pseudo-Zachariah and in Syriac Christianity they think that this can now be treated as virtually a fact. In the first two parts of my assessment, I have shown that those arguments do not hold water. I now turn to the way they (mis-)read *Joseph and Aseneth* (hereafter JosAs) itself.

(i) General points
(1) More than once they tell us that Aseneth is an obscure person in Genesis and so no one would have expected this Old Testament character to play the role given her in JosAs. However, the fact that she is mentioned only in two verses of Genesis (41:45, 50) would not have made her obscure or unimportant to attentive early Jewish or early Christian readers of Genesis. We should not measure this by the standard of the average modern Jew's or modern Christian's knowledge of Genesis. Many early Jewish and early Christian readers were accustomed to pondering every detail of their sacred texts. In the story of Israel's origins, Aseneth plays an extremely important role. She is the mother of Ephraim and Manasseh, progenitors of two of the most prominent of the twelve tribes of Israel. This puts her alongside Rachel and Leah, mothers either themselves or by proxy (their two handmaids) of the rest of the tribes. Like Sarah, Rebecca, Rachel and Leah, Aseneth ought to be one of the Israelite matriarchs. I say 'ought to be' because, for later readers, the fact that she was the daughter of an Egyptian priest could make this problematic. But this importance in Israelite lineage explains why the author of JosAs assures us, early on, that Aseneth 'was noble and glorious like Sarah, beautiful like Rebecca, and virtuous like Rachel' (1:5). Surely, a Jewish or Christian reader of Genesis might think, we ought to know more about such a key figure in the ancestry of Israel. That someone should have thought of writing the story that Genesis might have been expected to tell but doesn't would not be surprising. It is the reasoning behind the genesis of a good many apocryphal or para-biblical texts.

(2) Jacobovici and Wilson argue that the 'story told in our manuscript is simply not the story found in Genesis' – 'It's not even an elaboration of it. It's a different tale altogether' (LG 39-40). *Therefore*, they suppose, it is not actually about the biblical characters Joseph and Aseneth at all but a story about other people for whom these names are merely code. This is a *non sequitur.* The fact that the story is not in Genesis does not mean that it is not *about* the biblical characters. P. D. James recently published a sequel to Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*, in which all the main characters of the latter re-appear. The story is quite different (it takes place after the story in *Pride and Prejudice* ends), but James undoubtedly intended it to be about the same characters. Apocryphal or para-biblical literature, Jewish and Christian, is full of non-biblical stories about biblical

characters. For example, there was a famous story about the conversion of Abraham from the pagan idolatry of his father to the worship of the only true God. It occurs (with some variation) in *Jubilees*, Josephus and the *Apocalypse of Abraham*. Genesis does not even tell us that Abraham converted from paganism to monotheism, just as it does not tell us that Aseneth converted from paganism to monotheism. But later readers of Genesis assumed, in each case, that there must have been such a conversion and therefore made up a story about it. The Abraham of the story about his conversion is undoubtedly Abraham! In the case of JosAs, we should note how carefully the author links his story into the story Genesis tells in the first few verses, echoing Gen 41:45-50 in some detail (including the gathering of wheat 'like the sand of the sea') and establishing its precise chronological place within the Genesis narrative ('In the first year of the seven years of plenty...'; and again in 3:1).[1] Similarly he places the second part of his story (chaps 22-29) later in the sequence of years indicated by Genesis (22:1). He then indicates that he is taking Genesis 42-45 as read, and catches up with the Genesis story again when Jacob brings his family to settle in Israel (Gen 46; JosAs 22:2). This is not coded history; it is deliberate indication that the author is writing an imaginative expansion of the Genesis narrative. Note also how the details of Joseph's story in Genesis are echoed in 3:10-11 and presupposed in chapters 22-29.

We should also note that there was at least one other apocryphal story about Aseneth herself (in an unidentified Jewish apocryphon that was certainly not JosAs, cited by Origen, *Comm. Gen.* 46-47).

(3) That JosAs is a story about the biblical characters, set in their time and place, is not incompatible with the possibility that it also has symbolic or typological dimensions. I see in LG a degree of confusion between typology, as practised by early Christian interpreters of the Old Testament, and what Jacobovici and Wilson call coded history. When early Christian interpreters of Genesis, such as Cyril of Alexandria in the work that Moses of Ingila translated into Syriac, understood, for example, Isaac and Joseph as types of Christ, they did not mean that the stories were not about real individuals who lived long ago and were ancestors of the people of Israel. They meant that the stories about them, composed under the inspiration of the Spirit, also carried prophetic meaning, foreshadowing the events of the story of Jesus and the early church. The stories really happened to the historical characters Isaac and Joseph, but they also had prophetic significance. Jacobovici and Wilson, however, suppose that, if Joseph in JosAs stands for Jesus, then the character simply is Jesus and the story simply is a story about Jesus written in code. Moses of Ingila and Pseudo-Zechariah, I think, would have read it as a story about the biblical character Joseph which *also prefigured* the story of Jesus and his church. They would therefore not have read its typological reference to Jesus in the literal way that Jacobovici and Wilson do.

The issue is particularly interesting in the passage where the 'man' from heaven tells Aseneth that her new name is to be '"City of Refuge," for with you all the nations will take refuge and many people will be sheltered under your wing, and in your wall will be kept safe the ones attached to God through repentance' (15:5). Clearly here the figure of Aseneth is given a symbolic dimension that

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[1] I use the verse numbers in Tony Burke's translation of the Syriac in LG.

makes her more than an individual. Most scholars think this has to do with her status as a Gentile convert to Judaism; she is treated as prototypical of all other proselytes. I myself think an easier and more obvious reading is that she is represented as a type of the Christian Church. This at any rate is how Aphrahat, Ephrem, Cyril of Alexandria understood the biblical Aseneth: a type of the Church from the Gentiles, the Bride of Christ, married in the text to Joseph, a type of Christ. Readers of JosAs like Moses of Ingila would easily have read JosAs in the same typological way. To understand the text of JosAs here we need only two figures: (a) Aseneth the Egyptian woman who married Joseph according to the story read literally, and (b) the Christian church that Aseneth here symbolizes. To introduce a third figure – Mary Magdalene – is unnecessary and misleading. It makes for a strangely muddled reading:

> Clearly, the text is not talking about the Aseneth of the Book of Genesis. That woman was a minor figure who disappeared from the world stage at least seventeen hundred years before *Joseph and Aseneth* was written. What we are being told – in very clear terms [!!] – is that Aseneth (that is, Mary the Magdalene) was perceived by her followers as a figure of Penitence, and a Daughter of God, who prepared "a heavenly bridal chamber for those who love her" (15:7) (LG 99).

This reading of the text seems to me mistaken in that it identifies the figure of Repentance (15:6-8) with Aseneth. But more importantly, it is looking for an individual woman to whom the symbolic language of the text can be applied *as an individual* and supposes Mary Magdalene to fit the requirement. This misses what seems to me clear: that the individual Aseneth is being made to symbolize something other than an individual: a 'city' in which many nations will take refuge. It doesn't matter that Aseneth was 'a minor figure who disappeared from the world stage at least seventeen hundred years before *Joseph and Aseneth* was written.' That 'minor figure' stands for, is a type of the Christian church. Instead of looking for some kind of goddess (Mary Magdalene), *typology* can recognize both that Aseneth is an individual woman and that she symbolizes the church.

(4) Another difference between real typology, of the kind that early Christian writers deployed in their interpretation of Scripture, and the kind of coded history that Jacobovici and Wilson take *Joseph and Aseneth* to be, lies in their notion that the story of Jesus and Mary Magdalene was encoded in this way for secrecy, since a book openly telling that story would have been destroyed by the persecuting authorities of the form of Christianity that triumphed over all others in the fourth century (here I merely replicate Jacobovici's and Wilson's reading of church history). Jacobovici and Wilson seem to allow that this was a novel use of 'the tools of typology' (LG 127). They seem to be proposing a unique genre of ancient literature. Why should we believe them? It seems to be simply a way of getting Mary Magdalene into a text whose indications that it is more than *just* a literal story seem quite adequately explained in properly typological terms.