

## **Assessing *The Lost Gospel***

### **Part 4: Responding to Simcha's Responses**

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Here I respond to Jacobovici's responses to my Parts 1 and 2. I am aware that responses to responses can get rather tedious and so I will not try to be exhaustive but simply make points that seem to me important.

#### **Responses to Part 1**

##### **(1) The Title**

I pointed out that Jacobovici and Wilson mistranslated the title. (i) Jacobovici responds with an argument about what the title *ought to* mean, not what it does mean, which is a linguistic point. It seems clear that he decided on an inaccurate translation because of his own view of the contents of the book. Readers who notice this will not be inclined to trust his accuracy in other assertions. (ii) The true title 'A Volume of Records of Events Which Have Happened in the World' is equivalent to our word 'chronicle.' We all know that chronicles record events of very varying importance. Compilers of chronicles think that everything they record is of some significance, of course, but events certainly do not have to be "earth-shattering" to be included in a chronicle. (iii) The title covers the contents of all twelve books of Pseudo-Zachariah's work, not just Book 1. Did Pseudo-Zachariah really think all these events were of "earth-shattering" importance?

##### **(2) The Contents of Book I**

Jacobovici here makes the *completely baseless* assertion that Isaac (of Antioch) and Dodo (of Amida) 'appeared "very acceptable" to the authorities while covertly teaching heretical ideas.'

##### **(3) A Monophysite Work**

Here Jacobovici digs himself further into the hole that he and Wilson dug for themselves in trying to characterize the context of Pseudo-Zachariah's work as heretical. He continues to say: 'Monophysites differed from Trinitarians in their idea of the nature of Christ.' I don't think I could have made it clearer that Monophysites *were* Trinitarians. They were as Trinitarian as you could get. What distinguished them from Chalcedonians (the main body of the church that had imperial support) was whether Christ should be said to be 'in two natures' (divine and human) or 'out of two natures' and 'one incarnate nature of the divine Logos' (i.e. both divine and human). Modern readers may well be impatient with this technical distinction, but that is precisely my point: Although this distinction was important for them, it was the *only thing that distinguished* Monophysites from the larger body of the Catholic Church. In other words, Monophysites were a branch of what Jacobovici and Wilson call the 'Pauline Christianity' that triumphed over all other forms in the fourth century and persecuted other forms of Christianity. The point *is relevant* because, as the full twelve books of Pseudo-Zachariah's work show, he was a very strongly committed Monophysite. The only doctrinal issue that concerns him is the issue between Monophysites and Chalcedonians. There is nothing about his work to suggest that he had any sympathy for the sort of ideas that Jacobovici and Wilson

find in *Joseph and Aseneth* (and these, of course, include much more bizarre deviations from orthodoxy than merely the idea that Jesus married). It will not do to say that his sympathy had to be secret and that's why the only heretical passage in his huge work was an encoded text, because, of course, Pseudo-Zachariah included also Moses of Ingila's explanation of the hidden meaning of *Joseph and Aseneth*. (This was only removed from the text many centuries later.) As far as I can see, Jacobovici and Wilson never explain why, if the true meaning of *Joseph and Aseneth* was so dangerous and had to be kept secret by encoding, Pseudo-Zachariah prefaced it with the letter of Moses of Ingila, which, according to Jacobovici and Wilson, explained that the inner meaning of the text concerned Jesus' marriage to Mary Magdalene!

#### **(4) The Letters about *Joseph and Aseneth***

I would simply urge readers to read Moses' letter, which is quite explicit in saying that his hesitation was due to modesty ('recognizing my own shortcomings'). Jacobovici and Wilson are cloth-eared when it comes to hearing these texts as they would have sounded in a devout, Scripture-saturated literary context in sixth century Syria.

#### **(5) Censorship in the manuscript**

This is really the most important point because I need to clarify what I meant. I was not doubting that the page has been 'cut' (or at least I will not doubt it before seeing the manuscript). When I first read the account in *The Lost Gospel* I thought that the page must be cut so that a large part of the page, with a large portion of text, has been cut off. In fact (as can be seen in the photo in the book) it is only a small portion of the page that has been removed, and all that the cut has done to the text has been to obscure two or three words at the end of one line. It is hard to believe that these two or three words (continuing the sentence that we have) could have been so revealing that they needed obscuring in this way. If they did need obscuring, it would have been simpler and more effective just to blot them out. When I judged that what has been done to the page looks more like carelessness than censorship, I meant that it looks as though someone has cut off the bottom margin of the page and accidentally cut through these last few words of the text. To judge this properly, of course, we need more information of a kind that the authors are not ready to give us, such as whether any other pages of the manuscript have had margins removed by cutting, just as we need much more information about the general state of the manuscript.

#### **Responses to Part 2**

Yes, I first came to think that *Joseph and Aseneth* may well be a Christian text when I reviewed Kraemer's book, although she of course does not come out definitively in favour of this explanation. I'm well aware of the other precedents for this view. But it is plainly ridiculous to claim that those scholars who judge the text to be Jewish do so 'because they are afraid of the implications of this interpretation' (i.e. of the interpretation of it as Christian). After all, those scholars include Viktor Aptowitz and Gideon Bohak, both Jewish, not Christian. Moreover, before Jacobovici and Wilson, none of the scholars who argue that it is a Christian text have regarded this as having any implications that anyone need

be afraid of. It needs to be stressed that none of these scholars have thought for a moment that it is a coded history about Jesus' marriage.

The reason why the majority of scholars have seen *Joseph and Aseneth* as a Jewish work is that, in the study of apocryphal or para-biblical works of this kind during the twentieth century, it was generally considered that a work that had Jewish themes (such as a story about Old Testament characters) and no overtly Christian features must be Jewish. Even if there were a few passages of a Christian character, it was usually thought that these must be Christian interpolations in an originally Jewish work. This approach was a general approach to this kind of literature and was applied to *Joseph and Aseneth* simply as a matter of course, not specifically in order to evade a Christian reading of this text. But more recently, this approach has been significantly challenged, especially in James Davila's important book *The Provenance of the Pseudepigrapha*, where he argued that it was quite possible for Christian authors to write about Old Testament characters in Old Testament times without overtly Christian language and that we need tougher criteria for distinguishing Christian from Jewish literature of this kind.

In my assessment of *The Lost Gospel* it has not been my intention to expound or to justify my own view of *Joseph and Aseneth*, but simply to critique Jacobovici's and Wilson's arguments. Most of my critique can easily be accepted by scholars who see *Joseph and Aseneth* as Jewish, not Christian, and I don't think Jacobovici should be claiming me as an ally. My preference for seeing *Joseph and Aseneth* as Christian rather than Jewish is in fact still a quite tentative proposal, which I would not want to be too dogmatic about. Actually, when discussing typology, what I was most concerned to argue was that ancient Christian readers of *Joseph and Aseneth* such as Moses of Ingila and Pseudo-Zachariah would very likely have read it in typological terms, seeing Joseph as a type of Christ and Aseneth as a type of the church. Since they did the same with Genesis, it doesn't follow that they supposed *Joseph and Aseneth* to be a Christian text. Most likely, they thought it was a text from pre-Christian times, an apocryphal Jewish work that could be read in the same typological way as they read Genesis.

### **(1) Aseneth is a type of the church**

Just to be accurate, what I meant was "uncontroversial" was that the Syriac Fathers, such as Ephrem, saw Aseneth in Genesis as a type of the church.

### **(2) Mary Magdalene is a type of the church**

The problem with the logic is this. What Ephrem thinks is

A (Aseneth) *symbolizes* or *prefigures* (B) the church.

C (Mary Magdalene) *symbolizes* or *prefigures* (B) the church.

It does not follow that A (Aseneth) *symbolizes* or *prefigures* C (Mary Magdalene).

The trouble is that Jacobovici is too inclined to assimilate typology to coded history, which deals in simple equivalents.

**Note very carefully** that Jacobovici does not defend his flagrant misreading of the key passage of Ephrem that he had called 'The Clincher.' He merely shifts the ground to his reading of *Joseph and Aseneth*.