

Assessing *The Lost Gospel* **Part 5: Misreading *Joseph and Aseneth* (ii)**

Richard Bauckham

From some of the things that Jacobovici and Wilson say about *Joseph and Aseneth* (JosAs) one might suppose that to read it as a 'lost gospel' all one needs to do is to substitute the names Jesus and Mary the Magdalene for Joseph and Aseneth. But it turns out to be much more complicated. For a start, Aseneth is the daughter of a priest of the city of On (Heliopolis) in Egypt. She lives, within the precincts of her father's house, in a tower, which is her home, though it also bears some resemblance to a temple and includes a room where she worships all the Egyptian gods. Mary the Magdalene, on the other hand, is a Syro-Phoenician priestess. Her tower, a Phoenician-style sacred tower, is a temple to the goddess Artemis, whose priestess she is, located in Magdala in Galilee. This is explained at some length, but there is not then, as one might expect, a detailed explanation of the whole text of JosAs, explaining how it translates into a story about Jesus and Mary the Magdalene. The treatment of the text is quite selective, both within the main body of the book and in the notes that Jacobovici and Wilson add to Tony Burke's translation of JosAs.

In this part of my assessment I shall highlight just a few examples of the way Jacobovici and Wilson treat the narrative of JosAs, including both major misreadings of the text and arbitrary methods of deriving a story about Jesus and Mary the Magdalene from it.

(1) The seven virgins

Seven virgins live with Aseneth. They each have a room in the tower and they act as companions (she and they are all of the same age and have grown up together) and as maidservants looking after her needs (2:5). When, during the night, Aseneth embarks on her week of extreme penance and mourning, the seven virgins hear her groaning and weeping and come to her door to see what is wrong. Aseneth does not open the door to them, but tells them that she is in bed with a headache and needs to be left to be quiet. So the virgins return to their rooms.

In an effort to connect JosAs with the portrayal of Mary Magdalene in the Gospels, Jacobovici and Wilson claim that the seven virgins correspond to the seven demons that Jesus cast out of Mary Magdalene (Luke 8:2; Mark 16:9):

Aseneth has seven women attendants, co-priestesses. In the eyes of monotheistic Jews and pagans of the time, these priestesses would have been seen as spirits – or, in Greek, *daimons* [*sic*] – demons who officiated with her in her tower. When ... Aseneth rejects her gods, she also has no further use for her seven vestal virgins. They are dispensed with – in a sense, cast out or cast away (LG 91-92; cf. 318-319 n. 18).

In JosAs there is no indication that the virgins are 'co-priestesses.' They are servants and companions. Aseneth does not dispense with their services as priestesses or even with their services as servants, but simply wants, on this occasion, to get on with her penance and mourning uninterrupted. Moreover, I don't know of any evidence that monotheists would regard pagan priestesses as *daimones*. They might well regard the pagan gods as *daimones* (as Paul does in 1

Corinthians and some other early Jewish and Christian writings do), but not the priests or priestesses.

After the episode of the bees and the honeycomb, Aseneth asks the 'man' from heaven if she may call the seven virgins, so that he may bless them too, as he has Aseneth, for, she says, she loves them as sisters (17:4). So they come and the man says to them:

May the Lord God Most High bless you. You will be the seven pillars in the City of Refuge and all the daughters of the house of the Village of Refuge who choose shall enter and upon you they shall rest forever (17:5).

The only comment that Jacobovici and Wilson make on this episode is in a note to the text: 'The seven pagan demons are now transformed into seven pillars of the New Church' (LG 355 n. 157). But in the text the seven virgins have simply remained Aseneth's beloved companions and are now given a key role in the institution that she represents. What do Jacobovici and Wilson think these 'pillars' are? What can it mean that women will 'rest upon them forever'? Why do they not appear prominently in Jacobovici's and Wilson's reconstruction of the early history of Christianity? One would expect them to represent seven female leaders who support Mary the Magdalene in her leadership of her Christian group. I think this shows both how far Jacobovici and Wilson have to distort the narrative of JosAs to suit their application of it to Mary Magdalene and also how little their reconstruction of Christian origins is really governed by the actual narrative of this supposedly so valuable 'lost gospel.'

Jacobovici and Wilson do note, when equating the seven demons of Luke 8:2 with Mary Magdalene's (Aseneth's) seven 'pagan attendants': 'Interestingly, one of the Gnostic texts tells us that Jesus had seven women as well as twelve males among his disciples' (LG 319 n. 18). Most readers will not be able to check out this unspecified Gnostic text. It is the *First Apocalypse of James* (CG V,3), where James asks Jesus: 'who are the [seven] women who have [been] your disciples?' (38:16). Later four of these are named: 'Salome and Mariam [and Martha and Arsinoe...]' (40:25-26). The seven would undoubtedly have included Mary Magdalene, the most famous of Jesus' female disciples, who is not specified in addition to the seven and so must be included among them, and she is almost certainly the 'Mariam' who is named (as in many early Christian texts Mary Magdalene and Mary of Bethany are probably fused). So this tradition of seven female disciples, including Mary Magdalene, is no support for the idea that Aseneth's seven virgins represent seven attendants of Mary Magdalene.

(2) The foster father

In chapter 18, Aseneth, following her transforming encounter with the 'man' from heaven, hears that Joseph is coming to visit. Her parents are away on their country estate (see 20:5), and so she takes charge of affairs and instructs her 'foster father – the manager of her father's house' (18:2) to prepare the house and a banquet. Jacobovici and Wilson comment:

Her biological father is noticeable by his absence, as her "foster father" takes over. This seems to reflect a time when Mary the Magdalene's biological father, priest, and king "abandoned" her, before becoming reconciled to the marriage (LG 356 n. 163).

But the narrative in JosAs does not imply that Potiphar, Aseneth's father, has abandoned her because he objects to the marriage. On the contrary, he has been

a strong advocate of Aseneth's marriage to Joseph from an early stage – from the time when Joseph first visited the family and before Aseneth herself had fallen in love with Joseph (4:9). He never opposes the marriage. He just happens to be away from home on this occasion. When he does return home, he immediately proposes that Joseph and Aseneth should get married as soon as possible – the very next day! (20:5-6). There is not the slightest hint that he has to become 'reconciled' to the marriage. Once again, Jacobovici and Wilson are spinning a fantasy that has no basis even in their own practice of reading JosAs as a coded story of Jesus and Mary Magdalene.

(3) The visit to Jacob

After Joseph's marriage to Aseneth and when the famous famine is beginning, Joseph's father Jacob and Jacob's other sons and relatives arrive in Egypt and settle in the land of Goshen. (It is impossible to evade the deliberate echoes of the Genesis narrative here.) Joseph and Aseneth travel to Goshen to visit Jacob and Joseph's brothers. Jacob approves and blesses his new daughter-in-law (22:3-10). Jacobovici and Wilson note that this episode is not in Genesis (LG 364 n. 195). But, applying their methodology, the implication ought to be that it represents an event in the life of Jesus and Mary the Magdalene. What event? Who is Jacob when decoded? They do not tell us. All we learn from them is that this narrative expresses a Gnostic theology (LG 364-365 nn. 194, 195). Clearly this is a part of the JosAs narrative that they have not been able to decode. That throws doubt on the whole enterprise.

(4) What happened to Mary the Magdalene?

The following passage I find utterly baffling:

A later Christian tradition says that after Jesus' death, she [Mary the Magdalene] went to Ephesus. But *Joseph and Aseneth* seems to suggest otherwise. It seems to be telling us that she stayed in the Jerusalem area to the end (LG 208).

Early medieval tradition takes Mary Magdalene to southern France (where that tradition is still very much alive), but there is no tradition claiming she went to Ephesus. This point is obviously a confusion with Mary the mother of Jesus, who according to tradition from the fifth century onwards died in Ephesus. But the puzzling point is what Jacobovici and Wilson then say about JosAs. How does the latter suggest that Mary Magdalene stayed in the Jerusalem area until the end (her death?)? According to Jacobovici and Wilson, JosAs is 'a gospel compiled between the rescue of Mary the Magdalene and the crucifixion of Jesus' (LG 376 n. 233). How can it possibly tell us anything about what happened to Mary Magdalene after the crucifixion? It would seem that Jacobovici and Wilson have got so used to reading whatever they think about Mary Magdalene into the text of JosAs that they have overlooked this obvious problem.

(5) Pharaoh

In the interests of the fantastic tale of political conspiracy and murder in Palestine in 19 CE, soon after Jesus' marriage to Mary Magdalene, that Jacobovici and Wilson spin out of the later chapters of JosAs, they identify Pharaoh in the text with the emperor Tiberius and Pharaoh's son with Tiberius's adopted son Germanicus. But they mostly ignore an aspect of the JosAs narrative to which

they cannot do justice in constructing their tale. This is Joseph's relationship with Pharaoh. Joseph is 'the magistrate of all the land of Egypt, because king Pharaoh put him in charge over all the land' (4:7). (There is no note on this verse in Jacobovici's and Wilson's annotated text of JosAs, and no reference to it in chapter 10, where one might have expected it to be discussed.)

When Joseph decides to marry Aseneth, he explains that he must ask Pharaoh to give her to him, because, he says, Pharaoh 'is like my father and has appointed me magistrate over the land' (20:7). Here there is a note by Jacobovici and Wilson: 'Jesus seems to have had a relationship with the Roman emperor' (LG 361 n. 182). Then Pharaoh not only sanctions the marriage but performs the marriage ceremony and hosts the week-long wedding banquet (21:1-8). He also called all the chiefs of Egypt and all the kings of the nations and proclaimed to the whole land of Egypt that every man who does work for the seven days of the wedding of Joseph and Aseneth shall die (21:8).

This is only intelligible and appropriate because Joseph is Pharaoh's vicegerent, second only to Pharaoh himself in the ruling hierarchy of Egypt.

On this material Jacobovici and Wilson have only this to say:

"Pharaoh" here acts as Pontifex Maximus, which, of course, was the title and role of a Roman emperor such as Tiberias, but he seems more intimately involved in blessing this union than Tiberias would have been – even if he was aware of it. More likely, it is Sejanus who is playing the de facto role of Pharaoh here, with Germanicus playing the role of "son of Pharaoh" (LG 362 n. 185).

What is wrong with this?! In the first place, the relationship Jacobovici and Wilson here postulate between Jesus and Tiberius (so LG 361 n. 182) or, rather, Sejanus (so LG 362 n. 185: note the inconsistency) plainly does not do justice to the JosAs narrative, which ought to mean (on Jacobovici's and Wilson's theory) that Jesus was put in charge, if not of the whole empire, then of the whole territory of Roman Palestine or at least Galilee by Tiberius or Sejanus, and that Jesus' marriage to Mary Magdalene was actually performed by the emperor in his role as Pontifex Maximus. (It is surely not credible that Sejanus could have actually acted in the role of Pontifex Maximus.) Moreover, since Joseph goes to Pharaoh's court to gain Pharaoh's blessing on his marriage, the marriage must have taken place in Rome, with the greatest pomp and publicity.

It is easy to see why, in the second place, there is no hint of this relationship between Jesus and the emperor or Sejanus in chapter 14, where Jacobovici and Wilson construct their utterly conjectural tale about Tiberius, Germanicus, Sejanus, Pilate and Mary Magdalene. They have enough difficulty making that story seem credible without taking account of the relationship between Joseph and Pharaoh in JosAs. This illustrates again how arbitrary is their method of reading JosAs. Joseph's marriage to Aseneth and the birth of their children is taken to be a straightforward code for Jesus' marriage to Mary Magdalene and the birth of two biological children to them, but Joseph's position as vicegerent of Pharaoh, magistrate over all Egypt, and Pharaoh's part in the marriage are explained only in footnotes and there they are diluted to a faint echo of what the JosAs narrative actually says. Jacobovici and Wilson take that narrative seriously when it suits them, distort it on other occasions, and virtually ignore it when they realise that it would strain all credibility to read it in the

same way as they read the passages that really feature in their construction of a story about Jesus and Mary Magdalene.

(6) Joseph's brothers

In chapters 22-29 Joseph's brothers play a key role. Especially important are the pairs Simeon and Levi (after Reuben, the two eldest brothers, sons of Leah), Dan and Gad (two of the four sons of the handmaidens), Naphtali and Asher (the other two sons of the handmaidens) and Benjamin (Joseph's full brother, the youngest). Reuben and Judah also appear. Generally, Jacobovici and Wilson take the brothers of Joseph to represent Jesus' disciples (perhaps the twelve, though this is not explicit). But they are not consistent about it, because they also suppose that some of them are Jesus' blood relations (LG 368-369 nn. 209-210). Nor are they consistent in their treatment of the names. In chapter 23 Simeon and Levi are very clearly identified in the text as the sons of Jacob of those names in the Genesis narrative, since reference is made to their famous destruction of the city of Shechem (23:2). But Jacobovici and Wilson take them to represent the disciples of the same names: Simeon (Simon Peter) and Levi (Matthew). So is it a happy coincidence for the author who encoded the story of Jesus in this way that these two sons of Leah are namesakes of precisely those two disciples of Jesus he wanted those two sons of Leah to represent? Jacobovici and Wilson do not extend this treatment of the names of Joseph's brothers any further: they do not postulate disciples of Jesus named Dan and Gad, for example. Why not? As in so many cases, the 'decoding' of JosAs is done inconsistently, following no stable principles.

It should also be carefully noted that in their treatment of these chapters of JosAs (22-29) Jacobovici and Wilson cannot avoid admitting that the brothers of Joseph are those to whom the text of Genesis refers (see, e.g., 373 n. 225), since information about them (such as Simeon's and Levi's destruction of Shechem, and the fact that Benjamin is Joseph's full brother) is presupposed and alluded to. So although they insist that the story itself 'has absolutely nothing to do with the text in Genesis' (370 n. 214), they are, in effect, conceding that the story is a non-biblical story *about biblical characters*, even if these characters *symbolize* other persons. This is what they elsewhere deny when they insist that Joseph simply is not the biblical patriarch nor Aseneth his Egyptian wife.