

The Bride of God or the Lost Gospel of Joseph and Asyath

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I think there can be no doubt that this 'lost Gospel' is a section of *The Chronicle of Pseudo-Zachariah Rhetor*. The relevant section is Book I chs. 4-6, where chapter 6 is 'The History of Joseph the Just and Asyath his wife,' while chapters 4-5 are two letters that introduce it. The recent English translation of Pseudo-Zacharias (2011) does not include books I-II, mainly because these are not ecclesiastical history and consist mainly of material found also elsewhere. The editors do note that others are working on these books.

I do not read Syriac, and so, in the absence of an English translation, I have consulted the Latin translation by E. W. Brooks (CSCO 3/5, 1924). In the first of the two letters the unnamed writer says that he found in a library a work in Greek called 'the book of Asyath.' He says he read only its 'historia' (the Greek word apparently used in the Syriac text) and did not understand its 'theōria' (Greek again). Since the Greek language is difficult and alien for him, he asks his learned correspondent, a certain Moses 'Ingilae,' to translate it into Syriac for him, and to explain both its 'historia' as a whole and something of its 'theōria'. Moses replies, saying that he has read the 'historia' of the book and, if I'm understanding the text correctly, that the 'theōria' contained in it is ('to put it briefly') the truth that our God our Lord the Word became incarnate by the will of the Father and became human and was joined to a soul with its perfect senses
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And there the text breaks off without finishing the sentence. You can imagine what fun Jacobovici and Wilson will have with that suspiciously lost ending.

The words *historia* and *theōria* are obviously here used in the way they were in the Alexandrian tradition of biblical exegesis, where every Old Testament narrative (*historia*) is expected to have a corresponding Christian allegorical meaning (*theōria*). Since *Joseph and Asenath* tells a story about Old Testament characters, it was natural for Moses and his correspondent to suppose it must have an allegorical meaning, which to them would be much more interesting than the literal reading. I suspect that Moses took Asenath (or Asyath, as she is called) to represent the church, the bride of Christ, and Joseph to represent the incarnate Christ, while his heavenly *alter ego*, the archangel, is the pre-existent Logos. (Moreover, I think he may have been right. I strongly suspect that *Joseph and Asenath* is not a Jewish work, at least not in the form we have it, but a Christian work with allegorical meaning. But this is hardly relevant to the present argument.)

Jacobovici and Wilson have evidently supposed that the talk of *historia* and *theōria* in the two letters means that the story is a cover for a coded meaning, which is the true history of Jesus. They have missed the fact that Moses and his correspondent are speaking merely about the usual sort of allegorical exegesis that in the Alexandrian school was applied to any such narrative.

There seems to be nothing special about the Syriac version of *Joseph and Asenath* in Pseudo-Zacharias, apart from the fact that Asenath is called Asyath. But it's not too difficult to see roughly how Jacobovici and Wilson are interpreting it. Joseph, I guess, is a cypher for Jesus, a thoroughly human figure who nevertheless has a kind of heavenly counterpart in the chief archangel. In the story Asenath's name is changed to 'City of Refuge,' within whose walls many nations are going to gather. Since 'Magdalene' derives from *migdal*, tower, this change of name refers to Jesus giving his wife Mary the new name Magdalene, to symbolize the role she is to have in the Christian movement. Note that the blurb for the book refers to 'the towering presence of Mary Magdalene'! In the story, Joseph and Asenath have two children: Ephraim and Manasseh. That Mary Magdalene is the 'bride of God' reflects the last section of Asenath's psalm (21:21). I expect the strong political dimension in the description of Jacobovici and Wilson's book refers to some kind of reading of chapters 23-29 of *Joseph and Asenath*. None of this sounds to me any more far-fetched than Barbara Thiering's so-called pesher reading of the Dead Sea Scrolls.

Since Jacobovici and Wilson say that the lost gospel has 29 chapters, they must be well aware that the Syriac work in Pseudo-Zacharias is the well-known Greek *Joseph and Asenath*. What they find special in Pseudo-Zacharias must be the two letters with their cryptic suggestion of a hidden meaning that has something to do with the incarnation of the Logos.