

JOSEPH AND ASENETH: THE SYMBOLS BEHIND AN APOCRYPHAL STORY

Andreea Oana Tinca

PhDc, Faculty of Letters, University of Bucharest

oanatinca9@yahoo.com

Abstract: *This article is intended to investigate the manner in which a late-antique text composed for religious purposes could be appropriated and studied as literature per se. This happens, we argue, due to the richness of its symbolism, dating back to classical antiquity and melting together Hellenistic and Christian influences. Moreover, as it narrates a religious conversion imbedded into a love-story, Joseph and Aseneth plays on the Aristotelian topic of recognition, which imposes on it the appearance of a romance.*

Keywords: *apocryph, Old Testament, Aseneth, medieval literature, romance*

Little is known in Romania about the provenance and destination of *Joseph and Aseneth*. Nevertheless, after the authoritative editions of Marc Philonenko¹ and Christoph Burchard², the exact original, let alone the plethora of significations, are still subject to dispute even for Western scholars. The narrative is made up of two interconnected stories which develop the episode from the Book of Genesis (45) regarding Joseph's marriage to a Gentile woman. The first part is the story of a conversion: as Joseph, the trusted man of the Pharaoh, was travelling through Egypt, he reaches Heliopolis and makes a halt at the house of Pentephres, the great Egyptian priest. Pentephres introduces him his young daughter Aseneth, but Joseph invokes his faith and refuses to sit at the same table to a devotee of the pagan idols. However, seeing this had brought the girl to tears, he bestows his benediction upon her, in the name of God. Aseneth goes up to her maidenly room, throws away all jewelry, rich clothes and cult objects and starts a seven-day period of mourning. In the eighth day, an angel makes a mysterious apparition, asking her to eat from a honeycomb swarming with bees. He changes her name to `City of Salvation` and promises God would have her married to Joseph, which eventually happens as soon as he passes by on his way back to the Pharaoh. The second episode narrates the Pharaoh's son plotting to kidnap

¹ Marc Philonenko, *Joseph et Aséneth*. Introduction, texte critique, traduction et notes. E. J. Brill, Leiden, 1968.

² C. Burchard, *Joseph and Aseneth*, in *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha*, ed. By James H. Charlesworth, vol. 2, Doubleday&Company, Inc., Garden City, New York, 1985.

Aseneth and having his plan defeated by Joseph's two younger brothers, Levi and Simeon.

Romanian criticism has assimilated *Joseph and Aseneth* to the 'popular books' flourishing in the second half of the 18th century. The authoritative study of Nicolae Cartoian³ seems to credit Battifol⁴, the first editor of the English edition, in that the text is a product of the Jewish diaspora of the first centuries AD, noting that the story develops from a haggadic legend of the fourth century spread in some rabbinic collections of texts. Cartoian adds that the text was modified 'with a view to the model of the post-Constantinian hagiographies of the second century AD'⁵. However, recent studies such as Ross Kraemer's *When Aseneth Met Joseph* opt for an earlier date, invoking the resemblance between the portrayal of characters and the imperial ideology of late antiquity⁶.

The Romanian version is found in 5 manuscripts⁷, the lengthiest of which provided the basis for the first edition in 1922⁸. It encrypts a mystical story, as Mark Philonenko has showed in his 1968 study: at the centre of the legend there is the underlying symbolism of the celestial hierogamy, with Joseph being portrayed as an image of the Sun, and Aseneth, that of the Moon. Apart from the 'astrological allegory', he puts forth two more speculative readings, namely, a 'gnostic drama' and an 'initiatic liturgy'.

As it may be inferred, mystic love is older than a medieval utopia. The myth of the passion-love reveling in sufferance, the inner combustion of the courtier experimenting the painful distance hiding the lady from his reach, send us back to the erotic mysticism of the Jewish apocryphal legends of the first centuries. Prior to the accounts of falling in love in medieval literature and *dolce stil nuovo*, it favors the platonic connection between love and eyesight, 'the rejoicing and even the pleasure brought about by the sensible and supersensible beauty, that is to say, born from an aesthetic experience'⁹. Vision entralls the other senses, triggering a spontaneous and uncontrollable passion.

³ N. Cartoian, *Cărțile populare în literatura românească*, vol. 2, *Epoca influenței grecești*, Editura Enciclopedică Română, București, 1974.

⁴ P. Battifol, *Le Livre de la prière d'Aséneth*, *Studia Patristica: Études d'ancienne littérature chrétienne*, 1-2, Paris, Leroux, 1889-1890.

⁵ N. Cartoian, *op. cit.*, p. 78.

⁶ Ross Kraemer, *When Aseneth Met Joseph. A Late Antique Tale of the Biblical Patriarch and His Egyptian Wife, Reconsidered*, Oxford University Press, 1998.

⁷ Ms. Rom. BAR 2338, f. 125-138; Ms. Rom. BAR 1903, f. 87^v-97^v; Ms. Rom. BAR 5805; Ms. Rom. BAR 3324; Ms. Rom. BAR 4826.

⁸ Constantin Bobulescu, *Istoria frumosului Iosif și a prea frumoasei Asineta: după un manuscris din 1753*, Casa Școalelor, București, 1922.

⁹ Rudolf Otto, *Mistica Orientului și a Occidentului*, translated by Mihail Grădinaru and Friedrich Michael, pref. Mihail Grădinaru, Septentrion, Iași Septentrion, Iași, 1993.

Joseph is depicted in solar tones, as it can be seen from the description of his clothing and the four horses in golden harnesses¹⁰. He appears as the epitome of brightness and this is the main feature invoked by Aseneth when she confesses her love in mourning:

And the gates of the court looking east were opened, and Joseph entered, standing on Pharaoh's second chariot, and four horses, white as snow and with golden bridles, were harnessed (to it), and the entire chariot was manufactured from pure gold. And Joseph was dressed in an exquisite white tunic, and the robe which he had thrown around him was purple, made of linen interwoven with gold, and a golden crown was on his head, and around the crown were twelve chosen stones, and on top of the twelve stones were twelve golden rays¹¹

Joseph's clothing and the twelve precious stones on the crown surrounded by twelve golden rays are part of Helios' crown, also pointing to his status as a representative of the Pharaoh, himself depicted in details of an all-encompassing solar imaginary. The twelve stones can make reference to the signs of the Zodiac, to the twelve Jewish tribes or to the twelve patriarchs as well¹².

Some of the Greek variants note the presence of twelve young men accompanying Joseph at the entrance to Heliopolis; in the Romanian manuscripts, they are not mentioned. The image of Joseph amid the young men was thought to recall the iconographic representation of the Sun surrounded by the twelve figures of the Zodiac in the Jewish mosaic of Beth Alpha¹³ (Fig. 1).

¹⁰ M. Philonenko, *op. cit.*, p. 79.

¹¹ *Joseph and Aseneth*, in *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha*, p. 208. Romanian version: *Și ieși Pentefrie întru întâmpinarea lui Iosif cu fâmeaia lui și cu toată ruda lui și dășchisă porțile despre răsărit și intră Iosif. Și ședea în leagănul lui Faraon și era cu patru cai albi și era hamurile și frânele tot de hir și leagănul era tot de aur. Și Iosif era îmbrăcat cu emurluc albu dă sclipiia și era cu cunună de aur în cap. Și împrejurul cununii era 12 puietri alese și deasupra lor era 12 raze de aur, și cu toiag de auru în mâini (Ms. Rom. B.A.R. 2338).*

¹² C. Burchard, *op. cit.*, p. 208.

¹³ Marc Philonenko, *op. cit.*, p. 79

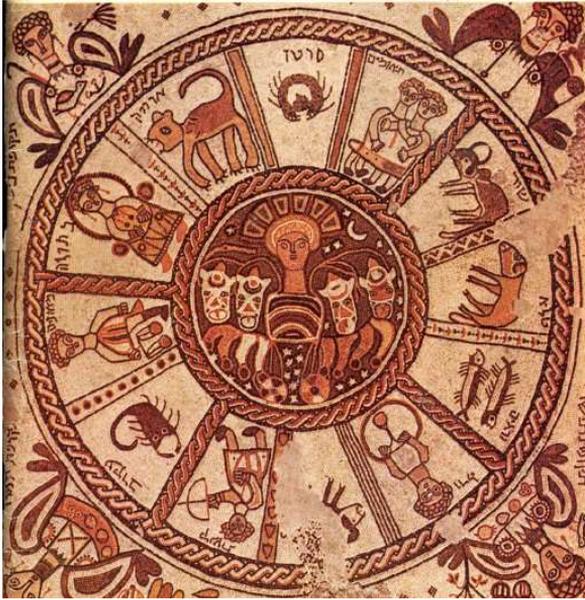


Fig. 1 - Beth Alpha Mosaic:

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Beth_Alpha#/media/File:Beit_Alpha.jpg

Kraemer states that the same representation can be found in the mosaic of Hammath Tiberias¹⁴ (Fig. 2), featuring a Helios-emperor in all his might: the hand stretched, the globe, the crown, in a Sol Invictus-type of representation. I would add that this type of representation is present in the Sepphoris Synagogue mosaic (Fig. 3), showing the imperial representation of the Sun would extend to the late fifth century, contemporary to the first attestation of *Joseph and Aseneth*. This is the image of a Sun supporting the Cosmos, the well-arranged universe.

¹⁴ Ross Kraemer, *op. cit.*, p. 160.



Fig. 2 – Hammath Tiberias mosaic. Source: Yaffa England, `Mosaics as Midrash: The Zodiacs of the Ancient Synagogues and the Conflict between Judaism and Christianity`, in *Review of Rabbinic Judaism*, Jun. 2013, vol. 6, Issue 2/3, p. 189-214.

The recurrence of the victorious representations of the Sun is due to the dimensions of the solar cult in late antiquity, from which there remained iconographical representations and texts as well. We can thereby think of Heliodorus' *Aethiopika*, for example, depicting the lost and found daughter of the emperor reigning over the land of sun. The Joseph description reflects the relationship between cosmology and imperial ideology in the first centuries; according to this cosmology, every being comes down on Earth from a celestial body and takes over the features of that particular body it originates from. As the terrestrial hierarchy mirrors the celestial one, the highest office on earth can't be depicted other than in terms of solar symbolism. The imperial ideology feeds the belief in a Sun creating the Time, since this would make it easier for royalty to state its eternal character¹⁵.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*



Fig. 3 – Sepphoris Zodiac: Yaffa England, `Mosaics as Midrash: The Zodiacs of the Ancient Synagogues and the Conflict between Judaism and Christianity`, in *Review of Rabbinic Judaism*, Jun. 2013, vol. 6, Issue 2/3, p. 189-214.

Unlike the foreign versions (all of which pertain to the long recension family), the Romanian manuscripts do not offer a description of the angel that visits Aseneth after her self-imposed penitence. However, he is still the celestial double of Joseph:

And when Aseneth had ceased making confession to the Lord behold, the morning star rose out of heaven in the east. And Aseneth saw it and rejoiced and said, <<So the Lord God listened to my prayer, because the star rose as a messenger and herald of the light of the great day>>. And Aseneth kept looking, and behold, close to the morning star, the heaven was torn apart and great and unutterable light appeared. And Aseneth saw (it) and fell on (her) face on the ashes. And a man came to her from heaven and stood by Aseneth's head. [...] And Aseneth raised her head and saw, and behold, (there was) a man in every respect similar to Joseph, by the robe and the crown and the royal staff, except that his face was like lightning, and his eyes like sunshine, and the hairs of his head like

*a flame of fire of a burning torch, and hands and feet like iron shining forth from a fire, and sparks shot forth from his hands and feet*¹⁶

It has been considered that the Helios figure is the model both for the portrayal of the angel and for the fragment in which he traces two lines on the honeycomb (one horizontal, one vertical). The long recension describes the symbolic gesture of the angel tracing two blood lines, first from east to west, second from north to south. This has appropriately been read as a Christian episode, converging to the allegorical interpretation that sees in Joseph a hypostasis of Jesus Christ, and in Aseneth, the Church. On the other hand, Kraemer argues, the two crossing lines on the honeycomb are not unrelated to the iconography of Helios' globe, as it can be found on the Hammath Tiberias mosaic¹⁷. The image is thought to recall the representations of Cosmos as a circle divided in four quadrants, representing the four corners of the world divided by the Equator and the Meridian.

Whereas Joseph and his angelic double are modelled after the image of Sun, Aseneth is representative of the Moon and her avatars in Septuagint: `Like the mother of the seven Maccabees among the sacred circle of her sons, Aseneth, surrounded by the seven virgins, is nothing else but the nocturnal luminary. This is what accounts for the fact that the author could borrow motifs from the legend of Helen – Selene to make use of them in *Joseph and Aseneth*¹⁸. During the reclusion in her tower, Aseneth passes through a transformation which would make her fit to be married to Joseph and assimilated by Jews. Whereas the hypostasis of the virgin disdainful of men is fit to an Artemis figure, the liminal phase of mourning and disintegration of the old status touches upon the symbolism of Persephone. The virgin, the wife, and the witch point to Hecate of the three paths¹⁹, of which it said to be `Selene or Moon in the sky, Artemis on earth and Persephone in Inferno²⁰. The Moon epitome is thus grounded in the rite

¹⁶ *Joseph and Aseneth*, in *Old Testament Pseudepigrapha*, p. 225. Romanian version: *Și dacă sfârși Asinetha ispovedania spre Dumnezeu, iată, răsări luceafăr luminat spre ceriu dăspre răsărit. Și să veseli Asinetha și dacă l-au văzut zise: „Oare auzit-au Domnul ruga mea, că această stea în ceriu iaste?” Iar căută Asinetha și văzu apropiindu-se lumina, pârîndu-i că au crăpat ceriul. Și deaca văzu Asinetha căzu cu fața la pământ și, iată, veni un om din ceriu și stătu la capul Asinethii și o strigă. [...] Și i-au pus mîna în cap și să temea Asinetha de mîna omului, că-i lăsa mîna schintei, ca un hier arsu.* (Ms. Rom. B.A.R. 2338)

¹⁷ Ross Kraemer, *op. cit.*, 166.

¹⁸ Marc Philonenko, *op. cit.*, 81.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ Anna Ferrari, *Dicționar de mitologie greacă și romană*, translated by Dragoș Cojocaru, Emanuela Stoleriu and Dana Zamosteanu, Polirom, 2003, p. 402.

of passage that separates the inexperienced and self-absorbed maiden and the wise bride.



Fig. 4 - Hecate Chiaramonti: <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hecate>

The Hecate archetype is in line with the three windows of Aseneth's room. However, the Romanian versions mention four windows facing the four directions, a sign that if the anonymous author had in mind the Hecate figure, it got lost in the process of translation and transmission of copies. In the context of the Hellenistic influence over late antiquity, Aseneth's resemblance to the Moon could find justification in the high rank accorded to virginity, which reminds us of Artemis. Still, the Moon archetype correlated to Aseneth is much more discreet than the solar model of Joseph.

The central episode is built on a honeycomb making a mysterious apparition in Aseneth's room. At his word, bees start flying from it: some of them lay honey on her lips, others try to bite her. After that, the `good` bees fly out on the window and rise to the sky, whereas the `bad` one fall dead to the ground. With a view to the later episode when Aseneth is announced she will be `the salvation of many peoples`, the bee episode can be read as a prefiguration of the trials that People of Israel would have to bear against the Gentiles. Among the

episodes in Septuagint where honey plays a part is the description of honey and milk flowing in the Promised Land (Deut. 26.9), as a parallel to the `City of Salvation` that Aseneth is to become. Another Old Testament reference is the `honey from the rock` that God used to feed the people of Jacob (Deut. 32.10-13). The beehive, like the eagle nest, is the refuge offered to the Jewish people; the honeycomb has been interpreted in the same paradigm, as a symbol for the salvation offered by God²¹.

Mystic echoes of the episode come from neo-platonic sources stating that the souls of the dead are incarnated as bees. The reference travels through the Mediterranean history: Pliny and Aristotle write that the souls of the righteous are incarnated in bees, for the bees have a divine touch; the idea is taken over in Virgil's *Georgics*. To Porphyry, bees symbolize the souls of the righteous who die on Earth and are reborn in Paradise²². The Greco-Roman antiquity establishes a close connection between bees and muses, translated in the belief that the one fed by the bees receives simultaneously the gift of poetry. In ancient thought, those who benefit from the gifts of the bees are the poets and the orators. Even if Aseneth's transformation into a City of Salvation does not exclude an intention of proselytism from the author's part, the female character does not become an apostle of the Jewish creed. If we tend to see honey as gift of wise speech, the correspondence can be found in the second part of the text, in a secondary episode, when Aseneth addresses Joseph's brothers a plea for forgiveness. The `gifts` of the bees should be sought after some other part than rhetoric, and a starting point can be found in the proximity between the apocryphal text and Jewish mysticism. Kraemer cites the passage where Porphyry finds an equivalence between bees and nymphs on the grounds of the quality honey shares with waters, that of preventing the composition of matter. In Neo-Platonism, the bees are associated both to the state of the souls after death and to the souls yet non-incarnated. According to the same doctrine, bees are asexual, which harmonizes with the Angel's observation that Aseneth became similar to a young man.

The honey symbol has still more to offer: once the couple is fulfilled, we can speculate they become similar to the primordial couple, Adam and Eve, and the touch of immortality is transferred upon Aseneth. The gnostic roots of the text stand the association between Aseneth and Wisdom, the first of the virtues. Even turning from the Christian layer of interpretation back to the ancient thought, bees

²¹ Anatheia E. Portier-Young, *Sweet Mercy Metropolis: Interpreting Aseneth's Honeycomb*, in *Journal for the Study of the Pseudepigrapha*, 14/2005, p. 151.

²² Anna Ferrari, *op. cit.*, p. 51.

bestow upon the woman attributes of the ideal femininity of the time: chastity, fidelity, mastery over domestic affairs²³.

From the point of view of its literariness, *Joseph and Aseneth* is clearly a romance, as it features the tribulations of a separated couple before being reunited into marriage. However, the first part of the story does not take delight in imaginative plotting, as it was the case with the ancient Greek romance, but stresses the importance of conversion. There is at stake the issue of knowledge, disguised as the heroine's quest from darkness to light, all of which is seen from the perspective of an orthodox Jewish author. Identity was at the core of ancient romance – the whole *Ethiopian Story*, for example, follows in the traces of a child girl exposed for not being black (as her parents were) and then travelling home without her knowing where she was heading. In the end, truth comes to the surface and the heroine is recognized as the royal heir. The issue of recognition is central to *Joseph and Aseneth* too, but here spiritual community overcomes family ties. This apocryph conceived as a plea in favor of Jewish identity makes use of one of the oldest devices of prose, which Aristotle names *anagnorisis*. His *Poetics* defines it as passage from ignorance to awareness in a moment that can turn the whole story upside down. Since it produces such unexpected course of events, it has mainly been despised by critics as a facile means of composition. However, it is present in biblical narratives (if we are only to think about how many time apostles failed to see in Jesus the Son of God) and it lay writings as well. *Joseph and Aseneth* is then skillfully enveloping the theme of love inspired by Jewish mysticism in a literary device well-sold and well-spread. As it is generally the case, it is not the theme which gives value to a work, but rather the treatment of recognition ennobles this old device. Aseneth's penitence is very similar to the 'passage through darkness'²⁴ that Philo of Alexandria speaks about and her coming to knowledge is not as rational as it was the case in the Greek novel. The logical spirit of Greek *theoria* is transformed in Hellenistic Judaism in a type of knowledge rather felt than acquired by the powers of thought alone.

This paper is supported by the Sectorial Operational Programme Human Resources Development (SOP HRD), financed from the European Social Fund and by the Romanian Government under the contract number SOP HRD/1599/1.5/S/136077.

²³ Sabrina Inowlocki, *Wisdom and Apocalypticism in Aseneth*, Oxford University, 2004, http://www.sbl-site.org/assets/pdfs/Inowlocki_Aseneh.pdf.

²⁴ Marie-Madeleine Davy, *Enciclopedia doctinelor mistice*, translated by Olimpia Berca, Constanța Ciocârlie, Constantin Făgețean et. al., Amarcord, Timișoara, 1997, p. 188.

Works cited:

1. ****Poveaste foarte de folos pentru Iosif și Asinetha*, in Romanian Manuscript 2338, Library of Romanian Academy.
2. BATIFFOL, P. (1889-1890). *Le Livre de la prière d'Aséneth*, Studia Patristica: Études d'ancienne littérature chrétienne, 1-2, Paris, Leroux.
3. BOBULESCU, Constantin (1922). *Istoria frumosului Iosif și a prea frumoasei Asineta: după un manuscris din 1753*, Casa Școalelor, București.
4. BURCHARD, C. (1985). *Joseph and Aseneth*, in *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha*, ed. By James H. Charlesworth, vol. 2, Doubleday&Company, Inc., Garden City, New York.
5. CARTOJAN, N. (1974). *Cărțile populare în literatura românească*, vol. 2, *Epoca influenței grecești*, Editura Enciclopedică Română, București.
6. DAVY, Marie-Madeleine (1997). *Enciclopedia doctrinelor mistice*, translated by Olimpia Berca, Constanța Ciocârlie, Constantin Făgețean et. al., Amarcord, Timișoara.
7. FERRARI, Anna (2003). *Dicționar de mitologie greacă și romană*, translated by Dragoș Cojocaru, Emanuela Stoleriu and Dana Zamosteanu, Polirom, Iași.
8. INOWLOCKI, Sabrina (2004). *Wisdom and Apocalypticism in Aseneth*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, http://www.sbl-site.org/assets/pdfs/Inowlocki_Aseneth.pdf (last consulted on 04.03.2015, 13:48).
10. KRAEMER, Ross (1998). *When Aseneth Met Joseph. A Late Antique Tale of the Biblical Patriarch and His Egyptian Wife, Reconsidered*, Oxford University Press, Oxford.
11. OTTO, Rudolf (1993). *Mistica Orientului și a Occidentului*, translated by Mihail Grădinaru and Friedrich Michael, pref. Mihail Grădinaru, Septentrion, Iași.
12. PHILONENKO, Marc (1968). *Joseph et Aséneth. Introduction, texte critique, traduction et notes*, E. J. Brill, Leiden.
13. PORTIER-YOUNG, Anthea E. (2005). *Sweet Mercy Metropolis: Interpreting Aseneth's Honeycomb*, in *Journal for the Study of the Pseudepigrapha*, nr. 14, pp. 133-157.