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# THE LOST GOSPEL

Decoding the Ancient Text that Reveals  
Jesus' Marriage to Mary the Magdalene

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TRANSLATION OF THE SYRIAC MANUSCRIPT BY TONY BURKE



PEGASUS BOOKS  
NEW YORK LONDON

*Dedicated to Amnon Rosenfeld (ז"ל)—scholar, friend and truth seeker.*  
*(1944–2014)*

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—Simch



*For my grandchildren—  
Jacob, Noah, Eden, Thalia, Jackson, Ryder  
and for those yet to be born*

—Barr

# CONTENTS

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PREFACE | Marriage, Sex, Children

## PART I | A MYSTERIOUS MANUSCRIPT

- 1 | Manuscript 17,202
- 2 | What Does It Say? . . . and What Does It Not Say?
- 3 | What Do We Know About the Manuscript?
- 4 | When Was It Written?
- 5 | Is There More to this Story Than Meets the Eye?

## PART II | DECODING THE MANUSCRIPT

- 6 | What's the Most Important Clue?
- 7 | Joseph
- 8 | Aseneth
- 9 | Aseneth: Her Story
- 10 | Joseph: His Story
- 11 | The Greatest Wedding of All Time
- 12 | Jesus and a Gentile
- 13 | The Plot: Kill Jesus, Abduct Mary the Magdalene, and Murder the Kids
- 14 | The Villain
- 15 | The Power Politics Behind the Crucifixion

## PART III | IMPLICATIONS

- 16 | Conclusion
- 17 | Postscript

## APPENDICES | THE LOST GOSPEL

- I | *Joseph and Aseneth* translated from the Syriac
- II | Letter to Moses of Ingila and His Reply

Illustrations

Endnotes

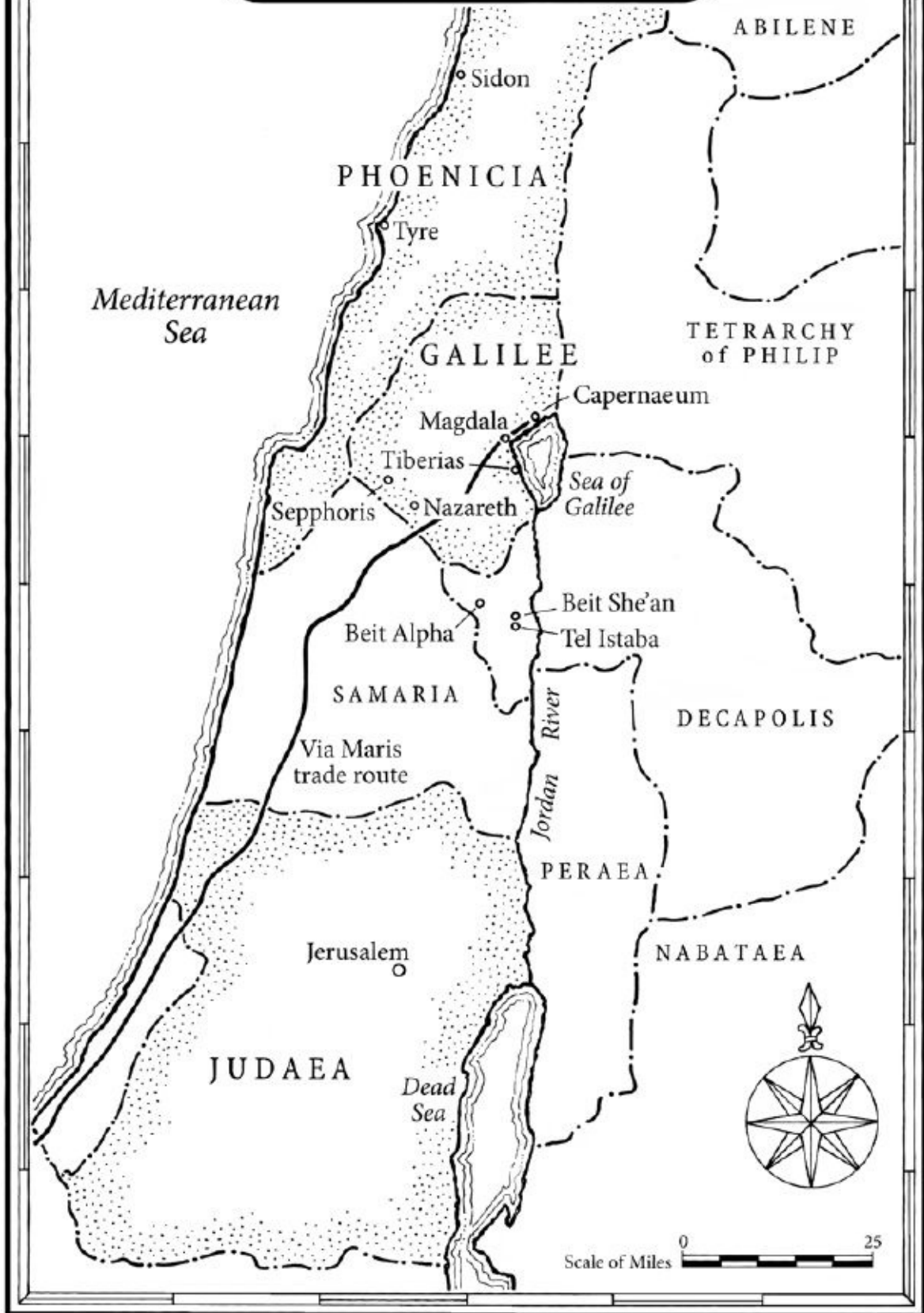
Suggestions for Further Reading

Acknowledgments

About the Authors

Index

# The World of THE LOST GOSPEL



## MARRIAGE, SEX, CHILDREN

What you are about to read is a detective story. We have uncovered an ancient writing that is encrypted with a hidden meaning. In the process of decoding it, we'll take you on a journey into the world of this mysterious text. What the Vatican feared—and Dan Brown only suspected—has come true. There is now written evidence that Jesus was married to Mary the Magdalene<sup>1</sup> and that they had children together. More than this, based on the new evidence, we now know what the original Jesus movement looked like and the unexpected role sexuality played in it. We have even unraveled the politics behind the crucifixion, as well as the events and the people that took part in it.

Gathering dust in the British Library is a document that takes us into the missing years of Jesus' life. Scholars believe that Jesus was born around 5 B.C.E. (B.C.) and that he was crucified around 30 C.E. (A.D.).<sup>2</sup> But there is a huge gap in his biography. We know absolutely nothing about Jesus from the time he was eight days old (his circumcision, according to Jewish law), until he was in his early thirties. There is one exception. According to the Gospel of Luke (2:41–2:51), when he was twelve years old, Jesus traveled with his parents to Jerusalem to celebrate Passover. That's it. That's all we have. Otherwise, thirty years of absolute silence.

Isn't this incredible? Here is arguably the most influential individual in human history and we know nothing about him until after he starts his "ministry" (i.e., his public activism) at most thirty years before his crucifixion. But the fact is that we simply have no information about Jesus' early years—his upbringing, friends, schooling, or his interaction with family members. We have no knowledge of Jesus as a young adult. How did he gain access to the writings of the Hebrew Bible? Did the synagogue in Nazareth, a very small hamlet at the time, have scrolls of the Law and the Prophets? Who were his religious teachers? How well versed was he in Hebrew, in addition to the Aramaic that we know he spoke? Did he speak Greek, the lingua franca of the Roman world?

Jesus appears on the stage of history suddenly in the late 20s C.E. At this point, the mature Jesus announces the "Kingdom of God"—that is, the advent of a qualitative transformation in human history, prophesied by the Hebrew Bible, in which justice will reign upon the earth and the worship of the one true God will be universal.

But what happened to Jesus before this sudden appearance? According to the document that we've uncovered, sometime during this period he became engaged, got married, had sexual relations, and produced children. Before anyone gets his/her theological back up, keep in mind that we are not attacking anyone's theology. We are reporting on a text. Theology must follow historical fact and not the other way around. Having said this, for the moment, we are not asserting that our text is historical fact. So far, we are merely stating that the Christian Bible tells us nothing about Jesus' early years and that we have discovered a text that claims that he was married and fathered children.

On a purely historical level, this really shouldn't surprise us. Marriage and children were expected of a Jewish man, then and now. If he hadn't been married, that would have caused consternation to his family, possible scandal in the community, and the New Testament certainly would have commented

on it—if for no other reason than to explain and defend Jesus’ unusual behavior. But now we have a document that claims that he was indeed married and fathered children. Not only this, our document indicates that for some of his original followers, Jesus’ marriage was the most important aspect of their theology.

## A Sudden Insight

Before we proceed, we need to clarify one more thing: we don’t claim to have excavated a long-lost text. What we do claim is to have found a centuries-old manuscript in a long-forgotten corner of a library. Such a discovery is not without precedent. For example, in 1873, in a library in Constantinople, a Greek priest found a text known as the *Didache*. It dates back to at least the beginning of the 2nd century, maybe even earlier, “making it as old as some of the books included in the New Testament canon.”<sup>3</sup> The *Didache* gives us a glimpse into a pre-Pauline Christianity: that is, Christianity before the Apostle Paul reworked it. In the *Didache*, the Eucharist is a simple thanksgiving meal. There is no mention of Paul’s idea that the bread represents Jesus’ flesh and the wine his blood.<sup>4</sup> In similar fashion, we have also found a text that gives us a glimpse into the earliest writings concerning Jesus and his followers. Later versions of this text have been known to a small coterie of scholars for over a hundred years. They have been baffled, however, by its message and its purpose. As a result, it has occupied esoteric corners of academic research largely unnoticed and certainly unheralded.

What we also claim is to have gone back to the text’s earliest existing version, translated it, and decoded its meaning. As we will demonstrate, the document in question is a very loosely disguised Gospel. It was probably encoded by a persecuted community of Christians so as to spare their group’s literature from the bonfires of their oppressors.

How did we come across the manuscript, and how did we discover its meaning?

Oddly enough, the discovery of the manuscript’s meaning came through an epiphany, a sudden blast of insight. We were both in Turkey en route to Ephesus in July 2008, filming an episode on Palestine for the Associated Producers’ History Channel documentary series, *Secrets of Christianity*. For our research, we had been mulling over puzzling texts from early Christianity—what they might mean and what new insights they could give us about the various groups that followed Jesus in the earliest days of his movement. Our discussion included a little-known text that highlights two figures from the Hebrew Bible.<sup>5</sup> The figures in question are Joseph, the Israelite of multi-color-coat fame who in the Book of Genesis is sold by his brothers into slavery and ends up as a ruler in Egypt, and his obscure Egyptian wife, Aseneth.

As Biblical historical researchers, we knew that the few scholars who had examined this text—dubbed *Joseph and Aseneth*—had expressed bewilderment over its meaning. We initially surmised that it might have something to do with Jesus—after all, the text was preserved in Christian monasteries. Also, the Joseph in the story is depicted—in scholarly language—as a savior-figure. He is an ancient Israelite who saved his people from extinction and the Egyptians from starvation. Following up on this idea, we began to explore the possibility that the Joseph in question might be a stand-in for Jesus. Right away, the parallel was easy to see. After all, Joseph, like Jesus, was assumed dead and turned up alive; he too had humble beginnings and ended up a king of sorts. Despite the parallels, however, we realized that we had no smoking gun to justify equating the Joseph of *Joseph and Aseneth* with the Jesus of the Gospels.

We now turned our attention to the woman of the story. Could Joseph’s partner, Aseneth, turn out to be a stand-in for Jesus’ partner, likely Mary the Magdalene? We weren’t at all sure about the identification. After all, even if she was a stand-in for his wife, there are other possibilities for Jesus’

partner. For example, another Mary—Mary of Bethany—and her sister Martha were also close to Jesus. According to the Gospels, he often used their home in Bethany—which was within easy walking distance of Jerusalem—as his base of operations.

But the symbolism associated with Aseneth in the text—which we will be decoding throughout this book—couldn't be ignored: she lives in a tower, she has a heavenly and an earthly wedding, she partakes of a magical honeycomb, and she is especially associated with bees. In the story, they swarm her, try to sting her, die, and are resurrected. What is this all about? If the Joseph in our manuscript is Jesus, what do bees have to do with his wife, whoever she might be?

All this perplexed us as we traveled from Antioch and Tarsus in eastern Turkey toward Ephesus in the west. How could we make sense of the obscure *Joseph and Aseneth* text? We were sure that on some level it must be comprehensible. But what could we make of those strange symbols it alludes to? Into what surreal space had we landed? Since we couldn't answer these questions, we decided to shelve the idea of doing further detective work on the manuscript.

But that all changed in Ephesus.

In Ephesus, Turkish authorities allowed us to get within an inch of the imposing statue of the goddess Artemis. This statue, now in a local museum, had originally graced Ephesus' spectacular Temple of Artemis, one of the seven wonders of the ancient world. We now found ourselves standing before the great goddess. Millions—literally millions—in the ancient world had adored her and prayed to her for health, healing, and prosperity. Standing in her presence, we were able to notice details that visitors could not see from fifteen or twenty feet away. For example, we observed that her garment was covered with—bees.

More than this, multiple protrusions cling to her chest. These have perplexed scholars for centuries. Some identified them as breasts. They argued that since Artemis was a nourishing goddess, she must have had dozens of breasts. This theory was accepted by academics for many years until someone noted that the protrusions on her body were too low, didn't look anything like breasts, and don't have the requisite nipples. Others then conjectured that the protrusions must be bulls' testicles. After all, bulls were sacrificed to Artemis, and the testicles must have been something like notches on her belt. There's no need to comment on this theory, although it still has several academic adherents.

Standing before Artemis, it all came together for us. Suddenly, the meaning of the protrusions became apparent—they were bee cocoons or, more accurately, queen bee cells. Just as there were bees clinging to Aseneth, here were bees clinging to Artemis.

Our eyes now tracked to the top of the statue. There, crowning her head, was a tall tower. As in our manuscript, just as Aseneth lived in a tower, here was a tower crowning the goddess Artemis.

We looked at each other at the same time and immediately blurted out with the excitement of children: "Could these be the bees and tower we have been puzzling over in our *Joseph and Aseneth* text?" Suddenly, our text came into sharp focus. It began to make sense, and the light began to dawn. As we went back and forth between statue and text, text and statue, we gradually came to see how the image of Joseph's partner, Aseneth, was modeled on the goddess Artemis. So whomever she might represent historically, she was likened to this figure. In time, we came to see what these symbols really meant.

Put simply, in order to convey the stature of Aseneth—perhaps Mary the Magdalene—to his audience, the unknown author of our manuscript selected a dominant image of his culture, one that he could be sure his readers would readily understand. He took the well-known figure of the goddess Artemis and used her symbols to clothe the depiction of Aseneth. While headquartered in Ephesus, the worship of Artemis flourished all over the Greek and Roman world. Unlike most other local deities, the worship of Artemis boasted religious sanctuaries around the entire Mediterranean basin—from



modern-day Spain, Greece, and Turkey to Africa, Jordan, and even Israel.

Now our work began in earnest. As we went through the text systematically, we figured out what the symbols meant by doing something that the few scholars who were familiar with this text had not done—we looked back in time to learn how early Christians understood these symbols. We examined ancient writings and sermons to see how the first followers of Jesus understood Biblical figures like Joseph. This was critical: we wanted to see how early Christians understood their own writings.

This detective work took us into the realm of Syriac-speaking Christianity—little understood today's world but highly influential in antiquity—as well as into the world of so-called Gnostic Christianity: that is, early Christian mysticism. A door opened to a lost world of early Christian understanding.

We worked jointly over several years, puzzling over the clues given within the document. Without getting ahead of our story, we eventually realized that our overlooked manuscript—ostensibly about *Joseph and Aseneth*—was really about Jesus and Mary the Magdalene. Not only that, it was also about their marriage and the previously unknown politics that surrounded their activism, including the events that led up to the crucifixion. All the imagery and symbolism dovetailed.

At one point, we realized that our obscure manuscript is really a lost Gospel and that it is less about Jesus and more about Mary. What the manuscript is really about is Mary as “the Bride of God.” On one level, it is a gripping love story: first meeting, first impressions, wedding preparations, the ceremony, and then the offspring. On another level, it is also a tale of politics, intrigue, betrayal, and mysticism.

As we pored through the manuscript, we realized that while knowledge of the marriage had been relegated to historical rumor, it never really went away. In fact, it is actually very impressive how the tradition refused to disappear. Over the centuries, it has been resurrected in different ways and in different places. Nonetheless, the stories are, for the most part, surprisingly consistent. In his chronicle of the Albigensian Crusade, Pierre Vaux de Cernay wrote in 1213 that the townspeople of Béziers were burned alive on the feast day of Mary Magdalene (22 July 1209) in retribution for “the scandalous assertion that Mary Magdalene and Christ were lovers.”<sup>6</sup> During the Renaissance Michelangelo sculpted a Pietà that was meant for his own tomb. Today, it is in the Museo dell'Opera del Duomo in Florence. The composition shows a group of people crowded around Jesus just after the crucifixion. Surprisingly, Jesus' leg is slung over one of the women. The slung leg is a Renaissance code indicating a sexual relationship.

There is a 16th-century Renaissance painting by Luca Cambiasi that can act as a cipher for Michelangelo's sculpture. Today, Cambiasi's painting is in the Hermitage in St. Petersburg. It depicts Venus and Adonis in the same way Michelangelo depicts Jesus and Mary—slung leg and all. In other words, Michelangelo depicted Jesus and Mary the Magdalene in the way Cambiasi depicted a Greek god and his divine consort.

Another example of the enduring nature of the heavenly marriage is associated with Rennes-le-Château in France. In 1885, a parish priest named Bérenger Saunière is said to have found secret coded documents hidden in a hollow pillar in an 11th-century church in the town. This has given rise to endless *Da Vinci Code*-type speculations. According to the various theories, the secret texts reveal Mary the Magdalene's marriage to Jesus.

And it's not just in writings and art that the marriage theme finds expression. More recently, for example, a popular song by U2 (“Until the End of the World,” from their album *Achtung Baby*, 1991) refers to Jesus and Mary the Magdalene as a bride and groom. In a song called “Jesus Had a Son” (from their *Long John Silver* album, 1972), Jefferson Airplane belt out “Jesus had a son by Mary Magdalene. . . .” In other words, Jesus' marriage to Mary the Magdalene is not an unknown idea. It

part of the substrata of our culture—and here we were looking at a document that took us back to the source of this idea.

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But why did the marriage have to go underground? If this was historical fact, why did it have to become historical rumor? Why was it relegated to our culture's fringes? Why was Mary the Magdalene written out, as it were, from the authorized accounts of Jesus' life? In other words, why has this chapter in Jesus' life been covered up? When it came to our manuscript, why did the authors have to encode the text to preserve it? Now, at last, we had a decoded document that could answer all these questions.

## Surprises

Reading the document from our new perspective, readers will be startled to learn about the human side of Jesus . . . and what this aspect of Jesus meant to his early followers. The new information gleaned from our lost Gospel will flesh out an aspect of Jesus only hinted at in the canonical texts. Clearly, in their attempt to assert his divinity, the latter tend to gloss over the details of Jesus' personal life.

Unexpectedly, through this text, we came across a whole new early Christian movement—one that was vastly different from the Jewish messianic movement led by James, the brother of Jesus, and from the Gentile "Christ Movement" led by Paul which, eventually, became Christianity as we know it today. In fact, the group of Jesus followers that we've rediscovered predates Paul and takes us into a now-lost world that has been inaccessible for centuries.

The early centuries of Christianity were exciting, gut-wrenching, noisy times, as factions jostled with one another—even battled vigorously with each other—over how best to understand Jesus—the man, his mission, and his message. According to Marvin Meyer, several of these factions "showed remarkable similarities to the mystery religions" of the Roman Empire.<sup>7</sup> The "mystery" religions involved secret teachings and secret rituals of initiation. Often these included the use of drugs, sex, and altered states of mind. Until the interventions of the Roman emperors Constantine and Theodosius in the 4th century, there wasn't one right, orthodox, or catholic (i.e., universal) expression of the faith. But eventually, one version of Christianity—Paul's version focusing on the resurrected "Christ" as opposed to the historical Jesus—was endorsed by the power of the Roman Empire. After that, multiple Christianities disappeared. Suddenly, there was only one correct version sanctioned by the Roman state. Those versions that did not make it into the official canon were dubbed heresies and consigned to the flames.

Today, conditioned by thousands of years of Pauline Christianity, it seems outlandish to talk, for example, of a married Jesus. The simple fact is that we live inside the post-Constantine box. In the post-Constantine era, talking about a married Jesus is akin to reporting on alien abductions. According to the mainstream—even the secular mainstream—the orthodox narrative is right or, at least, it is the only narrative with a shot at being right. By definition, every other narrative is wrong or at least far-fetched.

However, when we look at the first centuries of Christian development, we shouldn't make the anachronistic mistake of thinking that everyone agreed with Paul and the version of Christianity that we've inherited from him. More than this, his version did not represent the normative expression of the new faith. The original movements in Jerusalem—the Gnostics, the Ebionites, and the Nazarenes—all disagreed with Paul's version of Jesus' message.

In many ways, the Christianity of the first few centuries was much more varied than the religion we have today. Some might object, saying that that we live in a multi-denominational Christian world. But in some ways, this is an illusion. The fact is that Catholics, Orthodox, Anglicans, Reformation and post-Reformation Protestants (e.g., Presbyterians, Lutherans, etc.), and Evangelicals all trace their spiritual

lineage to the theology of Paul. However different they are from each other, and however important they think these theological differences are, all five contemporary Christian groupings represent variations on the same theme: Pauline Christianity.

But our text gives a voice to those who lost out. In the manuscript, for example, we encounter non-Pauline theology of redemption. Our lost Gospel is essentially a story of salvation—but it represents a perspective that's not familiar to us today, even though it was believed by many in the early church. It advances a theology of human liberation markedly different from the one we have inherited from Paul and his followers. It is a theology based on Jesus' marriage, not his death; on his moments of joy, not the "passion" of his suffering.

## **An Unknown Plot**

Besides giving us previously unknown details of Jesus' private life, our text reveals details of his political life. Specifically, in our manuscript, we uncover the story of a plot against Jesus' life prior to his arrest and crucifixion in Jerusalem. Jesus was clearly a marked man—and he knew it. Especially after the execution of his cousin, John the Baptizer,<sup>9</sup> by none other than Herod Antipas, the ruler of two Roman territories: the Galilee in northern Israel, and Peraea in modern Jordan.

Jesus had many opponents and enemies. The entire Herodian party—i.e., Herod's extended family and its supporters—was literally out to get him. Jesus' enemies also included other powerful people such as the High Priest Caiaphas in Jerusalem, as well as the Roman procurator/prefect Pontius Pilate and members of the occupying power, perhaps as far afield as Rome itself. Then, too, there were Jesus' Jewish debating partners and critics—the Pharisees and the Scribes.

The fact is that Jesus and his followers were well aware that the Roman authorities and the Jewish underlings were carefully watching them. No would-be "King of the Jews" could, of course, escape detection—at least, not for long.

Jesus' message was radical and seditious: "Coming soon—the 'Kingdom of God.'" Simply proclaiming that the Kingdom of God was on the cusp of history represented a forceful challenge to the viability and continuity of Roman rule over Jewish Judaea. Jesus went further: he claimed that many in his audience would live to see the redemption—that is, the end of Roman rule and its replacement by God's Kingdom. That's a fantastic assertion. It raised huge expectations. Jesus' powerful message tapped deeply into the messianic dream of ancient Israel. God, it was thought, would intervene in human affairs by sending a Moses-like messenger, or messiah. All evil empires—and peoples—would be swept away, Romans included, into the garbage heap of history. And all this was going to happen not in some distant future but now. Right now.

Given all this, the Romans had an excellent reason to monitor Jesus and his potentially seditious group. Equally, ordinary Jewish folk—Jesus' countrymen—had especially good reasons to become enthused. This was an explosive situation. That Jesus' period of activism—his so-called ministry—may have lasted three years is remarkable given the incendiary nature of his preaching. His message wasn't just religious: it was profoundly political and potentially threatening to established authority. Incredibly, the political side of Jesus has been vastly underrated. By highlighting an unknown plot against his life, prior to the one recounted in the Gospels, our rediscovered text places the Jesus story back in the historical/political context from which it has been extracted.

## **A Hidden Message**

We now embark on our detective work. As we scrutinize each section, the document in question occupies center stage in our investigation. We make no assumptions. We start at the beginning and let the text speak for itself.

Along the way, as the investigation unfolds, we'll also consider why a group of early Christians would think they had to disguise this history, composing for us a narrative that requires decoding. Indeed, why did they preserve this writing for posterity?

What we will soon discover is that encoded documents were not unusual in the world of early Christianity. It may seem strange to us today, but the early Christians thought the Old Testament—which preceded Jesus—was also a coded text. They believed that its real message became apparent only after Jesus' ministry. Jesus, too, veiled his central teaching concerning the Kingdom of God in parables. This reinforced the early Christian belief in the need to decipher hidden meanings in sacred scriptures. In other words, encoding and decoding was part and parcel of early Christian theology.<sup>10</sup>

For our part, we'll do something that scholars so far have failed to do with respect to early Christianity. When analyzing this particular text, we're the first to use the actual decoding techniques employed by early Christians themselves. From their writings and sermons that have remarkably survived the centuries, they will tell us—in their own words—what this ancient manuscript really means. What we're presenting is not some alien, modern-day take on the material. Rather, it is one that arises organically, out of the way in which communities within early Christianity understood Biblical writings.

In this document, against those who would seek to quell its message, we hear a voice that struggled to be heard. The censors include not only Romans but also Christians who did not share the perspective of the author of our Gospel. Certainly Paul and his followers would have rejected the views, as they objected to anything pertaining to Jesus' family. Paul and his followers were, after all, hostile not only to Mary the Magdalene, but also to James, Jesus' brother, who took over the leadership of Jesus' movement after the crucifixion.

## **Here's the Clincher**

Hidden messages, a secret history, a lost Gospel, encoding and decoding—pretty heady stuff. But, to our absolute amazement, we discovered that we weren't the first to think that our text contains hidden meaning. In the course of our investigation, we came across an ancient Syriac letter, never before translated into any modern language, that indicated that the person in antiquity who first discovered our document also suspected that it contained a secret message, an embedded truth.

We don't know the name of that person. He was likely a monk. But we have the nearly fifteen-hundred-year-old letter he sent to the translator he commissioned. He obviously intuited that it contained something very, very important. Around 550 C.E. he found our manuscript in a Greek version. Not very familiar with that language, he sent it to a scholar named Moses of Ingila<sup>11</sup> for translation into Syriac. The translation he requested represents the oldest extant manuscript of our work, a copy of a now-lost, much-older Greek writing. The anonymous man who commissioned the translation also asked Moses of Ingila to tell him its inner meaning. We don't know if Moses of Ingila ever did oblige, but now, some 1,460 years after his written request, we are pleased that this book provides this ancient truth-seeker with the answer he was looking for: a disclosure of its hidden meaning.

Here's our approach: first, we will present a synopsis of our manuscript by way of an overview. Without going into all the rich details of the story, we'll give the reader a précis of what it says. Then we'll take the reader through the surface narrative. Here we identify the questions that prompted us to look beyond its superficial story line and issues that point to a deeper underlying meaning. We invite the reader to partner with us in our detective work.

Next, we summarize what we know of this writing—its date and origin and what scholars say about the work.

After all this, we start making sense of our text by stepping into the world of early Christianity, so as to learn the original Christian approach to understanding scripture. Bit by bit, we decode the various elements of the story. In this book, we unravel the complex symbols and retrieve the original narrative.

Finally, we provide another first: an English translation of the oldest surviving manuscript of the ancient writing, the one written in Syriac.<sup>12</sup> This translation, along with commentary, is presented in Appendix I of this book so that you—the reader—can judge for yourself what the original narrative says. Two 6th-century covering letters to the manuscript are also translated for the first time from Syriac into English as Appendix II. Most exciting, we realized that a 13th-century censor literally took a knife to the manuscript and also covered certain words with ink. Using multi-spectral imaging, we were able to see these words for the first time in almost a thousand years.

# PART I

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## A MYSTERIOUS MANUSCRIPT

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## MANUSCRIPT 17,202

Located in the British Library is a manuscript dating to around 570 C.E. It was acquired on November 11, 1847. The man who sold it was an Egyptian by the name of Auguste Pacho, a native of Alexandria. Pacho got the ancient text from the Macarios monastery in Egypt. Founded in the 6th century C.E. and located between Cairo and Alexandria in the Nitrian Valley, Macarios is one of the oldest Syrian monasteries in the world. The manuscript left the monastery in July but en route to the UK, Pacho made a stop over in Paris, probably selling other manuscripts to the libraries there. He finally made it to the UK in November and promptly sold the text to the British Museum, which then turned it over to the British Library.

The Macarios Monastery manuscript was filed under the unpretentious name *British Library Manuscript Number 17,202*. It's written in Syriac, a Middle Eastern language related to Aramaic, the language spoken by Jesus and many of his contemporaries. Titled *A Volume of Records of Events Which Have Shaped the World*, it's a collection of writings—a kind of miniature library. It represents an anonymous 6th-century monk's attempt to preserve a record of events which, in his view, were earth-shattering in their import. As a result, he includes in his collection an account of the conversion of the Emperor Constantine to Christianity; an important church history that relates the debates over the person of Christ; the finding of key 1st-century Christian relics; and a proof of eternal life provided by the once-famous legend of the "Seven Sleepers of Ephesus."

All hot topics in his day . . . and for his community of believers.

One manuscript does not seem to fit this collection of ostensibly important writings. It is called *The Story of Joseph the Just and Aseneth his Wife*. It's this writing that concerns us here. This is one mysterious text, and it represents the focus of our investigation.

*The Story of Joseph the Just and Aseneth his Wife* did not originate with the 6th-century monk who preserved it. It was translated into Syriac, as an anonymous letter-writer who introduces the work tells us, from a much earlier Greek work—perhaps a century or more earlier. Even that previous document was most likely a copy of a still earlier work. It was copied, like the New Testament documents themselves, by generations of dedicated scribes who toiled to preserve this precious tale for future readers. The story this Syriac manuscript relates, therefore, stretches back in history—beyond the 4th and 3rd centuries—as far back as the 2nd or perhaps even the 1st century C.E.

Put differently, the story that *British Library Manuscript Number 17,202* tells may go as far back as Jesus' lifetime or shortly thereafter. It reaches back to the time when the canonical Gospels found in the New Testament were being written. We cannot be absolutely sure of its dating. Nor can we be sure of the dating of the Gospels themselves. In this regard, most scholars date the Gospel of Mark around 70 C.E.; Matthew to the 80s; Luke to the 90s; and John from 90 onwards. These dates for original composition are based on historical reconstructions that take into account when their messages would best fit the development of early Christianity within the wider context of the Roman world. There are no New Testament manuscripts dating from the 1st century—hence no originals. The

earliest surviving complete copies of the Gospels date no earlier than the 4th century. In both cases—our manuscript and the canonical Gospels—we do not know who the author was. As in the Gospel there are no dates given within our manuscript concerning its authorship. Nor are there datable originals with which to compare our copy. We only have copies of copies of copies, written centuries after the original, and the manuscript trail takes us back only so far. And yet, our manuscript roughly dates to the same time as our earliest copies of the Gospels—maybe even earlier.

While the document in question went by many names in the ancient world, scholars today refer to it as *Joseph and Aseneth*. The work is a curious one. For one thing, its name is terribly misleading. It was dubbed *Joseph and Aseneth* because it purports to be about the ancient Israelite patriarch Joseph and his obscure Egyptian wife, Aseneth. According to the Biblical Book of Genesis (chapters 37–50), these individuals lived some thirty-seven hundred years ago, a few generations after Abraham but long before Moses and 1,500 to 1,700 years before the birth of Jesus of Nazareth.

In contrast to the Biblical story of *Joseph and Aseneth*, the British Library manuscript tells a seemingly different story. It is a tale of love, sacred sex, politics, betrayal, and murder.

Pretty hot stuff, even by ancient standards.

In fact, there is very little in the manuscript that corresponds to the Biblical account of *Joseph and Aseneth*. It's not the same story at all. There are too many details within the writing which invite—even demand—that we move beyond its superficial layer to its underlying meaning; a secret history, you will. In other words, we strongly suspect that the surface narrative is really a cover story for a much deeper message—one that makes eminent sense only in the context of the first days of Christianity.



# WHAT DOES IT SAY? . . . AND WHAT DOES IT NOT SAY?

To review: the British Library’s *Joseph and Aseneth* represents a very different story from the one found in the Book of Genesis. It seems to be using the names Joseph and Aseneth as ciphers, to tell us something very important, in a disguised fashion, about the history of two other individuals. In other words, hidden beneath the superficial narrative is a deeper, far more pressing message.

There are four episodes in our document. To clearly differentiate our commentary from the synopsis, we have separated out the latter and put it in different typeface. A complete translation of *Joseph and Aseneth* based on the original Syriac manuscript can be found as Appendix I.

Here, then, is *The Story of Joseph the Just and Aseneth his Wife*, the questions it raises, and the hidden history at which it hints.

## Episode 1: The Meeting

First impressions. Joseph’s prayer for Aseneth’s transformation.

### Synopsis

Joseph, the ancient Israelite patriarch, is in Egypt and approaches the city of Heliopolis. He sends messengers to Potiphar, a priest of Heliopolis and advisor to Pharaoh, indicating that he would like to have lunch with him. Potiphar has a beautiful daughter, Aseneth, an 18-year-old virgin who has shunned men. Joseph, too, is a virgin.

While Aseneth is an Egyptian, she is described as being “noble and glorious like Sarah, beautiful like Rebecca, and virtuous like Rachel” (1:5), the matriarchs of ancient Israel.

Potiphar’s estate is described in detail. It includes a house and a lush garden. Most importantly, it contains a tall tower. Aseneth lives on the top floor of the tower. She occupies a suite with ten rooms, which are described in detail including a room devoted to the host of deities. She is attended by seven beautiful virgins. Potiphar’s entire estate is enclosed with a wall and gates.

To greet Joseph, Aseneth puts on “garments of fine white linen and rubies” (3:6). She then places “a crown on her head and covered herself with bridal veils” (3:7). Her parents rejoice to see her “adorned like a Bride of God” (4:1). Potiphar describes Joseph as “the Powerful One of God” (3:4) and as “the savior” (4:7). He continues, telling Aseneth that Joseph “will be given to you as a bridegroom forever” (4:9).

Aseneth initially despises Joseph as a foreigner—“the son of a shepherd from Canaan” (4:11), she says dismissively—but when she sees him she quickly changes her mind. Joseph arrives in style in his golden chariot. He wears a white tunic and a purple robe and his head is adorned with a golden crown. Twelve golden rays of light “like the rays of the shining sun” (5:5) emanate from his head. There is a royal scepter in his left hand, a plant like an olive branch in his right. Aseneth quickly revises her first contemptuous impression. She says: “Now I see the sun shining from his chariot that has come to us” (6:2), adding that she hadn’t realized that “Joseph was the Son of God” (6:3).

Joseph eats separately from the Egyptians (presumably because of Jewish dietary concerns). Aseneth greets Joseph, “Blessed of God Most High, peace to you” (8:2). Joseph replies, “May the Lord, bringer of life to all things, bless you” (8:3). Joseph and Aseneth are proclaimed to be “brother” and “sister” (8:4 and 7:10).

Potiphar encourages them to kiss. As they are about to kiss, Joseph places his right hand between Aseneth’s breasts and says, “It is not right for a man worshipping God, who blesses the living God and eats the blessed bread of life and drinks the blessed cup of immortality and incorruptibility and is anointed with the perfumed ointment of holiness, to have sexual relations and kiss a foreign woman who blesses dead, empty idols, and eats foul strangled food and drinks the libation of deceit and is anointed with the ointment of corruption” (8:6).

Aseneth is taken aback by this rejection. Seeing Aseneth's pain, Joseph is moved to prayer. In the name of the God who calls people from "darkness to light, from error to truth, and from death to life" (8:12) he beseeches Him to renew and transform Aseneth. He prays that she may eat the eternal bread of life, drink the blessed cup, be counted amongst God's people "and live forever" (8:13). With that said, Joseph leaves, promising to return in eight days.

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If this story is really referring to the Biblical Joseph and Aseneth, right away we see problems with this text. In this account, Aseneth quickly moves to center stage, whereas the Bible makes Joseph the primary figure. In the Biblical narrative, Joseph is betrayed by his brothers and sold into slavery in Egypt. The Book of Genesis tells us that Joseph's brothers were jealous of their father's love for him. After all, as a sign of his affection, the patriarch Jacob had given his son Joseph a multi-colored coat. In the Biblical tale, after a series of trials including sexual temptation and imprisonment, Joseph works his way up to becoming the second most powerful person in Egypt next to Pharaoh. In the Book of Genesis, Pharaoh gives Joseph an Egyptian wife, Aseneth. She is the daughter of Potiphar, priest of On (Genesis 41:45). In this way, Joseph is married into an influential Egyptian priestly family. In time, they have two sons: Manasseh and Ephrem (Genesis 41:50–52).

That's all we ever hear of Aseneth in the Biblical text. No sooner is she mentioned than she disappears. All the Bible tells us is that Aseneth is the daughter of an Egyptian priest, she was given in marriage to Joseph, and she bore him two children. We are provided with absolutely no information about her appearance, beliefs, personality, values, or character. There is nothing that would indicate that she was a person of importance or that she played a vital role in human history.

*Joseph and Aseneth*, on the other hand, right away takes us into vastly different territory, one that is chaste and sensual at the same time. This Aseneth is an attractive woman with strong opinions of her own. She is a forceful personality and her perceptions of, and reactions to, Joseph are featured prominently in the narrative. Her parents respect her wishes. Although Aseneth is an Egyptian, she is described as having the virtues of the Israelite matriarchs—comparable to Sarah, Rebecca, and Rachel. Later Greek manuscripts heighten her "Jewishness": "and this [girl] had nothing similar to the virgins of the Egyptians, but she was in every respect similar to the daughters of the Hebrews."<sup>1</sup>

Why? Why the insistence upon her Jewish qualities? The Biblical Aseneth did not live among Israelites. Is our manuscript perhaps referring to a woman who did?

Moreover, in our document, Aseneth's father's impressive estate is described in detail: a house, a garden, walls, and, most importantly, a tower in which Aseneth lives. Do these seemingly irrelevant facts have a deeper significance?

After an initial hesitation, Aseneth is attracted to Joseph and is groomed to be "the Bride of God" (4:1). This is very strange language about an ordinary human wedding—if indeed that is what it is about. In the Bible, Joseph is a Hebrew, the forefather of two of the twelve Israelite tribes of the ancient world. In contrast, the language describing him in the *Joseph and Aseneth* manuscript is not Hebrew. It is not Jewish. In the Jewish tradition, no human would ever be described as "God" or "Bride of God." In this text, "Aseneth is the divine bride, [and] Joseph is her groom."<sup>2</sup> If this were a Jewish text, this idea would be utter blasphemy.

As Erwin Goodenough has noted, "Christian traditions of the first centuries as taken from the Christian writers refer to the contemporary writings of not a single Jew."<sup>3</sup> In other words, seen from the Christian side, *Joseph and Aseneth* is unlikely to be a Jewish text. On the Jewish side, in Ronald Shepard Kraemer's words, there is a total "absence of any knowledge of this Aseneth story in early Jewish sources."<sup>4</sup> But, if it's not Jewish, is it Christian?

The attempt to locate the people who wrote this text is crucial to understanding the manuscript. To make sense of the text, we need to understand the original community from which it sprang. So let's examine how Joseph is described in *Joseph and Aseneth*. For starters, Joseph's physical appearance

described in our manuscript in far more detail than in Genesis. Here he wears not the multi-colored coat of a Hebrew, nor the clothing of an Egyptian, but a white tunic and a purple robe, reminiscent of the attire of a Roman emperor. Furthermore, he is adorned with a crown, and twelve rays of light emanate from his head. He holds a scepter in his hand. These can hardly be accidental details. But what do they signify?

In this text, Joseph is Torah-observant (that is, he observes the laws in the Five Books of Moses) and serious about his religion. He is concerned about Aseneth's worship of idols—so much so that he refuses to kiss her and draws away from her. What are we to make of Joseph's refusal to kiss Aseneth prior to marriage? He seems to protest too much, and it's curious that kissing and sexual relations are not mentioned at all. The Bible never mentions any intimacy between Joseph and Aseneth.

Moreover, Joseph's subsequent prayer for Aseneth's transformation is also odd. It is offered in the name of the God who calls people "from darkness to light, from error to truth, from death to life" (8:12). Joseph prays that she might be recreated, referring to her receiving "the eternal bread of life" and "the blessed cup" so that she might live forever (8:13–14). These phrases are nowhere to be found in the Hebrew Bible. Simply put, once again, they sound Christian, not Jewish.

There are a lot of remarkable details here. It sounds as if the writer is trying to tell us something very important and, perhaps, at the time of writing, something very dangerous. Perhaps that is why the original author of the manuscript tells the story using surrogates.

## Episode 2: The Rebirth

A strange dreamlike sequence involving Aseneth in a tower.

After confessing her sins, she is visited by an angelic being who looks like Joseph. She eats honey and is swarmed by bees.

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### Synopsis

While Joseph is away, Aseneth weeps for a week, eats nothing and is unable to sleep. She puts on a black mourning garment. She tosses her fine robes, jewelry, and golden crown out of the window. Similarly she throws all her idols, engravings, and images of Egyptian deities out of the window. She takes the offerings to the gods—food and libations—and throws these out the window for the wild dogs to consume. She spreads ashes around her room. All this lasts for seven days.

Finally, she prays to God. She confesses her sins: transgressing God's law and offering sacrifices to idols. She prays for deliverance from persecutors (foreshadowing later developments) knowing that "an old lion," "the father of the gods of Egypt" (12:12), will seek retribution for her abandonment of them. She asks for divine forgiveness for initially speaking poorly of Joseph: "[I] said evil, empty things against my lord Joseph because I did not know he was your son" (13:9). She sees the morning star and rejoices.

Then a man from heaven appears—someone "alike in every respect to Joseph in clothes and crown and royal scepter" (14:8) but whose face was like lightning and his eyes "like the splendor of the sun" (14:9). He orders her to take off her black robe and put on a new one along with a belt. She washes. The man from heaven informs her that today her name has been written in the Book of Life; that she is renewed, refashioned, and has been granted new life. She is, essentially, born again.

He also tells her that she will eat the bread of life, drink the cup of immortality, and be anointed with the ointment of incorruptibility. God has given Joseph to you, he says, adding that no longer will her name be Aseneth but "City of Refuge" (15:5). The man from heaven also tells her that all the nations shall take refuge in her—those who give their allegiance to God in repentance will find in her security. Repentance, the man from heaven explains, is the daughter of the Most High, the mother of virgins, who has prepared a "heavenly bridal chamber for those who love her" (15:7). God himself loves her and the angels respect her.

Aseneth offers the man from heaven bread and wine. He then asks for a honeycomb, which mysteriously appears in Aseneth's chamber; white as snow and smelling pleasantly like the spirit of life. He eats a piece of the comb and puts another piece in Aseneth's mouth, while tracing—in blood—the sign of the cross on the surface of the honeycomb. Suddenly, a multitude of bees fly up from the honeycomb. They totally envelop Aseneth. Some good bees fly upwards to heaven; evil bees—i.e., those who wish to injure Aseneth—die but are brought back to life by the command of the heavenly man. The man from heaven then blesses her and her seven virgin attendants. With that, he disappears.

As the heavenly man recedes, Aseneth confesses that she "did not know that God from heaven appeared in my bed" (17:7).

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Clearly, Aseneth is front and center. This is her story—her remarkable transformation—totally unlike anything found in the Bible.

The unexpected language also leaps off the page—Joseph is “God’s son.” No matter how much love with him she is, why would Aseneth describe Joseph, the ancient Israelite patriarch, in such non-Torah terms? Again, this is Christian terminology. Simply put, there is nothing—absolutely nothing—like this in the Five Books of Moses. In the Book of Genesis, Joseph appears as an agent of God—strong, faithful, intelligent, focused, and pure. In a sense, he is, indeed, a savior-figure—he not only saves the Egyptians from starvation but also ensures the continuity of the Israelite people. But, in Jewish text, he would never have been described as “God’s son.”

Moreover, what are we to make of the heavenly Joseph look-alike? This is an episode completely missing from the Biblical narrative. In our manuscript, Joseph is a spiritual being as well as an earthly figure. Put differently, he has many natures and assumes several forms. Furthermore, according to the manuscript, *Joseph and Aseneth*’s union is first celebrated in heaven, not on earth. This spiritual ceremony is interesting. Aseneth confesses her sins, is robed in a new garment, and then she washes—is all this symbolic of her new life? The angelic being tells her she will eat of the bread of life and drink from the cup of immortality, being anointed with the oil of incorruption. Kraemer states that the “ensuing dialogue between Aseneth and the angel is frustratingly esoteric.”<sup>5</sup> It can be decoded, however, if we pay attention to what happens next. The angel literally puts a piece of honeycomb in Aseneth’s mouth, all the while tracing in blood the sign of the cross across its surface. This is not so esoteric. Clearly, this is a kind of Christian Communion ceremony. At the same time, the whole thing is oddly erotic, since it represents the consummation of her marriage with Joseph’s heavenly counterpart.

But what does this heavenly ceremony signify? How does it relate to the later earthly marriage? And why do the bees fly up from the honeycomb, encircling her and finally settling near her tower? In the entire corpus of the Hebrew Bible and Rabbinic tradition, there is nothing—absolutely nothing—like this story.

But if the story is Christian, not Jewish, and is referring to sex and marriage between a divine chosen “Bride of God” and “God’s son,” can it be that this ancient document, last copied by Syrian monks some fifteen hundred years ago, is preserving a tradition hinted at in Christian texts but so far missing in the historical record?

The deciphering process requires us to look deeper.

Specifically, what are we to make of the odd designation of Aseneth as a “City of Refuge” (15:1 and later 19:4)? In what sense could Aseneth be a “City of Refuge”? Why is she called this? There are six cities of refuge mentioned in the Bible (Numbers 35:11–24; Deuteronomy 19:1–13). They represent safe havens for individuals charged with unintentional murder. Are the Biblical cities of refuge the intended reference here? What does our text have to do with serious crimes involving both slayers and avengers? Who would seek refuge in Aseneth? Who are they fleeing? What is their crime?

We know that within the Biblical tradition, naming is associated with creation and renaming with new creation. In Genesis, for example, the structural elements of the universe are named along with humans and animals. Later on, in the speeches of Isaiah (chapter 60, for instance), the prophet envisages a restored Israel freed from captivity in Babylon. He sees an exciting new social and political reality about to dawn on the world’s stage. He urges the exiles to prepare for their triumphant march homeward—valleys shall be raised and mountains lowered so that their passage from Babylon back to Jerusalem will be an easy trek. Describing God as “your Redeemer, the Mighty One of Jacob” (Isaiah 60:16), the prophet becomes ecstatic as he proclaims that God will rename Jerusalem “the City of the Lord” (Isaiah 60:14); He will rename the walls “Salvation” (Isaiah 60:18); and its gates, He will

rename “Praise” (Isaiah 60:18).

But what new creation is taking place in our story? In what way will all nations take refuge in Aseneth? After all, the Biblical Aseneth is neither a Bride of God nor a refuge to many people. The text itself seems to suggest an answer. The specific rituals involved in the strange heavenly ceremony—the centerpiece of our story—are very carefully depicted. The sequence is: confession, dressing, washing, offering bread and wine, eating, encirclement by bees, and a final blessing. What is the meaning of this mysterious and moving ceremony? It sounds highly liturgical.

But what liturgy?

To some extent this ritual is explained in *Joseph and Aseneth*. In other words, the text provides clues for its own decipherment. On a simple level, the ritual is about Aseneth’s transformation into a suitable bride for Joseph and it seems to be built around a Communion-like ceremony. But many details elude us: the honeycomb, for instance, and the bees which encircle Aseneth and which end up near her tower. They appear just after the eating of the honey—almost as the climax of the ceremony—and just before the angelic being blesses Aseneth, the final element in this ritual. Why all the imagery of honey, honeycomb, and bees? These cannot be accidental details. What does this strange liturgy tell us about the two central figures—Joseph and Aseneth? Or the people they really represent?

Obviously, the decoding has to start with the cross. The symbolism of the cross—drawn in blood—seems quite explicit. This suggests that our story comes from Christian circles, not Jewish ones, as had been previously surmised by some scholars.<sup>6</sup> We also should not conclude that the presence of the cross is either a late interpolation into an early text, or proof that the text is no earlier than the 4th century, when the cross is assumed to have become a Christian symbol. The fact is that we have dozens of crosses from the 1st century in clearly Christian contexts. They are usually dismissed as arbitrary scratches or stonemasons’ marks. For example, there are several crosses next to the name of Jesus on ossuaries from 1st-century Jerusalem tombs.<sup>7</sup> At Bethsaida, in the Galilee, archaeologists Rami Arav and Richard Freund have discovered a 1st-century cross in situ.<sup>8</sup> There is also a clear cross in Herculaneum, a Roman city that was destroyed, along with Pompeii, by the eruption of Mount Vesuvius in the year 79 C.E. This would place Christian crosses firmly in the 1st century. As a result, some have dismissed the Herculaneum cross as the remains of a bookshelf.<sup>9</sup> But the best 1st-century Christian cross is from Pompeii, where a clear cross was found in a graffito in a courtyard. It has *VIVAT* inscribed at the top, probably short for the Latin *vivat*, meaning *live*.<sup>10</sup>

When the author of *Joseph and Aseneth* has the angelic being draw a cross in blood across the honeycomb, we sense that he is trying to convey something important to us. To that end, he may have embedded clues within his writing to prompt us to make connections to other people and other events. For example, the “bridal chamber” phrase immediately conjures up Gnosticism, a branch of early Christianity that reveled in mysticism and hidden codes. After the 4th century, when Trinitarian Christianity (that is, the idea that God is both one and three in the persons of the Father, the Son and the Holy Ghost) won exclusive imperial favor, Gnosticism was banned by the triumphant church and was accused, among other things, of indulging in secret ceremonies involving ritualized sex. Indeed, some Gnostic writings like the *Gospel of Philip* talk about a heavenly bridal chamber as a sacrament—that is, a holy ritual. The honeycomb ceremony in *Joseph and Aseneth* also feels sacramental—something akin to the Christian Communion service. Maybe it’s preserving something historical and describing, in Gnostic terms, the first Communion ever held. Furthermore, Aseneth’s report of the episode with the heavenly man as “God from heaven appeared in my bed” (17:7) is, to say the least, highly unusual and erotic. Again, the combination of *God* and *bed* in the same breath seems to suggest early Christian Gnosticism, as opposed to anything Jewish or Trinitarian.

The next episode in the *Joseph and Aseneth* manuscript focuses on the actual marriage and i

consummation, resulting in children.

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### **Episode 3: The Marriage**

The wedding, the consummation, and the children.

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#### **Synopsis**

Joseph returns from his trip and Aseneth dresses resplendently for her wedding—a glittering robe, a golden belt, bracelets, anklets, precious necklace, and a crown of gold upon her head. She covers her head with a bridal veil and washes her face. The manager of her father's estate greets her by saying, "The Lord God of heaven truly chose you to be the bride of his first-born son" (18:13).

Aseneth meets Joseph and recounts to him her experiences with the heavenly visitor. They embrace for a long time and Aseneth receives from him the spirit of life, the spirit of wisdom and, finally, the spirit of truth. Aseneth insists on washing Joseph's feet. Joseph takes hold of Aseneth's right hand and kisses her on the head. Everyone who sees this is "amazed at her beauty" and they give "glory to God who gives life and raises the dead" (20:5). Aseneth's father announces that tomorrow the wedding will take place. Joseph stays in Potiphar's house but does not have sexual intercourse with Aseneth, noting "it is not right for a man who worships God to know his bride before the wedding" (20:8).

Pharaoh, the ruler, blesses Aseneth: "Blessed are you by the Lord God of Joseph, because he is the first-born of God, and you will be called the Daughter of God Most High" (21:3). They kiss. After seven days of celebration, Joseph engages in sexual intercourse with Aseneth. In time, they have two children.

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As noted, no Jewish author would ever refer to an Israelite patriarch, or anyone else for that matter, as "the Son of God" (6:3). This is just not part of the Jewish landscape and was at the core of the rift between Judaism and Christianity some nineteen hundred years ago. In Judaism, God is one. "Hear, O Israel, the Lord is our God. The Lord is One" (Deuteronomy 6:4) is the central declaration of Jewish faith. To this day, an observant Jew proclaims this statement of faith once during daylight hours and once at night. If a Jew believes that he's about to die, he must endeavor to utter this statement as his dying words. Moreover, within Judaism, God does not have a divine family—no sons or daughters. Again, here we have the clear sense that this text comes from a Christian source for which having a plurality within the Godhead is not anathema.

But once again, we have to ask: to whom is the text referring? Clearly, it is not referring to the Joseph of history, the ancient Israelite patriarch.

We now note that the marriage described in our manuscript is literally made in heaven. There is heavenly Joseph and an earthly Joseph. Only after Joseph and Aseneth are proclaimed as the "first-born son of God" and, most intriguingly, "daughter of the Lord" do the lovers kiss and have sexual relations. Only then is their marriage consummated and their union blessed with two children.

Curiously enough, the story doesn't end here. It's not a "happily ever after" account.

### **Episode 4: The Murder Plot**

The conspiracy to abduct Aseneth, kill Joseph, and murder their children is foiled.

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#### **Synopsis**

There are seven years of plenty. These come to an end and seven years of famine begin. Aseneth instigates a visit to Joseph's father Jacob, and his family. Jacob is described by Aseneth as "like a god to me" (22:3), resplendent in his old age, with bright flashing eyes and the body of a mighty man. Joseph's brother Levi, described as a prophet who knows "the secrets of God" (22:14), informs Aseneth of her elevated status.

Seeing Aseneth's great beauty, Pharaoh's first-born son is jealous and desires her. He approaches Simon and Levi, both brothers of Joseph, trying to bribe them with great wealth if they would consent to forge an alliance with him. The plan is to kill Joseph and his children so he can marry Aseneth. They refuse. Pharaoh's son succeeds in recruiting Dan, Gad, Naphtali, and Asher (sons of Jacob with his two concubines), however, and provides them with two thousand troops to help capture Aseneth, kill Joseph, and murder the children. Pharaoh's son also plans to murder his father, the Pharaoh.

The plot is foiled. Pharaoh's son is unable to kill his father. The loyal brothers of Joseph rescue Aseneth. The treasonous brother

throw themselves on Aseneth's mercy. She is forgiving, saying that it is wrong to repay evil with evil. Benjamin, another of Joseph's brothers who is accompanying Aseneth, takes a stone and hits Pharaoh's son in the left temple. He is about to finish him off when Aseneth intercedes, again saying that we must not repay evil for evil. They bandage up the wounded son of Pharaoh and take him to his father.

On the third day, however, Pharaoh's son dies from the wound.

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And there the dramatic story abruptly ends: the plot is foiled. Again, the story is curious. Who are Joseph's enemies? Who is Pharaoh's son? Why does the son of the Pharaoh want to kill his father as well as Joseph, when he's trying to take Aseneth by force? Is Egypt really Egypt or is this, too, a surrogate for another major empire?

In the context of the Joseph story, the Bible, of course, does talk of seven years of plenty and seven years of famine. In fact, the story of the plenty and the famine is central to the Biblical tale. But here it is totally marginalized, overtaken by a character who doesn't appear in the Bible at all, that is, Pharaoh's son.

Also, in this story, Joseph disappears from the narrative. In the Bible, he is front and center and it is Aseneth who disappears.

In this story, the brothers divide along pro-Aseneth and anti-Aseneth factions. In the Bible, however, Aseneth is irrelevant to Joseph's brothers. To the degree that they are divided, the brothers are divided along Joseph lines. When Joseph is sold to Arab traders, there are some brothers who intercede on his behalf and others who are against him.

In contrast to our manuscript, in the Bible there is no plot, no battle, and no military victory. There is nothing like this in the Book of Genesis. Clearly, something other than the story of the Bible and Joseph and Aseneth is driving the narrative in this ancient manuscript.

# WHAT DO WE KNOW ABOUT THE MANUSCRIPT?

## 1. It Records a World-Changing Event

We've already mentioned that the manuscript—*British Library Manuscript #17,202*, in which *Joseph and Aseneth* is found—forms part of a larger collection of writings. A Syriac-speaking Christian monk put the collection together around 570 C.E.<sup>1</sup> Since scholars don't know this monk's name, they refer to him by the awkward-sounding designation Pseudo-Zacharias Rhetor. In academic terms, Pseudo-Zacharias Rhetor means “not that Zacharias,” not the Zacharias who was a famous orator. For convenience sake, we'll call this unnamed monk who preserved our copy of *Joseph and Aseneth* by the name Second Zacharias.

Second Zacharias gave his work a masterful title: *A Volume of Records of Events Which Have Shaped the World*. It was an ambitious project by any standard. It seems that Second Zacharias was a monk with a tremendous sense of history who believed that the ancient writings that he was including in his collection were of great importance and had to be preserved for posterity. And so he assembled them in one convenient place. As far as Second Zacharias was concerned, these are not documents that just describe random happenings: they are writings about events that transformed the world . . . the world.

Here's what Second Zacharias chose to include in this anthology of important ancient documents:

- A work by Sylvester, Bishop of Rome, relating to the conversion and Baptism of the Roman Emperor Constantine;
- A document related to finding the 1st-century relics of Stephen and Nicodemus, two important early followers of Jesus;
- A story of miracles, the Legend of the Seven Sleepers of Ephesus;
- An important church history penned by an eyewitness, the so-called real Zacharias Rhetor; and, central to our interests,
- A translation of the work he called “The Story of Joseph the Just and Aseneth his Wife.”

Note that Second Zacharias didn't compose this latter writing. It's not something that originated with him in the 6th century. In his compilation, just before his section on “The Story of Joseph the Just and Aseneth his Wife,” Second Zacharias tells us the origin of the translation that he's including in his collection. He appends a letter from some anonymous individual—likely a monk—to a man called Moses of Ingila. We know the latter from the historical record. In Appendix II, we have provided the first-ever translation of this letter to Moses of Ingila, which tells us how our manuscript came to be translated from ancient Greek into Syriac. In other words, in his collection of works



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