

## Conquering the world in *Joseph and Aseneth*

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The romance known as *Joseph and Aseneth* exists to justify or explain a perceived anomaly. The problematic situation in the eyes of the narrator is the marriage of a national Jewish hero, Joseph, to Aseneth the daughter of a pagan Egyptian priest. It is recorded in Genesis 41: 45: “Pharaoh gave Joseph the name Zaphenath-Paneah and gave him Aseneth, daughter of Potiphera, priest of On, to be his wife.”<sup>1</sup>

Most modern scholarship on *Joseph and Aseneth* has agreed that it was a Jewish piece originally composed in Greek,<sup>2</sup> with possible Christian interpolations.<sup>3</sup> It is usually dated as early as the second century BCE, and no later than 200 CE.<sup>4</sup> The majority of scholars consider Egypt as the likely place for the birth of this novel.<sup>5</sup> The book has been seen as “religious propaganda aimed at portraying Judaism in the best possible light.”<sup>6</sup> The targeted audience of the work seems to be native Jews, Jewish sympathizers, or proselytes who would have enough background to understand the different Scriptural allusions and Jewish customs.<sup>7</sup> The text exists in two variants (a longer and a shorter version), with some major differences between them.<sup>8</sup>

In this seminar presentation I will probe the question of how the narrative of *Joseph and Aseneth* encourages travels to distant and inhabited lands, and how it justifies itself. The methodological lenses used in this paper are those of postcolonial study.<sup>9</sup> The

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<sup>1</sup> Asenath is the Hebrew name of Aseneth, and her father’s name in the LXX is Petephres. For more on these names see C. Burchard’s notes on 1: 3 in ‘Joseph and Aseneth,’ J. H. Charlesworth (ed), *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha*, II (2 vols.; Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1983-85), 202.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., 181.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 187. See also J.J. Collins, “Joseph and Aseneth: Jewish or Christian?” *JSP* 14.2 (2005), 97-112.

<sup>4</sup> See, among others, Randall D. Chesnutt, “From Death to Life: Conversion in Joseph and Aseneth,” *Journal for the Study of the Pseudepigrapha*. Supplement Series 16 (Sheffield, England: Sheffield Academic Press, 1995), 85; Edith M. Humphrey, *The Ladies and the Cities: Transformation and Apocalyptic Identity in Joseph and Aseneth, 4 Ezra, the Apocalypse and the Shepherd of Hermas*. *JSPSup*, 17 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1995), 33. For a challenge to this view see, among other dissenting voices, Kraemer Ross S., *When Joseph met Aseneth* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 286-288.

<sup>5</sup> See Chesnutt (1995, 20-93) and Humphrey, *Joseph and Aseneth* (England: Sheffield Academic Press, 2000), 17-79.

<sup>6</sup> Moyer Hubbard, *New Creation in Paul’s Letters and Thought*. SNTSMS 119 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 56.

<sup>7</sup> See C. Burchard, ‘Joseph and Aseneth,’ in J.H. Charlesworth (ed), *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha*, II (2 vols.; Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1983-85), 195; Terence L. Donaldson, *Judaism and the Gentiles: Jewish Patterns of Universalism (to 135 CE)* (Waco, Texas: Baylor University Press, 2007), 151.

<sup>8</sup> I am more convinced by Burchard’s strong case for the priority of the longer text. See his recent critical edition assisted by C. Burfeing and U.B. Fink, *Joseph und Aseneth kritisch herausgegeben* (PVTG, 5; Leiden: E.J. Brill, 2003). See also C. Burchard, “The text of Joseph and Aseneth reconsidered,” *JSP* 14 (2005), 83-96. The present study is based on the longer version and it makes only passing reference to the shorter text edited by Marc Philonenko, and favored by some scholars. See M. Philonenko, *Joseph et Aseneth: Introduction, texte critique, traduction et notes* (SPB, 13; Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1968). The results of a postcolonial exploration of the text might be slightly different if the shorter text was to be considered.

<sup>9</sup> A postcolonial reading is an “anti-imperialist,” and thus an “anti-colonial” reading. I understand postcolonial literature not simply as a type of literature that comes after the independence of a certain colony from an imperial system, but as a protest genre, as reclamation of a voice. This type of reading has the potential to help the reader identify the powers at play and use the text to release a constructive

narrative expresses an ideology of conquest, which does not stop at the land of Egypt or to other lands. The text envisions the re-arranging of the whole cosmos by and for the benefit of those who would take refuge in the Jewish faith embraced by Aseneth and by people like her. Thus, my argument is that Aseneth's conversion has implications that go beyond the individual dimension because the conquering of the prized Aseneth seems to signal the conquering and the re-creation of the whole cosmos.

### **The construction of Otherness in the narrative**

From the beginning of the text one can sense a certain tension vis-à-vis the Other. As Gideon Bohak remarks, "No reader of *Joseph and Aseneth* can fail to note the author's disdain for Egyptians."<sup>10</sup> The first encounter with "the Other" is in the family of the Egyptian priest, Pentephres, the father of Aseneth. Pentephres is a very rich priest, and a counsellor to Pharaoh. His daughter, a virgin of eighteen years, is contrasted with other Egyptian girls and compared to the daughters of the Hebrews: "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." She is as tall as Sarah, as handsome as Rebecca and as beautiful as Rachel (1: 7). Because of her beauty, she is the object of admiration of all young men in Egypt and beyond. Pharaoh's own son wants to have her as his wife (1: 11-14).<sup>11</sup>

Aseneth, like her father, is viewed as Other and yet she is made to be the same; one who is more akin to the Hebrews than to her own people in appearance. It is interesting to note that to justify Joseph's relationship with a non-Jew, the author deems it necessary to erase the very physical identity of Aseneth and make her like one of the Jewish people, as opposed to one like "those people." The ideological reasoning is that there cannot be anything good in the Other. If there is something worthy of admiration in Aseneth the Egyptian girl, it must conform to the highly racialized mentality of "because she is like us" as opposed to "because she is like them."

The second important point is that "the Other", symbolically located in the national representative figure of Aseneth, is portrayed as a prize to be conquered. She is a beautiful virgin,<sup>12</sup> and she seems well aware of her beauty and of her fame beyond the walls of her father's luxurious palace (2:1-5). The author portrays her as worthy of admiration, but she must satisfy other requirements to become the wife of the biblical hero. She must realize that she is idolatrous and, as such, is unworthy of the "Powerful

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imagination for liberation. Other readings, say, a feminist one, might reach similar or overlapping conclusions as those reach in this paper, but I have chosen "this" vocabulary rather than "that" (to borrow J. Z. Smith's favourite equation) because of the way a postcolonial reading allows me to explore imperialist agenda in this particular text.

<sup>10</sup> Gideon Bohak, *Joseph and Aseneth and the Jewish Temple in Heliopolis*, "SBL Early Judaism and Its Literature, 10." (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1996), 42.

<sup>11</sup> Marc Philonenko notes that the stunning beauty of Aseneth is part of the literary convention for this particular genre. See Marc Philonenko, *Joseph et Aséneth: Introduction, texte critique, traduction et notes*. (SPB, 13; Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1968), 130-131. Philonenko's very informed remark does not lessen the point I will make about the function of Aseneth's beauty in the narrative.

<sup>12</sup> For a good overview of the idealized projection of women in late antiquity see Kate Cooper, *Virgin and the Bride: Idealized Womanhood in Late Antiquity* (Cambridge: Harvard Press, 1996). See also Musa Dube, *Postcolonial Feminist Interpretation of the Bible* (St. Louis, Missouri: Chalice Press, 2000), 57-83; Virginia Burrus, "Mimicking Virgins: Colonial Ambivalence and the Ancient Romance," *Arethusa* 38 (2005), 49-88.

One of God” (3:6). The first time Aseneth sees Joseph as a guest in her parent’s house, her soul is crushed, her knees paralyzed, and she realizes then that she is lost (6:1). And as she approaches to greet Joseph with a kiss, he stretches his right hand and stops her. His next gesture towards Aseneth is, oddly, described in erotic terms<sup>13</sup>: “He stretched out his right hand and put it on her chest between her two breasts, and her breasts were already standing upright like handsome apples” (8: 5-6). Then, he utters these devastating words to Aseneth:

It is not fitting for a man who worships God, who will bless with his mouth the living God and eat blessed ointment of incorruptibility to kiss a strange woman who will bless with her mouth dead and dumb idols and eat from their table bread of strangulation and drink from their libation a cup of insidiousness and anoint herself with ointment of destruction. But a man who worships God will kiss his mother and the sister (who is born) of his mother and the sister (who is born) of his clan and family and the wife who shares his bed, (all of) who (m) bless with their mouths the living God (8:5-7).

Aseneth is constructed as Other, impure and unworthy of the man of God. But, curiously, she is also constructed as sexually available to Joseph. Moreover, Aseneth is envisioned as accepting the position of “unworthiness” as normal. She retires in confusion, and she repents of her infatuation with the gods whom she used to worship (9-17). In her prayer, Aseneth alludes to her family rejecting her because she has destroyed the idols, and she considers herself an orphan and turns to God as “the father of the orphans, a protector of the persecuted, and of the afflicted a helper” (11:13).<sup>14</sup> The case of Aseneth’s repentance justifies her future role as the bride of Joseph. The other Egyptian characters of the novel are not required to change from their state of “impurity,” since the author does not need them to advance his narrative.

There is a double standard in terms of relationship with the Other. Joseph goes to the house of the pagan priest; he is glad to be married by the pagan Pharaoh, and, logically, he participates in the wedding *fiesta* worthy of a kingly Egyptian dignitary. There is no indication in the text that there is insistence on the part of Joseph to be seated at a separate table with his wife during the wedding banquet. When it comes to accepting a favour and taking advantage of the social system, the offer of the Other is gladly accepted. But in the case of sexuality and marriage, the Other is despicable, idolatrous and in need of being saved from the worship of idols.

All that is foreign is condemned and replaced in *Joseph and Aseneth*. As for the exclusivist religious claims of Joseph, they remain unchallenged. In fact, there is no room in the author’s mind for any dialogue concerning the religious sentiments of the Other.

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<sup>13</sup> This observation is from Virginia Burrus’ “Mimicking Virgins.”

<sup>14</sup> See Terence L. Donaldson, *Judaism and the Gentiles: Jewish Patterns of Universalism (to 135 CE)*. (Waco, Texas: Baylor University Press, 2007), 146. His observation concerning Aseneth’s ostracism and rejection, which is itself based on Chesnutt’s (1995, 115), is to the point. Apart from her prayer, one does not sense that her family is even aware of her spiritual journey, let alone about to persecute her.

For the author, the Egyptians are doomed in their religions. Their only hope is to abandon their religious understandings in order to follow, or to confess,<sup>15</sup> Joseph's deity. The conversion—or treason, if one looks at it from the Egyptian position—of Aseneth makes her enjoy her political power in a way that is possibly detrimental to her own people. The conversion/treason of Aseneth represents the possibility for the Egyptians to come to accept the Jewish social-religious way of thinking and doing.

The much crafted 'Othering' of the Egyptians is used as a hermeneutical strategy to manipulate and advance the author's imperial intentions. At the end of the novel, Joseph is portrayed as having everything that a colonial power looks to possess in a foreign land: God, gold, and glory. Joseph has also conquered the beautiful Aseneth. The cycle of empire building is thus complete with the gender factor well under control. The tale ends with Joseph being like a father to Pharaoh's younger son.<sup>16</sup> The final image, then, is "the Other" projected as a child in need of being guarded and guided.

### **A different sort of travel**

The narrative is set in an imperial social setting, namely Egypt. It is a foreign place, but the biblical hero occupies a high political position. He is, one might say, following Homi Bhabha's insights, a hybrid, a colonial elite subject who occupies a "third Space of enunciation."<sup>17</sup> His colonial condition is one of perpetual negotiation of choosing when and how to assimilate, when and how to repudiate, and when and how to mimic. His "*in-between*"<sup>18</sup> spatial movements make his acts of mimicry very telling. And it is this mimicking of the power that enables him at the end of the novel (29:9-11) to ascend to the throne of Egypt for forty-eight years before giving the diadem to Pharaoh's grandson (29: 8-11).<sup>19</sup>

There is no critique of the imperial power in the text. On the contrary, what is hoped for is a replacement of one imperial figure, Pharaoh, by another, Joseph.<sup>20</sup> It is unclear how the power of a Jew reigning over Egypt might have been received, but this is

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<sup>15</sup> T. L. Donaldson remarks that while the Egyptians are shown to "speak of God with respect" there is no other Egyptian besides Aseneth who is actually depicted as participating in the Egyptian religious practices. See Terence L. Donaldson, *Judaism and the Gentiles: Jewish Patterns of Universalism (to 135 CE)*. (Waco, Texas: Baylor University Press, 2007), 150.

<sup>16</sup> This is a reversal of what can be inferred about the relationship between the Pharaoh and Joseph at the beginning of the narrative.

<sup>17</sup> Homi Bhabha, "Cultural diversity and Cultural differences" in B. Ashcroft et al. (eds.), *The Postcolonial study reader* (London/New York: Routledge, 1988), 206-209.

<sup>18</sup> The expression is from Bhabha. See his "Culture's In-between" in Stuart Hall and Paul du Gay, eds., *Questions of Cultural Identity* (London & Thousand Oaks, Calif.: Sage, 1996), 53-60.

<sup>19</sup> The author imagines a long reign, which would make Joseph quite old at the end of his rule. The imaginary political scenario one gets here is an old monarch clinging to power to the last minute until he cannot rule any longer.

<sup>20</sup> The idea of the colonized people as envious of the position of the colonizer and wishing to replace them is well documented by Frantz Fanon. See *Les Damnés de la Terre* (Paris: François Maspero, 1961 [1991]), 18-19. In Fanon's words, "Face à l'arrangement colonial le colonisé se trouve dans un état de tension permanente. Le monde du colon est un monde hostile, qui rejette, mais dans le même temps c'est un monde qui fait envie. Le colonisé est toujours sur le qui-vive...Il est dominé...infériorisé. Le colonisé est un persécuté qui rêve en permanence de devenir persécuteur."

clearly not part of the author's concern. The impression given in the narrative is that Joseph's reign was a time of peace.<sup>21</sup>

Thus, Joseph did not have to leave a particular spatial location to go out in order to conquer a foreign land. The narrative portrays him as one who knows what to do in every circumstance in order for him to take control of the Egyptians "for their own good." In this sense, *Joseph and Aseneth* envisages a different sort of travel than the one Abraham, for example, had to undertake. What is dreamed of in this tale is the coming of the nations to the God of Israel. This ideological construction is part of the shared nationalistic narrative of the Second Temple period which envisions the coming of the Gentiles to faith in the age to come in order to share in Israel's eschatological blessings. The "eschatological pilgrimage" of the nations (this term goes back at least to J. Jeremias)<sup>22</sup> is one of the most distinctive patterns of Jewish universalism.<sup>23</sup>

Consider for example 1 *Enoch* 10:21, 2 *Baruch* 72-73 and the eschatological sections of the *Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs* which contain frequent references to the future salvation of the Gentiles. It is difficult to make a decision one way or the other in *Jubilees*. It is true that there seem to be hope for the whole world in the book but the negative view of the Gentiles in *Jubilees*, e.g. *Jubilees* 31: 20, makes it hard to see little sign of hope for them in the eschatological new creation. Different views concerning the ultimate fate of the Gentiles emerge from 4 *Ezra*. One is that they are doomed for destruction. This very pessimistic outcome constitutes the initial point of departure in the book. The second is a more universalistic outcome for a certain kind of salvation.

Thus, what we have from these selected Second Temple Judaism materials seems to indicate that Israel will be vindicated in the eschatological age as the people of God and they will be able to inherit, ultimately, the new creation in its finalized manifestation. The eschatological pilgrimage scenario is based on the response of the Gentile nations to "God's saving vindication of Israel in the eschatological future."<sup>24</sup> This hope for a blissful future of restoration for Israel is envisaged by placing the Gentiles in a position subservient to Israel.

A postcolonial reading of this scenario reveals that what is envisaged as universalism in some of the Second Temple Jewish materials is a discourse of imperialism as it pertains to the Gentiles. In other words what is universalism for one privileged group is imperialism for the rest of the world. Remark that the whole discourse is one of ascribing a privilege status to a certain group by means of a unique covenant

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<sup>21</sup> Keep in mind that this is a literary piece emphasizing a Jewish perspective. The biblical Joseph, one recalls, expropriated the land and enslaved the people (Gen. 47: 13-25). Also, the idea of a Jew on the Egyptian throne is absent in the Genesis account, but it is important in the interpretive imagination of the author of *Joseph and Aseneth*. It gives legitimacy and coherence to the ideology of mimicking the ruling power in the narrative. But this ideology also dreams of shaming the Egyptians, who are portrayed as being unable to manage their own political affairs, and as a consequence, deserving to be occupied by a foreign figure until they are mature enough- presumably in the grandson of Pharaoh- to take control of their own destiny.

<sup>22</sup> *Jesus' Promise to the nations* (London: SCM, 1958), 55-62.

<sup>23</sup> For a thorough study of Jewish patterns of universalism in the Second Temple period see Terence L. Donaldson, *Judaism and the Gentiles: Jewish Patterns of Universalism (to 135 CE)*. (Waco, Texas: Baylor University Press, 2007).

<sup>24</sup> Terence L. Donaldson, *Paul and the Gentiles: Remapping the Apostle's Convictional World* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1997), 70.

with God.<sup>25</sup> Though this view does not preclude the possibility that God does or may have a certain relationship with other peoples it still maintains the uniqueness of one group over and above any other ethnic groups. In this sense what is hoped for in this kind of eschatological vision is the nations coming to embrace the faith and the religion of Israel. In this vision, there is uniformity to, and acknowledgment of what Israel has to offer. Notice that the position of Israel in this envisioning of the future is that of one enjoying the monopoly on matters of faith. The whole discourse is one of overconfidence without ever entertaining the slightest possibility that the Other may also have a certain understanding of faith and religion.

The eschatological vision is one centered on Israel. It pictures a nation viewed as sufficient to itself and in no need of others since it has God by its side. What is imagined is a series of binary divisions (“pure vs. impure,” “Israel vs. the other nations,” “true vs. false”) that pile up on top of each other.<sup>26</sup> The imperial ideology of us having the monopoly of the good versus them with the need to come to us is what is portrayed in the so-called “eschatological pilgrimage.” This myth of Israel’s eschatological vindication and of uniqueness may well have been a powerful cultural and religious way for this ethnic group to look at complex realities and cope with the realities of the present by imagining another possible world.<sup>27</sup> However, this same myth of uniqueness and of future restoration has ingrained in it the possibilities to become a tool of domination and of eradicating other groups who could be perceived as “the enemy.”

In *Joseph and Aseneth* the mythical uniqueness of Israel is reinforced through the conversion of Aseneth. Her conversion, it can be proposed, has implications that go beyond the individual. She is, in T. L. Donaldson’s words, “a prototype and representative of a whole company of proselytes.”<sup>28</sup> In this story the nations are seen to be taking the journey to come to the God of Joseph via the conquered woman Aseneth (the City of Refuge), who is now transformed for a specific imperialistic ideology.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> On the problematic usage of the term ‘unique,’ see Jonathan Z. Smith, *Drudgery Divine: On the Comparison of Early Christianities and the Religions of Late Antiquity* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1990), 38. For him, the way the term ‘unique’ is used, particularly in religious studies, has given the impression that the comparative task is “both an impossibility and an impiety.”

<sup>26</sup> See the general theory of symbolic boundary maintenance in Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger: An analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo* (New York: Praeger, 1966). For Douglas the construction of beliefs in the uncleanness of others is a way for a given social entity to affirm its version of identity.

<sup>27</sup> See Mircea Eliade, *Myth and Reality* (New York: Harper & Row, 1963).

<sup>28</sup> Terence L. Donaldson, *Judaism and the Gentiles: Jewish Patterns of Universalism (to 135 CE)*. (Waco, Texas: Baylor University Press, 2007), 147.

<sup>29</sup> It is well known that the conquests of lands and peoples usually happen through the conquering of women and, in many cases, with their help. One needs to remember, however, that while women play an important part in conquest strategies in the ancient - and modern! - world, lands and peoples are conquered through many other means as well, most of which are more vital to the success of conquest than the degradation of a conquered people’s women (e.g., attacks on economic infrastructures; desecration and/or removal of sacred texts; de-legitimizing of religious authorities; shaming of political and military leaders, etc.). Indeed, degradation of women is merely an ancillary to these other aspects of colonialization. Thus, one needs to be careful not to overplay the significance of gender in the story. Too often we impose our gender mores on the ancient world, distorting what are often much more mundane explanations of relations between men and women in ancient texts. Having acknowledged this point, however, one should not be blind to the fact that this text portrays women in a certain manner: as prized objects to be conquered and as mute ghosts if they are not speaking to satisfy a certain pre-determined role of accomplishing male’s agendas.

Aseneth has to go through her own spiritual journey; she has to travel from her supposedly dark existential location to the light of Joseph's faith; she has to move from her allegedly erratically religious conceptions to truth in order to become the model for subsequent proselytes.

Aseneth is so desperate to marry the luminous figure Joseph that she decides to deny who she is, her family, and her nation. The epiphany of Joseph is enough to make her realize that she is in need of repentance. It prompts her to throw away her valuables, everything of importance in her life up to this point, all she has known, and everything that defines her, in order to embrace the new religious reality that Joseph offers to her. Thus,

She put off her linen and gold woven royal robe and dressed in the black tunic of mourning, and loosened her golden girdle and girded a rope around her, and put off the tiara from her head, and the diadem and the bracelets from her hands and feet, and put everything on the floor" (10: 11-12).

She renounces her old identity, and goes through much anguish of ritual cleansing before being transformed into a new way of life to satisfy the one she desperately loves. The conversion of Aseneth is pictured as a passage from falseness to truth, from death to life, and from darkness to light (8:9; 12:1; 15:12; 27:10). The long prayer placed in her mouth by the author advances the Jewish religion as having the monopoly on the divine. The religious experiences and visions of the native Egyptians are devalued, bypassed, and counted for nothing.

*Joseph and Aseneth's* "natural theology" envisages God reigning with the people of Israel as his vice regents in the age to come, where the covenant people enjoys the wealth and well-being of an elite nation with "the others" as existing for, and having their lives subservient to, Israel. The narrative envisages a cycle of imperial powers and counter-emperors in its Jewish mythmaking: Joseph is the new emperor against whom everybody else is measured; Israel is the nation of God *par excellence*.

Reading the text from a postcolonial perspective forces one to challenge the strong binary division of us equals truth versus them equals falsehood, which is so pervasive throughout the tale. As R. S. Sugirtharajah suggests, "the colonialist mode of interpretation offered a simple choice between truth and falsehood. If one is right, the other is invariably wrong. What postcolonialism does is to force one to choose between truth and truth. The validation of one does not depend on the negation of the other."<sup>30</sup>

Furthermore, Aseneth displays a level of knowledge of Hebrew Scriptures and of Jewish history in her prayer which surpasses that of most Hebrews. Like most other female figures whose conversions are recorded in Hebrew writings, she knows the Jewish texts and Jewish history with surprising accuracy.<sup>31</sup> The Jewish God is portrayed as surpassing in knowledge, wisdom and powers all of her deities, which the author

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<sup>30</sup> R. S. Sugirtharajah, *Postcolonial Reconfigurations: An Alternative Way of Reading the Bible and Doing Theology* (St. Louis, Missouri: Chalice Press, 2003), 124.

<sup>31</sup> Musa Dube, seeing Rahab as a colonized woman, notes that Rahab "can quote Deuteronomy with more facility than Israelites." See *Postcolonial Feminist Interpretation of the Bible* (St. Louis, Missouri: Chalice Press, 2000), 76-80.

qualifies as idols. Her native religious symbols are violently smashed so that she can embrace Joseph and the religious understandings he brings with him.

Though there is allusion in Aseneth's prayer to rejection on the part of her parents of her new religious affiliation (11:13), she still occupies their house. Far from disowning their daughter, they marvelled at her newfound beauty after her encounter with a mysterious heavenly visitor (20:7). The whole family seems to be won over by her cause since there are no signs of persecution afterwards. Recall that Aseneth's father is the high priest of the Egyptians. He now witnesses the religious affection of his daughter shifting from the religion of her ancestors to that of a foreigner who occupies a high political place. The whole Egyptian social structure is, albeit imaginatively, upset by what is going on in Pentephres' house. And this is not problematized at all in *Joseph and Aseneth*. One of the probable reasons for this *léger de main* is that this portrait of reality should be, in the mind of the author, the norm for the Egyptian family. The "barbarian" native Egyptians should accept, with joy, that their daughters are taken as prized objects, that the peace of the family is threatened, and that the gods of the ancestors are abandoned.<sup>32</sup>

When she is finally married —after rejecting her past, her family, and her culture— she bows down to wash Joseph's feet as his slave (20: 4-5), a position that she has hoped for (6:8; 13:12). Now that she enjoys the protection of Joseph's deity and accepts wholeheartedly the position of the slave to the master Joseph, she gets to share in the power which Joseph possesses *in toto*. Joseph's fabricated wicked brothers will prostrate themselves at her feet for grace (28:2). In her position at the side of the new emperor Joseph, she becomes herself part of the political power. There is, thus, no necessity for the narrator to elaborate on Aseneth's family, or on her maids, or on her people. They simply do not exist. I would argue that she is also represented as a prime model in the re-creation of the whole cosmos.

### **New creation motif**

The re-creation or new creation motif appears early on in the narrative. The description of Aseneth and the description of her house is that of a perfect state. She is beautiful and her house is described as a replica to the Garden of Eden (2: 6-20). Note the similarity of Gen. 2: 6 "But a stream would rise from the earth, and water the whole face of the ground." The LXX reads: πηγὴ δὲ ἀνέβαινεν ἐκ τῆς γῆς, καὶ ἐπότιξε παν τὸ πρόσωπον τῆς γῆς, compared to *Joseph and Aseneth* 2: 12 (20) "a river flowed through the middle of the court and watered all the trees in it." The text from C. Burchard reads: καὶ ἦν ἐν τῇ αὐλῇ ἐκ δεξιῶν πηγὴ ὕδατος πλουσίου ζῶτος καὶ υποκατωθεν τῆς πηγῆς ἦν ληνος μεγάλη δεχομένη τὸ ὕδωρ τῆς πηγῆς ἐκείνης.<sup>33</sup>

However, Joseph's entrance into her quarter disrupts this ideal image, and is used by the narrator to project what would seem to be a truer representation of her identity and location. Joseph prays for her conversion from darkness to light, from error to truth, and from death to life. He also prays that she might enter rest and live in God's eternal life forever. The binary oppositions of darkness versus light, error versus truth, death versus

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<sup>32</sup> That one can identify the colonizers as Jews or representatives of Judaism is, of course, a product of the literary analysis engaged in the text and that has nothing to do with historical accuracy.

<sup>33</sup> See C. Burchard, *Joseph und Aseneth kritisch herausgegeben* (PVTG, 5; Leiden: E.J. Brill, 2003), 84.

life are well developed in Aseneth's own prayer of repentance.<sup>34</sup> She takes her black tunic as a death-shroud, prostrates herself as if in a state of mourning and she weeps and fasts for seven days. In her period of mourning she throws ashes on the floor of her chamber (10:14), which, when mixing with her tears, form mud, transforming her idyllic place into a chaotic state (13: 6-7). She renounces her old identity, throws all that has a similarity to life, to light, to truth and to creation away, goes through a stage of chaos/cleansing in order to embrace a new reality that will lead her to the realization of where she truly was and what laid in store for her in her new life. For the author, this is the real portrait of the location of Aseneth in opposition to the blissful picture of the Garden of Eden portrayed at the beginning of the story. Thus, she "put off her linen and gold woven royal robe and dressed in the black tunic of mourning, and loosened her golden girdle and girded a rope around her, and put off the tiara from her head, and the diadem and the bracelets from her hands and feet, and put everything on the floor" (10: 11-12).

On the eighth day of her spiritual journey (can we venture to see here a type of new creation similar to the story of creation in Genesis?) all the signs of life are visible for her to see: "Behold, it was dawn and the birds were already singing and the dogs barking at (people who were) passing through, and Aseneth lifted her head (just) a little from the floor and the ashes on which she was lying, because she was extremely tired and could not control her limbs because of the want (of food) for the seven days" (11:1).

Hubbard's observation is very helpful at this point: "The cosmos itself mirrors Aseneth's experience as the morning star rises in response to her repentance (14:1)."<sup>35</sup> Later on, Aseneth's eyes are described as looking "like the rising morning star" (18:7). What is envisaged is that the re-creation or transformation of one individual is the prelude to the re-creation of the whole cosmos in the eschatological age. Her transformation announces the pilgrimage of other nations to form a single humanity in the God of Joseph. This eschatological redemption appears to sound very hopeful indeed for the Gentile nations. But read from a postcolonial perspective one can understand this image can be seen as a way to secure the privilege and elite position of Israel among the nations. Note that the eschatological vision of the nations is to come under the wings of the God of Israel with their identity as Gentiles, with their status as "the Other" remaining intact. Thus, the eschatological vision of the Gentiles travelling to come under the wings of the God of Joseph participates in the aestheticized chauvinist thinking from the author in order to keep "the Other" in place. From this perspective, nothing has changed. Or *plus ça change ...*

In her encounter with the angel Aseneth is told that her name is written in the "Book of life." The angel assures her that her prayers have been heard, and that, from the day of this heavenly visitation, she will be "renewed and formed anew and made alive again" (15:4). She is also given a new name in 15:6: City of Refuge: "for many nations

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<sup>34</sup> The idea of light versus darkness and movement from error to truth also permeates the writings of the Qumran community. The forces of light versus the forces of darkness are a prominent theme in many of the scrolls. The War Scroll, for example, suggests that the Messianic age would be hailed by battles between forces of light and darkness. Thus, the themes of light, truth, life in reference to Aseneth's conversion have a wider chamber of echoes that surpasses just the individual to encompass the whole created reality.

<sup>35</sup> See Moyer Hubbard, *New Creation in Paul's Letters and Thought*. SNTSMS 119 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 64.

will take refuge in you...” Note that this comment about Aseneth’s witness to the nations is the same as one finds in the Abrahamic covenant. It is, in its own right, universal in scope, for in Abraham “all the nations of the earth will be blessed.” Abraham, it seems, had to travel to distant and inhabited lands in order for him to conquer the land of the Canaanites and to dispossess foreign people of their land so that God’s promises for him could be accomplished. In doing so, he would become “a channel of blessing” to the Canaanites by expropriating their lands. And here Musa Dube’s observation applies very well: “If imperialism means “to think about distant places, to colonize them, to depopulate them,” then at the core of ancient Israel’s foundational story is an imperialist ideology, which operates under the claims of chosenness.”<sup>36</sup>

It is true that if looking at the question of the blessing of the earth through Abraham from a different and more sympathetic angle, it can also mean that the nations are, after all, children of God and, in this sense, Abraham (and now Aseneth) plays the role of a new Adam.<sup>37</sup> But the proposed postcolonial reading of *Joseph and Aseneth* makes one very much aware of the possible connections between the expansionist program of Abraham and of his descendant Joseph.

Also, one needs to pause and think about the new name given to Aseneth by the heavenly man. The far-reaching implication of this pericope is that “the Other” is constructed in such a way that he or she can be embraced, invaded, and placed under the wings of the Jewish God, to the benefit of the Jewish people. Now Aseneth, as Abraham of old, becomes the channel through which the “blessings” of the religion of the Jewish people can be filtered through to the other nations. And note again that this ideology does not stop with the land of Egypt or with other lands. In *Aseneth*, the text seems to suggest, a gate is open not only to other strangers travelling to benefit from the shelter the God of Joseph offers, but it also envisions the re-arranging of the whole cosmos. In this sense, the universe is joined with the community of Israel and those who would take refuge in the Jewish faith in the *eschaton*.<sup>38</sup>

Before moving on let us pause and reflect on the imagery of the shelter awaiting those who travel as refugees to Aseneth, with the aim of embracing her new found faith. The very language of “refuge” makes one shudder when reading *Joseph and Aseneth* through a postcolonial lens. What is the fate of those who decide not to take refuge under the wings of Joseph’s wife? Is there room to disagree and not to enlist with Joseph? The text seems to indicate that anyone who is not with Joseph is against him, and is subject to suffer dire consequences. Pharaoh’s son is dead (though this is skilfully portrayed in the narrative as a regrettable outcome); his accomplices shamed, and the ones who would dare work on the day of Joseph’s wedding are threatened with death (21:7).

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<sup>36</sup> See Musa W. Dube, *Postcolonial Feminist Interpretation of the Bible* (St. Louis, Missouri: Chalice Press, 2000), 17-18. Note that the land to be given to Abraham and his descendants (Gen.12: 7) remains clearly the property of the Canaanites (12:6). The end of Genesis indicates that the promise of land remains unfulfilled. David Clines proposes that “the theme of the Pentateuch is the partial fulfilment-which implies also the partial non-fulfilment- of the promise to or blessing of the patriarchs.” See his *The Theme of the Pentateuch* (JSOTSup 10, Sheffield, 1978), 29. In other words, the promise (or conquest) of land remains a hope throughout the Pentateuch.

<sup>37</sup> There are enough allusions to the Garden of Eden and to (re)-creation imagery in the text to warrant comparison with the mythical figure Adam.

<sup>38</sup> See Chesnutt, “From Death to Life: Conversion in *Joseph and Aseneth*,” chapter 5, for a good summary of Jewish proselytism seen in light of the new creation imagery in Jewish literature.

*Joseph and Aseneth* is constructed in such a way as to show to the reader that turning to the God of the Hebrews for refuge is the right and proper move to make. Refusing to come to this refuge means death - certainly spiritually and culturally- and possibly physically and politically. Bypassing this refuge seems also to signify that one is stubbornly persevering in error. That would also present one as being clearly anti-social. The obvious reason is that the very people in power, such as the king and his high priest, recognize the genuineness of the Jewish's God superiority.

Aseneth's supposed crossing over from a chaotic life characterized by death, error, and darkness to one that is devoid of error is fabricated by her initiation into a mystical world replete with heavenly beings and mysterious bees into which only the elect have access.<sup>39</sup> Her transformation is the prelude of a greater transformation, that of the cosmos in the eschatological age, which is already launched through one individual. Her salvation looks forward to the eschatological transformation and perfection of all that are still in her former state of chaos. The different new creation symbolism speaks of eschatological realities. In her, a gate is open not only for the salvation of other human beings, but also for the salvation of the cosmos, where the new community enjoys the re-mixing of the creation in the eschatological vision.

### **Summary and concluding remarks**

*Joseph and Aseneth* is borne out of a certain construction of the Other. It is written with the objective to explain or justify to fellow Jews and Jewish sympathizers the intrusion of a non-Jewish woman (Aseneth, the daughter of an Egyptian priest) into the life of a biblical hero, Joseph. In this seminar presentation I have probed the question of how this narrative encourages travels to distant and inhabited lands, and how it justifies itself.

The narrative expresses an ideology of conquest, which does not stop at the land of Egypt or to other lands. The text envisions the re-arranging of the whole cosmos by and for the benefit of those who would take refuge in the Jewish faith embraced by Aseneth and by people like her. I have endeavoured to show that Aseneth's conversion/treason has implications that go beyond any easy individual interpretation of the text. Her conquering signals the conquering and the re-creation of the whole cosmos. The eschatological "salvation" of the Gentiles is a by-product of the eschatological restoration of Israel in the sense that the Gentiles cannot approach God unless they come to the Jewish understanding of this deity. There is no place in the author's understanding for any dialogue or learning to know anything that pertains to the religious understanding of the Egyptians. They are condemned and are projected as being in need to repent to come to the God of Israel. The whole narrative exists to promote a particular understanding of God. What may appear at first as a mundane romance is in fact a well-crafted religious and political propaganda: The Jews are the yardsticks of religion; God is on our side; the Other with unthinkable stories and understanding of God needs to come to us.

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<sup>39</sup> See Sabrina Inowlocki, *Des idoles mortes et muettes au dieu vivant: Joseph, Aséneth et le fils de Pharaon dans un roman du judaïsme hellénisé* (Turnhout, Belgium: Brepols, 2002), 132-146 for a very good exploration of the initiation aspect of the novel.

The different sort of travel the narrative anticipates is the coming of the other nations to be subjugated under the refuge of Aseneth's newfound God. The picture of the city of refuge, which is encapsulated in the figure of Aseneth, is what is offered to the pilgrims coming from the four corners of the earth. It is a city where the God of Israel is pre-eminent with Israel as its side to reign and to judge. The refugees of the world are seen to be journeying in order to accept what *Joseph and Aseneth* displays all along: the replacement of one imperial figure, Pharaoh, by another, Joseph. This image opens up the possibility for an eschatological restoration of Israel as a future imperial force; the abandonment of one's cultural and religious heritage in order to follow, or to confess,<sup>40</sup> Joseph's deity. Throughout the narrative the Other is portrayed as being idolatrous and as accepting the position of "unworthiness" as normal.

The conversion of Aseneth represents the possibility for the Egyptians and for all other nations to come to accept the Jewish social-religious way of thinking and doing. The portrait of reality should be, in the mind of the author, that the "barbarian" native Egyptians should accept, with joy, that their daughters are taken as prized objects, that the peace of the family is threatened, and that the gods of the ancestors are abandoned.<sup>41</sup>

The conversion/treason of Aseneth appears to announce the opening of a new creation where the cosmos is part of the eschatological restoration of Israel. The narrative moves from alleged existential chaos to order, from death to life, from mourning to joy. The transformation of Aseneth announces the arrival of others from the nations as refugees to Israel in order to form a homogeneous humanity subservient to the God of Joseph.

In sum, the story of *Joseph and Aseneth* is as a story of conquest of the Other as well as the imaginary framing of a new humanity centered around uniformity; it is a totalistic vision where the scattered immigrants of the world come to the "City of Refuge" in order to conform to one single myth: the uniqueness of the people of Israel restored in the eschatological era to rule and to conquer the world.

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<sup>40</sup> T. L. Donaldson remarks that while the Egyptians are shown to "speak of God with respect" there is no other Egyptian besides Aseneth who is actually depicted as participating in the Egyptian religious practices. See Terence L. Donaldson, *Judaism and the Gentiles: Jewish Patterns of Universalism (to 135 CE)*. (Waco, Texas: Baylor University Press, 2007), 150.

<sup>41</sup> That one can identify the colonizers as Jews or representatives of Judaism is, of course, a product of the literary analysis engaged in the text and that has nothing to do with historical accuracy.

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