

# Aseneth's Eight-Day Transformation as Scriptural Justification for Conversion<sup>1</sup>

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## Abstract

The author of *Joseph and Aseneth* writes a lengthy narrative about Aseneth's conversion, thereby providing a justification for Joseph's marriage to an Egyptian woman. The author explicitly connects her seven-day period of withdrawal to creation, thus portraying her conversion as a divinely wrought new creation. In addition, her eight-day conversion process imitates two similar processes from Jewish scripture. First, Aseneth's transformation parallels the circumcision of the newborn male eight days after his birth. Second, on the eighth day Aseneth partakes of an angelic existence, conversing with an angel, eating the food of angels, and being dressed in angelic garb. This elevation in her status parallels the consecration of the priestly class in Lev 8, which goes through a period of seven days before it can serve as priests on the eighth day. This process thus stresses the distance between non-Jew and Jew, while at the same time providing a scriptural rationale for how Aseneth overcame it.

## Keywords

angelification – circumcision – conversion – intermarriage – *Joseph and Aseneth* – new creation

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## Introduction

*Joseph and Aseneth* deals with the marriage of Joseph to an Egyptian woman, a marriage mentioned in Gen 41:45, but which many Jews of the Second Temple period would have viewed as unlawful. While the Pentateuch never declares a universal ban on intermarriage, Ezra 9:1 does, explicitly mentioning, among others, Egyptian women (cf. 1 Kgs 11:1-2).<sup>2</sup> Clearly indebted to this exegetical tradition, the author of *Joseph and Aseneth* portrays Jacob warning his sons against foreign women: “Guard yourselves carefully, my children, from associating with a foreign woman (ἀπὸ γυναικὸς ἀλλοτρίας τοῦ κοινωνῆσαι αὐτῆ).<sup>3</sup> For her association is destruction and corruption” (7:5).<sup>4</sup> In light of this prohibition of exogamy, the author must provide a compelling explanation for Joseph’s marriage to Aseneth. Presumably this is no mere justification of this marriage, but, more broadly, a justification of a known practice of ethnic Jews marrying ethnic non-Jews. That is, the biblical story of Joseph and Aseneth becomes the

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- 2 Michael Fishbane, *Biblical Interpretation in Ancient Israel* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1985), 116, states, “[T]here can be little doubt that the reference by Ezra’s princes to the intermarriage law in Deut. 7:1-3, 6, with the notable addition of just those peoples mentioned in Deut. 23:4-9, is an intentional exegetical attempt to extend older pentateuchal provisions to the new times” (emphasis original).
  - 3 Although a number of scholars, such as Ross Shepard Kraemer (*When Aseneth Met Joseph: A Late Antique Tale of the Biblical Patriarch and his Egyptian Wife, Reconsidered* [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998] and Rivka Nir (*Joseph and Aseneth: A Christian Book* [Hebrew Bible Monographs 42; Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix, 2012]) have argued that the work is a Christian composition, most scholars believe the work to be Jewish based on this central issue of intermarriage between a Jew and a gentile. See, for instance, John J. Collins, “*Joseph and Aseneth: Jewish or Christian?*” *JSP* 14 (2005): 97-112.
  - 4 One of the most fundamental issues in the interpretation of *Joseph and Aseneth* is the question of which text to use. Marc Philonenko (*Joseph et Aséneth: introduction, text critique, traduction et notes* [SPB 13; Leiden: Brill, 1968]), followed more recently by Angela Standhartinger (*Das Frauenbild im Judentum der hellenistischen Zeit: Ein Beitrag anhand von Joseph und Aseneth* [AGAJU 26; Leiden: Brill, 1995]) and Kraemer (*When Aseneth Met Joseph*, 6-9), has argued for the priority of the shorter *d* family, while Christoph Burchard (*Untersuchungen zu Joseph und Aseneth* [WUNT 8; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1965], 18-90; “Zum Text von ‘Joseph und Aseneth,’” *JSJ* 1 [1970]: 3-34; and, “The Text of *Joseph and Aseneth* Reconsidered,” *JSP* 14.2 [2005]: 83-96) has argued for a text closer to what he formerly called the *b* family, but now (“The Text of *Joseph and Aseneth*,” 86) thinks of as “a clan.” All translations are my own and are based upon the critical text of Christoph Burchard, *Joseph und Aseneth* (assisted by Casten Burfeind and Uta Barbara Fink; PVTG 5; Leiden: Brill, 2005) in consultation with Uta Barbara Fink, *Joseph und Aseneth: Revision des griechischen Textes und Edition der zweiten lateinischen Übersetzung* (FoSub 5; Berlin: de Gruyter, 2008).

cipher for a live issue in the author's community: how can a pious Jew take a non-Jewish spouse? What must a non-Jew do in order to become an acceptable marrying partner?<sup>5</sup> Other early Jewish works also provide evidence that Jews wrestled with the issue of exogamy. The author of *Jubilees*, for instance, uses the story of Shechem's rape of Dinah (Gen 34) to proclaim a universal ban on intermarriage between Jews and gentiles.<sup>6</sup> The book of Tobit stresses that Tobit married "a woman of our own lineage" (1:9). In fact, the drama of the narrative is driven by the need to find Tobiah a woman of the seed of the patriarchs (4:12-13; 6:10-18).<sup>7</sup> Similarly, the *Testament of Levi* censures priests for "purifying [gentile women] with an unlawful purification" (καθαρίζοντες αὐτάς καθαρισμῶ παρανόμῳ; 14:6; cf. *T. Levi* 9:9-10), a statement which some scholars have taken as evidence of the existence of an extrabiblical purification/conversion process which was intended to make gentiles pure and therefore marriageable.<sup>8</sup> I will argue that it is to these sorts of criticisms that the author of *Joseph and Aseneth* responds.

The author of *Joseph and Aseneth* begins to address these issues in the first nine chapters of the work by highlighting Aseneth's sexual purity: "And in this bed Aseneth slept, alone; and a man or another woman never sat upon it, only Aseneth alone" (2:9; cf. 15:14; Josephus, *Ant.* 1.91). In fact, "no man had ever seen her" (2:1). Seven virgins, whose purity was also exemplary since "neither a man nor a male child had talked with them" (2:6), surround Aseneth, thereby providing a protective barrier of purity around her. With regard to sexual purity, Aseneth is a blameless virgin (παρθένος; 1:4-5; 7:7-8; 8:9).

Similarly, the author portrays Joseph as a paragon of virtue in the face of sexual temptation. Even prior to meeting Aseneth, he (perhaps still smarting from the consequences of being in the same house as Potiphar's wife) demands that her father send her away while he visits in order to ensure that she will not molest him (7:2-3). Only upon finding out that she is a virgin and despises men does he consent to meet her. In fact, as Pentephres reminds Aseneth, her sexual purity equals that of Joseph, who is "a virgin like you today" (παρθένος ὡς

5 So, too, Terence L. Donaldson, *Judaism and the Gentiles: Jewish Patterns of Universalism (to 135 CE)* (Waco, Tex.: Baylor University Press, 2007), 142.

6 See the discussion of Cana Werman, "Jubilees 30: Building a Paradigm for the Ban on Intermarriage," *HTR* 90 (1997): 1-22.

7 On endogamy in Tobit, see, most recently, Geoffrey David Miller, *Marriage in the Book of Tobit* (Deuterocanonical and Cognate Literature Series 10; Berlin: de Gruyter, 2011), 43-82.

8 On the question of intermarriage more generally, see Martha Himmelfarb, "Levi, Phinehas, and the Problem of Intermarriage at the Time of the Maccabean Revolt," *JSQ* 6 (1999): 1-24, and Christine E. Hayes, *Gentile Impurities and Jewish Identities: Intermarriage and Conversion from the Bible to the Talmud* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002).

σύ σήμερον; 4:7; 8:1). Further, he notes that Joseph hates foreign women, just as Aseneth hates foreign men, the assumption being that hatred of exogamy was praiseworthy. As Michael Penn notes, “Pentephres tries to collapse the distinctions between his daughter and Joseph” by stressing that both are virgins who oppose exogamy, while at the same time encouraging them to kiss in order to “overcome markers of difference and establish a familial connection between Aseneth and Joseph.”<sup>9</sup> The character of Pentephres thus gives voice to the position that the only meaningful barrier between Jewish and gentile intermarriage is the (potential) sexual impurity of gentiles.

In addition to sharing Jewish sexual mores, the author claims that while she is Egyptian, Aseneth looks like an Israelite: she was “not like the virgins of the Egyptians, but was in all things similar to the daughters of the Hebrews; and she was tall like Sarah and comely like Rebecca and beautiful like Rachel” (1:4-5). Physically similar to Israel’s matriarchs though she may be, and though she may hold in common Joseph’s sexual purity, Aseneth remains an Egyptian devoted to Egyptian gods. Her room is filled with the idols of Egyptian gods, and “she worshiped and feared them and performed sacrifices to them every day” (2:3).

It is this worship of Egyptian gods that the author stresses is most odious to Joseph. Despite Aseneth’s great physical beauty and sexual purity, he refuses to be kissed by her, stating that it is not fitting that he, one who worships the living God (τὸν θεὸν τὸν ζῶντα) and partakes of the victuals of life—the bread of life (ἄρτον ζωῆς), the cup of immortality (ποτήριον ἀθανασίας), and the ointment of incorruptibility (χρίσματι ἀφθαρσίας),<sup>10</sup> should kiss her, one who blesses dead idols (εἰδῶλα νεκρά), eats the bread of strangulation (ἄρτον ἀγχόνης), drinks from a cup of plotting (ποτήριον ἐνέδρας), and uses an ointment of destruction (χρίσματι ἀπωλείας, 8:5). Her idolatry prohibits them from kissing or marrying. As Christoph Burchard states, “Das Kußverbot markiert hier eine Grenze zwischen Juden und Heiden, das heißt auch zwischen Leben und Tod.”<sup>11</sup> More

9 Penn, “Identity Transformation and Authorial Identification in *Joseph and Aseneth*,” *JSP* 13 (2002): 171-83 at 173, 174. Penn points to two Greco-Roman sources, Apuleius, *Metam.* 11.25, 28, and Petronius 127.4-3, which use kisses to establish fictive kinship.

10 T. Holtz (“Christliche Interpolationen in ‘Joseph und Aseneth,’” *NTS* 114 [1968]: 482-97) argues that this triadic reference to bread, cup, and ointment is a Christian interpolation referring to the Eucharist and baptism. While this is possible, it is equally plausible that it is original, since Randall D. Chesnut (“Perceptions of Oil in Early Judaism and the Meal Formula in *Joseph and Aseneth*,” *JSP* 14 [2005]: 113-32) has demonstrated that it fits well within Jewish thinking, which uses this triad as a boundary between Jews and gentiles in later rabbinic literature.

11 Burchard, “Küssen in *Joseph und Aseneth*,” *JSJ* 36 (2005): 316-23 at 319.

than this, as, B. Diane Lipsett states, "In Joseph's proprieties of piety, the boundaries of and for eating, drinking and anointing also constitute the boundaries for kissing."<sup>12</sup> To kiss her would, in short, be like kissing a corpse.

This stark assessment of the gap between Aseneth and Joseph, and, by extrapolation non-Israelites and Israelites or non-Jews and Jews, creates considerable tension within the story. As John M. G. Barclay states, "When one considers the numerous frictionless ways in which this marriage could have been portrayed, the humiliating experience which Aseneth is made to undergo indicates just how strongly the author wishes to communicate this message."<sup>13</sup> Knowing that Joseph ultimately marries Aseneth,<sup>14</sup> what must take place for her to become marriageable? How can Aseneth move from death to life? Given the author's emphasis upon the discrepancy between the gods they worship, one might assume that Aseneth's abandonment of idolatry and subsequent worship of Israel's God would suffice to bridge the gap.<sup>15</sup> To be sure, these two things must and do happen. As Erich Gruen states, Aseneth "turned her religious life around at a stroke."<sup>16</sup> But this turn does not result in an immediate change in Aseneth's state; rather, the author creates a seven-day waiting period, followed by a culminating eighth day when Aseneth becomes worthy of marriage to Joseph, thereby suggesting that something more than Aseneth's "religious life" is at play here.

### The Eight Days of Aseneth's Re-creation

After rebuffing Aseneth's advances and explaining to her why they cannot kiss, Joseph has mercy upon her and offers the following prayer on her behalf:

Lord, God of my father Israel,  
the most High, the Powerful One of Jacob,

12 Lipsett, *Desiring Conversion: Hermas, Thecla, Aseneth* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 103.

13 Barclay, *Jews in the Mediterranean Diaspora: From Alexander to Trajan (323 BCE-117 CE)* (Hellenistic Culture and Society 33; Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), 211.

14 Both Gerhard Dellling ("Einwirkungen der Sprache der Septuaginta in 'Joseph und Aseneth,'" *JSJ* 9 [1978]: 29-56) and Susan Docherty ("*Joseph and Aseneth*: Rewritten Bible or Narrative Expansion," *JSJ* 35 [2004]: 27-48) demonstrate the numerous connections between *Joseph and Aseneth* and Genesis's account of the Joseph story.

15 Penn, "Identity Transformation," 175.

16 Gruen, *Heritage and Hellenism: The Reinvention of Jewish Tradition* (Hellenistic Culture and Society 30; Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), 90.

the one who made alive all things  
 and called (them) from the darkness into the light,  
 and from the error into the truth,  
 and from death into life;  
 you, Lord, bless this virgin,  
 and renew her by your spirit,  
 and form her anew by your hidden hand,  
 and make her alive again by your life,  
 and let her eat your bread of life,  
 and let her drink your cup of blessing  
 and number her together with your people. (8:9)

In response, Aseneth retreats to her chamber in seclusion, weeping and repenting of the gods she worshipped, while Joseph departs, stating that he will return in eight days. If idolatry were the sole issue, one would expect such repentance to effect an immediate change in Aseneth's status. But it does not. Joseph's statement that he would return in eight days introduces the period of Aseneth's repentance and conversion. Significantly, he connects that day, a Sunday, to the first day of creation: "I will depart today, since this is the day in which God began to make all his creatures, and on the eighth day,<sup>17</sup> when this day returns, I also will return to you and lodge here" (9:5). This statement suggests that the author intends his readers to understand Aseneth's conversion as paralleling God's creation of the world, something alluded to in Joseph's earlier prayer as well. Just as God gave life to all things in Gen 1, and brought light into the darkness (Gen 1:2-3), so now God will bring Aseneth from death into life and out of the darkness into the light. Aseneth's conversion is not instantaneous, but a seven-day process, just like creation.<sup>18</sup> Only after this seven-day process can Joseph return to enjoy God's completed new creation on the eighth day.

On the morning of the eighth day, precisely because of her earlier repentance, Aseneth notes her liminal status: "All have hated me, and among those

17 As Burchard ("Joseph and Aseneth," *OTP* 2.214 note h) notes, manuscripts a c d (Syr.) L<sub>1</sub> L<sub>2</sub> read "eighth" (τῆ ἡμέρᾳ τῆ ὀγδόῃ); E F W Arm read "seventh." It seems most likely that a scribe modified "eighth" to "seventh" in order to stress the seven-day period of creation, even though this modification would then create tension with the timing of 11:1.

18 I am indebted here to Jill Hicks-Keeton for her paper entitled "A New Creation: Joseph and Aseneth and Genesis 1-2," which was delivered to the Duke New Testament Colloquium, January 22, 2013. Ronald Charles ("Une lecture narrative de *Joseph et Aséneth* à la lumière du motif de la 'nouvelle création,'" *ScEs* 63 [2011]: 73-84) argues that the theme of new creation applies not merely to Aseneth, but also has broader cosmic significance within the narrative.

my father and my mother, because I also have hated their gods and have destroyed them, and gave them to be trampled upon by humans. And for this reason my father and my mother and my entire kin have hated me and said, 'Aseneth is not our daughter since she destroyed our gods' " (11:4-5).<sup>19</sup> Aseneth is now neither Egyptian nor, apparently, Jewish. As Richard Pervo notes, "[T]his dissonance stems from her role as typical and representative proselyte, one who experiences as the model and patron of other converts the sufferings and alienation a change of religion may bring."<sup>20</sup> Her prayer in chapter 12 functions as a bookend to her seven-day period of repentance, again touching upon the theme of God as creator:

Lord, God of the ages,  
 the one who created all things and gave life,  
 the one who gave breath of life to your entire creation,  
 the one who brought the invisible things into the light,  
 the one who made the things that are and the visible from the invisible  
 and non-being . . .  
 For you, Lord, spoke and they were brought to life,  
 since your word, Lord, is the life of all your creatures. (12:1-2)

As Burchard states, "Aseneth repents on a Sunday (see vs. 2), but she must wait a week until God accepts her. This goes to underscore, among other things (see 10:17), the huge distance between her old and new existence."<sup>21</sup> Aseneth's transformation is brought about not merely by turning from idolatry to worship of the true God, but also by divine intervention akin to God's original seven-day creation of the world.

19 On Aseneth's liminal status during this seven-day period, see Rees Conrad Douglas, "Liminality and Conversion in Joseph and Aseneth," *JSP* 3 (1988): 31-42.

20 Pervo, "Aseneth and Her Sisters: Women in Jewish Narrative and in the Greek Novels," in *Women Like This: New Perspectives on Jewish Women in the Greco-Roman World* (ed. Amy-Jill Levine; Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1991), 145-60 at 151. It should be noted that Aseneth's statements conflict with the narrative, which portrays her family's continuing support of her.

21 Burchard, "Joseph and Aseneth," 214 note i. Thus, while Philonenko (*Joseph et Aséneth*, 53) is correct in saying that the work "pourrait passer pour une illustration de la μετάνοια," the author actually emphasizes the divine response to and transformation of the repentant one.



### Eighth-Day Circumcision

Aseneth's eighth-day transformation evokes another eight-day period which informs the author's portrayal of Aseneth's conversion—the eight-day period culminating in the circumcision of a new-born Israelite male. According to the priestly writings of the Pentateuch, Israelite males are to undergo circumcision on the eighth day after their birth. In Gen 17:9-14, the circumcision legislation twice specifies that the rite needs to take place on the eighth day after birth:

You shall keep my covenant, you and your seed after you in their generations. This is my covenant which you shall keep between me and between you and between your seed after you: to circumcise every male among you. And you shall circumcise the flesh of your foreskins and it shall be for a sign of the covenant between me and between you. And the eight-day-old child shall be circumcised, every male among you throughout your generations, the one born in your house and the one purchased from any foreigner who does not belong to your seed. Surely the one born in your house and the one purchased shall be circumcised, and my covenant shall be in your flesh for an eternal covenant. And any uncircumcised male, who is not circumcised in the flesh of his foreskin on the eighth day, his life shall be cut off from his people; he has broken my covenant.

According to Gen 17:12, God commands Abraham to circumcise the males of his household on the eighth day after their birth. Leviticus 12:3 contains this same temporal requirement.<sup>22</sup> The consequence of failing to circumcise an infant on the eighth day becomes apparent in Gen 17:14, which, according to the LXX, states that one who is not circumcised on the eighth day is to be cut off from the people. Although MT Gen 17:14 does not contain this temporal stipulation, the book of *Jubilees*, the Samaritan Pentateuch, and the Old Latin do. Recently I have argued that the LXX and Samaritan Pentateuch preserve the earliest inferable form of Gen 17:14.<sup>23</sup> Whether or not this argument is correct, the author of *Joseph and Aseneth* used the LXX and therefore knew this version

22 To my knowledge, only Philonenko (*Joseph et Aséneth*, 161) notes these passages in connection with *Jos. Asen.* 9:5 and 11:1. Scholars agree that both Gen 17:12-14 and Lev 12:3 stem from one author. While most attribute them to P, Joshua M. Vis ("The Purification Offering of Leviticus and the Sacrificial Offering of Jesus" [Ph.D. diss., Duke University, 2012], 55-62) has recently made a strong case that they come from H.

23 Matthew Thiessen, "The Text of Genesis 17:14," *JBL* 128 (2009): 625-42.



of the circumcision legislation, which did contain this temporal stipulation.<sup>24</sup> Consequently the priestly conclusion to the covenant of circumcision (Gen 21:1-4) describes Isaac's circumcision on the eighth day (τῆ ὀγδόῃ ἡμέρᾳ)<sup>25</sup> after his birth as being in accordance with God's commandment (21:4).<sup>26</sup>

Given this emphasis upon the timing of circumcision, it is likely that the author of *Joseph and Aseneth* describes Aseneth's conversion as an eight-day process in order to parallel circumcision, another eight-day process, thereby legitimizing her conversion.<sup>27</sup> Just as the newborn Jewish male must wait a period of eight days prior to being circumcised and entering into the life of the Jewish community, so too must Aseneth, who also receives a new name on the eighth day: "And your name will no longer be called Aseneth, but your name will be 'City of Refuge,' because in you many gentiles will take refuge with the Lord God, the Most High" (15:7).<sup>28</sup> Aseneth's transformation on the eighth day signals the divine circumcision of her heart (cf. Lev 26:41; Deut 10:16; 30:6; Jer 4:4; 9:26; Ezek 44:6-9).<sup>29</sup>

While Gen 17 provides no rationale for this eight-day waiting period, Lev 12 does by placing circumcision within the context of parturient impurity.<sup>30</sup>

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- 24 Burchard, *Untersuchungen zu Joseph und Aseneth*, 144; Delling, "Einwirkungen der Sprache der Septuaginta."
- 25 Although I follow Burchard's critical text of *Jos. Asen.* 11:1, which reads τῆ ἡμέρᾳ τῆ ὀγδόῃ, it is possible that the reading of manuscripts G BD (τῆ ὀγδόῃ ἡμέρᾳ), is to be preferred. If so, it is possible that 11:1 alludes to Isaac's circumcision in Gen 21:4, which is unique in the LXX in using this precise grammatical construction to refer to the eighth day.
- 26 That second-temple period Jews picked up on the significance of eighth-day circumcision can be seen most clearly in *Jubilees* and Luke-Acts. See Matthew Thiessen, *Contesting Conversion: Genealogy, Circumcision, and Identity in Ancient Judaism and Christianity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 67-86, 111-23. Cf. Josephus, *Ant.* 1.192, 214.
- 27 In light of this parallel to eighth-day circumcision, I disagree with both J. C. O'Neill ("What is *Joseph and Aseneth* About?" *Hen* 16 [1994]: 189-98) and Catherine Hezser ("Joseph and Aseneth' in the Context of Ancient Greek Erotic Novels," *Frankfurter Judaistische Beiträge* 24 [1997]: 1-40), who have argued that *Joseph and Aseneth* is not concerned with gentile conversion to Judaism.
- 28 On the possibility that converts to Judaism changed their names, see G. H. R. Horsley, "Name Change as an Indication of Conversion in Antiquity," *Numen* 34 (1987): 1-17.
- 29 On this theme in Jewish scripture, see Werner E. Lemke, "Circumcision of the Heart: The Journey of a Biblical Metaphor," in *God So Near: Essays on Old Testament Theology in Honor of Patrick D. Miller* (ed. Brent A. Strawn and Nancy R. Bowen; Winona Lake, Ind.: Eisenbrauns, 2003), 299-319.
- 30 In light of the fact that this reference to circumcision appears within the context of a discussion of parturient impurity, Jacob Milgrom (*Leviticus 1-16: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* [AB 3; New York: Doubleday, 1991], 747) argues, "The

According to Lev 12:1-3, the Israelite mother of a newborn male suffers a high-level ritual impurity for a seven-day period, followed by a thirty-three-day period of lower-level impurity. Although Lev 12 does not explicitly state so, the priestly writer may assume that the newborn child suffers the same impurity as his mother.<sup>31</sup> That is, both mother and male child need a seven-day period to distance themselves from their encounter with the threshold of death or mortality.<sup>32</sup> Only after this impurity is dealt with can the infant be circumcised and enter into Israel's cultic life.<sup>33</sup>

In the case of Aseneth, the author emphasizes that her rebirth is the occasion of her departure from the realm of death. On the first day of this process she changes into mourning clothing, locating herself within the sphere of death (10:8). Further, she removes objects that signified death—the innumerable gods that dwelt in her chamber (which Joseph refers to as “dead and mute idols,” εἰδωλα νεκρὰ καὶ κωφά; 8:5) her food (“bread of strangulation,” ἄρτον ἀγγρόνης; 8:5), and her wine (“a cup of plotting,” ποτήριον ἐνέδρας; 8:5)—and throws them out of her chamber. On the morning of the eighth day Aseneth confesses that she has worshipped dead and mute idols (11:8), and that her mouth is impure from partaking of the sacrifices of idols (11:9, 16). In hope she calls upon God, who created all and gave the breath of life to all (ὁ δοὺς πᾶσι πνοὴν ζωῆς). The first day of her repentance, then, parallels the birth of the newborn male. On this day both the newborn male and Aseneth leave the realm of death and begin making their way to life. On the eighth day, both

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purpose of this interpolation is to emphasize the uniqueness of this rite; not the rite itself, which was practiced ubiquitously by Israel's Semitic neighbors, but the timing of the rite, which in Israel alone was performed in infancy and, precisely, on the eighth day.”

- 31 For Ancient Near Eastern evidence supporting this claim, as well as evidence that at least some early Jews believed this to be the case, see Matthew Thiessen, “Luke 2:22, Leviticus 12, and Parturient Impurity,” *NovT* 54 (2012): 16-29.
- 32 See Milgrom, *Leviticus: A Book of Ritual and Ethics* (CC; Minneapolis: Fortress, 2004), 122-26. 1QHodayot<sup>a</sup> supports this connection between birth and death: “I was in distress like a woman giving birth to her firstborn, when her pangs and painful labor have come upon her womb opening, causing spasms in the crucible of the pregnant woman. For children come to the womb opening of death, and she who is pregnant with a manchild is convulsed by her labor pains. For in the breakers of death she delivers a male, and in the cords of Sheol there bursts forth from the crucible of the pregnant woman a wonderful counselor with his power, and the manchild is delivered from the breakers by the one who is pregnant with him” (11:8-11). Translation follows Eileen M. Schuller and Carol A. Newsom, *The Hodayot (Thanksgiving Psalms): A Study Edition of 1QH<sup>a</sup>* (SBLJL 36; Atlanta: SBL, 2012), 37.
- 33 See Shaye J. D. Cohen, *Why Aren't Jewish Women Circumcised? Gender and Covenant in Judaism* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 19.

become viable Jewish offspring. Thus, in contrast to Terence L. Donaldson, who argues that “if Torah and circumcision were important for the author, they could easily have been incorporated,” I would suggest that by portraying Aseneth’s conversion in such a way as to evoke the rite of eighth-day circumcision, the author stresses the way in which Aseneth’s conversion parallels circumcision.<sup>34</sup> In this way, the author is also able to overcome the difficulty of portraying the conversion of a gentile *woman*, who cannot undergo the very visible rite of circumcision.<sup>35</sup> By portraying Aseneth’s conversion in a way that evokes the eighth-day circumcision legislation of the Pentateuch, the author thus demonstrates his need to anchor Aseneth’s conversion (and presumably all conversions) in some scriptural precedent.

Significantly, then, Aseneth’s eight-day conversion process emphasizes the great distance between Jews and non-Jews, while simultaneously providing a biblical basis for the possibility that gentiles can cross this gap.

### The Eight-Day Transformation of the Levites

Not only does Aseneth’s conversion parallel the eight-day process of birth and circumcision for Jewish males, it also parallels a broader eight-day process of entering into Israel’s cultic sphere. For instance, according to Exod 22:23, Israel must offer the firstborn of any of its sheep or oxen on the eighth day after its birth. In fact, any bull, sheep, or goat remains illegitimate for the first seven days of its life—only on the eighth day does it become a viable sacrifice (Lev 22:26-27). Similarly, the person who suffers from an impurity due to scale disease or a genital discharge, or the Nazirite who encounters corpse impurity, must endure a seven-day purification process before he or she can come to make a

34 Donaldson, *Judaism and the Gentiles*, 149. On Torah more broadly in *Joseph and Aseneth*, see Karl-Wilhelm Niebuhr, “Ethik und Tora: Zum Toraverständnis in *Joseph und Aseneth*,” in *Joseph und Aseneth* (Sapere 15; ed. Eckart Reinmuth; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2009), 186-202.

35 Daniel R. Schwartz (“Doing like Jews or Becoming a Jew? Josephus on Women Converts to Judaism,” in *Jewish Identity in the Greco-Roman World / Jüdische Identität in der griechisch-römischen Welt* [ed. Jörg Frey, Daniel R. Schwartz, and Stephanie Gripenotrog; AGJU 71; Leiden: Brill, 2007], 93-109) has demonstrated that Josephus was troubled by the inability of gentile women to undergo circumcision as a sign of their conversion. Although Mary Knight (“Curing Cut or Ritual Mutilation? Some Remarks on the Practice of Female and Male Circumcision in Graeco-Roman Egypt,” *Isis* 92 [2001]: 317-38) provides evidence that female circumcision was practiced in Greco-Roman Egypt, no evidence exists that Jews in Egypt ever practiced it apart from the apparently mistaken claims of Strabo 16.4.9.

purification offering on the eighth day (Lev 14:8-10, 23; 15:13-14; Num 6:9-10). As Jacob Milgrom states, "The eighth day is integrally connected with the previous seven. This holds true throughout the cult."<sup>36</sup>

Yet it is one eight-day process which is especially instructive for the way in which the author portrays Aseneth's conversion: the consecration of the priests at the inception of the sacrificial system (Lev 8; cf. Exod 29:35-37). In order to serve as Israel's priests in the wilderness tabernacle, God must, through Moses, consecrate Aaron and his sons to the priesthood. While this process begins with a rather detailed ritual involving anointing oil and the manipulation of blood, this ritual only prepares Aaron and his sons for a seven-day period in which they will remain in the tent of meeting.<sup>37</sup> Moses states that they must remain there for seven days in order for their ordination to be completed (8:33-35). On the eighth day, Moses calls Aaron and his sons and commands them to begin serving as priests for the entire congregation of Israel (9:1). Prior to their consecration, Aaron and his sons differed in no way from other Israelites, but their consecration created a sharp distinction between them and their compatriots: now they are priests, able to serve in sacred space, while their compatriots remain laypeople unable to safely enter such space. Through this consecration process God creates a new class of Israelites, now demarcated by its ability to serve within a sphere of greater holiness than is permitted to the lay Israelite.<sup>38</sup> As Mary Douglas and Jacob Milgrom argue, the priestly worldview consists of three different types of humans, which correspond to the three classes of the animal kingdom:

Priests	Sacrificial animals
Lay Israelites	Clean, non-sacrificial animals
Non-Israelites	Unclean animals <sup>39</sup>

Apart from this initial, and apparently never-to-be-repeated, consecration of Aaron and his sons, no provision is made for a lay Israelite to become a priest or

36 Milgrom, *Leviticus 1-16*, 571. See also the discussion of David A. Bernat, *Sign of the Covenant: Circumcision in the Priestly Tradition* (SBLAIL 3; Atlanta: Scholars Press, 2009), 60-63.

37 Milgrom (*Leviticus 1-16*, 538) argues that the complex rituals of Lev 8:1-32 occur every day for the entire week.

38 On gradations of holiness in priestly thinking, see Frank H. Gorman Jr., *The Ideology of Ritual: Space, Time and Status in the Priestly Theology* (JSOTSup 91; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1990), and Philip Peter Jenson, *Graded Holiness: A Key to the Priestly Conception of the World* (JSOTSup 106; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1992).

39 Milgrom, *Leviticus 1-16*, 689, and Mary Douglas, "Deciphering a Meal," *Daedalus* 101 (1972): 61-81 at 75-76.

vice versa. One might say that Aaron and his sons undergo an ontological transformation that is then transmitted genealogically. To be a priest is to be born a priest. To be an Israelite is to be born an Israelite. Priestly identity, Israelite identity, and gentile identity are inherent and, consequently, immutable.<sup>40</sup>

The author of *Joseph and Aseneth* assumes this worldview, stressing the great distance between gentile and Jew. Yet, by depicting Aseneth's seven-day conversion process followed by her adoption of a new identity upon the eighth day, he makes use of the precedent set by the seven-day consecration period of the priesthood to justify gentile conversion. Just as Aaron and his sons undergo a lengthy ritual in order to become genealogically distinct from their fellow Israelites, so, too, does Aseneth, who becomes genealogically distinct from her gentile family. Like Aaron and his sons, at the beginning of the process Aseneth is not ready to enter her new identity, for she remains in a liminal state. As Victor W. Turner states,

During the intervening "liminal" period, the characteristics of the ritual subject (the "passenger") are ambiguous; he passes through a cultural realm that has few or none of the attributes of the past or coming state . . . as liminal beings they have no status, property, insignia, secular clothing indicating rank or rule, position in a kinship system.<sup>41</sup>

This accurately describes both Israel's priests, who are no longer profane lay Israelites, and Aseneth, who is no longer daughter to her parents. She has abandoned her past, and been abandoned by it; but she is not yet ready to marry Joseph. Only after the seven-day period is complete does an angel come and invest her with her new status. While no angelic visitor validates the consecration of the priests, the fact that Leviticus stresses that God has given Moses this consecration rite demonstrates that divine activity takes place in it.<sup>42</sup>

40 For such priestly thinking, see Daniel R. Schwartz, "On Two Aspects of a Priestly View of Descent at Qumran," in *Archaeology and History in the Dead Sea Scrolls: The New York University Conference in Memory of Yigael Yadin* (ed. Lawrence H. Schiffman; JSPSup 8; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1990), 157-79.

41 Turner, *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-structure* (New York: Aldine, 1995), 94-95. Cf. Christian Wetz, *Eros und Bekehrung: Anthropologische und religionsgeschichtliche Untersuchungen zu "Joseph und Aseneth"* (NTOA/SUNT 87; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2010), 62-68.

42 Michael B. Hundley (*Keeping Heaven on Earth: Safeguarding the Divine Presence in the Priestly Tabernacle* [FAT 2/50; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2011], 87-88) states, "The people would see that the priests are somehow being changed and that this change is important,

As Milgrom states, “The eighth day marks the inauguration of the regular public cult. During the previous week, the tabernacle was consecrated and the priests were invested, all in preparation for this day. The eighth day is thus the climax of the foregoing seven, as in so many other rituals and events.”<sup>43</sup> This is precisely what we see in *Aseneth*: a seven-day period of purification, seclusion, and repentance that culminates on the eighth day in her partaking of the blessings of her newly acquired status.<sup>44</sup> In answer to Joseph’s prayer, God has now numbered her among his people (8:9), who are a kingdom of priests (Exod 19:6; cf. *Jub.* 16.18).

### Angelic Israel, *Aseneth*’s Angelic Visitor, and Her Angelic Transformation

This parallel to the transformation of the tribe of Levi from a profane existence with the rest of Israel to a sacred existence as those who minister before the Lord sheds light on the significance of *Aseneth*’s angelic transformation within the narrative.<sup>45</sup> On the eighth day, *Aseneth* hosts a celestial guest:

When *Aseneth* stopped confessing to the Lord, behold, the morning star arose out of heaven in the east (ὁ ἑωσφόρος ἀστήρ ἀνέτειλεν ἐκ τοῦ οὐρανοῦ κατὰ ἀνατολάς). And *Aseneth* saw it, and rejoiced and said: “Then the Lord God has heard my prayer, for this star is an angel and herald of the light of the great day (ὁ ἀστήρ οὗτος ἄγγελος καὶ κήρυξ τοῦ φωτός τῆς μεγάλης ἡμέρας ἀνέτειλεν).” And behold, the heaven was split near the morning star and an unspeakable light shone. And *Aseneth* fell upon her face in the ashes. And a man from heaven (ἄνθρωπος ἐκ τοῦ οὐρανοῦ) came to her. (14:1-3)

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unnatural, and intimately connected to the altar. In short, it would communicate that making people holy and fit for divine service requires complex and extreme means.”

43 Milgrom, *Leviticus*, 88. See Bernat, *Sign of the Covenant*, 62.

44 So, too, George J. Brooke (“Joseph, *Aseneth*, and Lévi-Strauss,” in *Narrativity in Biblical and Related Texts: La narrativité dans la bible et les textes apparentés* [ed. G. J. Brooke and J.-D. Kaestli; BETL 149; Leuven: Leuven University Press, 2000], 185-200 esp. 190-91), who uses Claude Lévi-Strauss’s categories of “raw” and “cooked” to interpret *Aseneth*’s transformed status.

45 On the theme of angels in *Joseph and Aseneth*, see George Brooke, “Men and Women as Angels in *Joseph and Aseneth*,” *JSP* 14 (2005): 159-77.

Although it is possible to translate ἄγγελος as “messenger,” not “angel,” the fact that the star seems to take on the appearance of a man from heaven suggests that this star is an angelic figure who changes forms in order to address the human Aseneth.<sup>46</sup> This angelic visitation heralds Aseneth's angelic transformation on the eighth day. Not only does she converse with the angel, but she also partakes of the honeycomb, which is angelic food according to the angel: “And the bees of the paradise of delight have made this from the dew of the roses of life which are in the paradise of God. And all the angels of God eat of it and all the elect of God and all the sons of the Most High, because this is a comb of life, and everyone who eats of it will not die for ever” (16:14).<sup>47</sup> As Randall Chesnutt argues, Aseneth's consumption of the honeycomb places

46 On the equation of divine or angelic beings and celestial bodies in antiquity, see Alan Scott, *Origen and the Life of the Stars: A History of an Idea* (Oxford Early Christian Studies; Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991). For this equation in specifically Jewish thinking, see Dale C. Allison, Jr., *Studies in Matthew: Interpretation Past and Present* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 2005), 17-41. As Ross Shepard Kraemer (*When Aseneth Met Joseph*, 101), notes, *PGM* 1.74-77 provides an interesting parallel: “[A blazing star] will descend and come to a stop in the middle / of the housetop, and when the star [has dissolved] before your eyes, you will behold the angel whom you have summoned and who has been sent [to you], and you will quickly learn the decisions of the gods.” So, too, *PGM* 1.154-55, which contains a spell to the moon: “. . . you will see some star gradually free itself from [heaven] and become a god.” Translations taken from Hans Dieter Betz, ed., *The Greek Magical Papyri in Translation, Including the Demotic Spells: Volume One Texts* (2d ed.; Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992). See also *1 En.* 17.1, in which Enoch describes his ascent to the “place where there were (the ones) like the flaming fire. And when they (so) desire they appear like men.”

47 On recent interpretations of the bees and the honeycomb, see Moyer Hubbard, “Honey for Aseneth: Interpreting a Religious Symbol,” *JSP* 16 (1997): 97-110; Edith M. Humphrey, “On Bees and Best Guesses: The Problem of *Sitz im Leben* from Internal Evidence as Illustrated by *Joseph and Aseneth*,” *CurBS* 7 (1999): 223-36; and Anthea E. Portier-Young, “Sweet Mercy Metropolis: Interpreting Aseneth's Honeycomb,” *JSP* 14 (2005): 133-57. Gideon Bohak (*Joseph and Aseneth and the Jewish Temple at Heliopolis* [SBLJL 10; Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1996]), followed by Martina Hirschberger (“Aseneths erstes Brautkleid: Symbolik von Kleidung und Zeit in der Bekehrung Aseneths [JosAs 1-21],” *Apocrypha* 21 [2010]: 179-201), argues that the bees, whose appearance evokes the priestly clothing of Exod 28, and honeycomb represent those priests who established another temple at Heliopolis in the second century B.C.E., and therefore provides a justification for the establishment of this temple. Although I am not convinced by this reading, it would suggest a priestly authorship to the work, something that would coincide nicely with my own argument that the work envisions an ontological/genealogical distinction between Jew and gentile that can only be overcome by dramatic divine intervention. Again, for such priestly thinking, see Schwartz, “On Two Aspects of a Priestly View.”



her “on a par with the Jew by birth, and indeed with the angels of God, who eat the same immortal food.”<sup>48</sup> Aseneth’s transformation to the status of an angel demonstrates vividly the distance between her and her former family and identifies her with Israel. She has undergone a change in species, a transformation on an ontological level.

In addition to now being able to eat the food of angels, Aseneth’s visage also changes. The author compares her face to the sun and her eyes to the morning star (18:9).<sup>49</sup> Her family perceives her to be like the appearance of light and her beauty as “heavenly” (κάλλος οὐράνιον; 20:6). The angelic statement that “from today (ἀπὸ τῆς σήμερον), you will be renewed and formed anew and made alive again” (15:5) indicates that it is precisely at this point in time, the eighth day, that Aseneth undergoes transformation. When Joseph sees her, he proclaims that “the sons of the living God” (οἱ υἱοὶ τοῦ ζῶντος θεοῦ) will dwell in her (19:8). Further, the angel tells Aseneth that her head is as a young man’s (ἡ κεφαλή σου ἔστιν ὡς ἀνδρὸς νεανίσκου; 15:1), possibly again acknowledging her angelic transformation, since other early Jewish and Christian texts describe angels as young men (e.g., Josephus, *Ant.* 5:276-277 [νεανίας]; Mk 16:5 [νεανίσκος]).<sup>50</sup>

The narrative of *Joseph and Aseneth* implies that this transformation places Aseneth on par with her soon-to-be husband, Joseph. In *Jos. Asen.* 5, Joseph, carrying a royal staff and dressed in a white garment, a purple robe, and golden crown, enters Pentephres’ courtyard on a golden chariot drawn by four horses, which were white as snow (5:4-5). The twelve stones and golden rays of his crown evoke the sun. Aseneth’s words confirm this identification, for she

48 *From Death to Life: Conversion in Joseph and Aseneth* (JSPSup 16; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1995), 131. Additionally, there is a moral component to this transformation, as Portier-Young (“Sweet Mercy Metropolis,” 155) notes, since Aseneth, now a City of Refuge, becomes “an agent of divine mercy for others,” as is evident in her treatment of Dan, Gad, Naphtali, Asher, and the sons of Bilhah and Zilpah (27:7-28:17). On the concept of Aseneth as a city, see 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), 30-56.

49 Kraemer (*When Aseneth Met Joseph*, 112) notes that 2 *En.* 1:5 contains a description of angelic beings strikingly similar to the description of Aseneth: “Their faces were like the shining sun; their eyes were like burning lamps; from their mouths fire was coming forth.”

50 Kraemer (*When Aseneth Met Joseph*, 116) argues that the seven-day period of seclusion prepares Aseneth for this transformation: “Depriving the body of all those elements that transform the natural body into the social body (food, clothing, sexual and social contact with other humans) appears to make the adept’s body as close to that of an angel as is humanly possible. Such preparation rests on ancient notions of angelic bodies as essentially spiritual rather than material.”

states, “[T]he sun from heaven has come to us on its chariot and entered our house today, and shines in it like a light upon the earth” (6:2). It is possible that the author here intends readers to perceive the fulfillment of Joseph’s dream that one day the sun, moon, and stars would bow down to him (Gen 37:9), having becoming the sun itself now.<sup>51</sup>

Further, Aseneth calls him “the son of God” (ὁ υἱὸς τοῦ θεοῦ; 6:5; cf. 6:3; 22:10), a title probably meant to convey Joseph’s semi-divine or angelic status, since Jewish scripture often uses (הים) אֱלֹהִים for divine beings (cf. Gen 6:2-4; Deut 32:8 [4QDeut<sup>f</sup>]; Pss 29:1; 89:7; Job 1:6; 2:1; 38:7), and the LXX translators at times rendered this phrase as ἄγγελος θεοῦ (Deut 32:8; Job 1:6; 2:1) or just ἄγγελος (Job 38:7).<sup>52</sup> That this statement implies her belief that Joseph is divine or angelic is confirmed by her observation: “[F]or who among men on earth will generate such beauty, and what womb of a woman will give birth to such light?” (τίς γὰρ ἀθρώπων ἐπὶ γῆς γενήσῃ τοιοῦτον κάλλος καὶ ποία κοιλία γυναικὸς τέξεται τοιοῦτον φῶς; 6:4). As Chesnutt states, “The glorified portrayal of Joseph upon his arrival among his Gentile hosts (5.4-7), including something very close to an ascription of angelic status to him by the startled Aseneth (6.1-8), reinforces the reader’s initial impression that the author wishes to set Joseph and his people qualitatively apart from all others and generates the expectation that the story will somehow revolve around this fundamental difference.”<sup>53</sup>

Additionally, the author stresses the similarities between Joseph and Aseneth’s angelic visitor: “And Aseneth lifted her head and saw, and behold, there was a man in all things similar to Joseph (ἰδοὺ ἀνὴρ κατὰ πάντα ὁμοίος τῷ Ἰωσήφ; 14:9), by the robe and the crown and the royal scepter—only his face was as lightning, and his eyes as the light of the sun, and the hairs of his head as a flame of fire of a burning torch, and hands and feet as iron shining forth from a fire, and sparks were shooting from his hands and feet” (14:9; cf. 17:8; LXX Dan 10:5-6). The portrayal of Aseneth’s angelic visitor strengthens the author’s portrayal of Joseph as an angelic human being, and no mere human. Joseph is, in other words, a different species or order of human being.

Not only does Aseneth’s transformation raise her to the level of Joseph, it also demonstrates that she is now of the same species as Joseph’s family. The author describes Jacob as “very beautiful to look at, and his old age was as a young man (ὥσπερ νεότης ἀνδρός),<sup>54</sup> and his head was entirely white as snow,

51 At the very least, Joseph has usurped the position of the sun god Helios.

52 See also, Burchard, *Untersuchungen*, 115-117.

53 Chesnutt, *From Death to Life*, 98.

54 The edition of Fink (*Joseph und Aseneth*, 191) reads “as a beautiful young man” (ὥσπερ ὠραίου νεότης ἀνδρός).

and the hairs of his head were all very close and thick (like an Ethiopian), and his beard white (reaching down) to his chest, and his eyes flashing and darting (flashes of) lightning, and his sinews and his shoulders and his arms were as an angel (ὡς ἄγγελου), and his thighs and his calves and his feet as a giant (ὡσεὶ γίγαντος) (22:7). Consequently, Aseneth refers to him as both a father and a god (22:3). In light of this magnificent physique, is it any wonder that Jacob successfully wrestled with an angelic being (22:8; Gen 32:25-33; cf. *Prayer of Joseph*)? The transformation of Aseneth results in her face becoming like that of a young man, suggesting her resemblance to youthful, angelic Jacob.

While the author does not explicitly connect Joseph's brothers to the angelic, his descriptions of Joseph and Jacob are enough to suggest that he believes that Israel partakes in an angelomorphic humanity, a class of humanity distinct from that of the gentiles.<sup>55</sup> This semi-divine status provides the fundamental explanation for the seemingly unbridgeable gap between Aseneth and Joseph. Joseph is an angelic being. Aseneth is not. If Joseph kisses Aseneth, he acts as though they are compatible. A son of God (υἱὸς τοῦ θεοῦ), an angelic being, would be coupling with a non-angelic being, that is, a daughter of humans. Were he to do such a thing, he would be guilty of the precise transgression that the angels (οἱ υἱοὶ τοῦ θεοῦ) were guilty of in prediluvian times when they took for themselves wives from the daughters of humans (Gen 6:1-2). At its root, this transgression was one of interbreeding or intermarriage (cf. *1 En.* 86:4).<sup>56</sup> This transgression of the boundary between the celestial and terrestrial realms led to grave consequences for the entire cosmos, as the rest of Gen 6 indicates. In contrast to those transgressing angels, Joseph withstands temptation, praying that God would transform Aseneth so that she could partake of the celestial realm. Aseneth's eighth-day transformation demonstrates that she has now become a worthy partner to angelic Joseph.

55 On the theme of angelic Israel at Qumran, see Crispin Fletcher-Louis, *All the Glory of Adam: Liturgical Anthropology in the Dead Sea Scrolls* (STDJ 42; Leiden: Brill, 2001). For this theme in early Jewish and rabbinic literature, see Jonah Steinberg, "Self-identification with Angels in Rabbinic Agadah and its Jewish Antecedents" (Ph.D. diss., Columbia University, 2003).

56 Interestingly, David Suter ("Fallen Angel, Fallen Priest: The Problem of Family Purity in *1 Enoch* 6-16," *HUCA* 50 [1979]: 115-35) argues that *1 En.* 6-16 appropriates the myth of Gen 6:1-4 in order to criticize certain priestly circles for intermarriage. If so, we see the way in which this story could inform questions surrounding intermarriage between Jews and gentiles, or priestly Jews and lay Jews.

## Conclusion

Shaye J. D. Cohen has argued that in the second century B.C.E., Jewishness transitioned from an ethnicity (by which he means genealogical descent) to an ethno-religion.<sup>57</sup> Only with the rise of this latter definition of Jewishness does the concept of gentile conversion to Jewishness begin to develop. If, as most scholars believe, *Joseph and Aseneth* is a Jewish composition that was written in the centuries immediately following this transition, it sheds further light on this transition. To be sure, Aseneth, who is genealogically not Jewish, begins to worship Israel's God and becomes marriageable for Joseph. Marrying her is not, in the eyes of the author, intermarriage, after all. Clearly conversion to Judaism is a real possibility for the author.<sup>58</sup> In light of this possibility, Penn claims that the boundary between "believer and nonbeliever" is "a distinction that is more important to Joseph than fictive, legal or biological kinship."<sup>59</sup> This article suggests otherwise, and, in fact, Penn seems to undermine this claim when he later notes that through the ingestion of the honeycomb and "kiss" of the bees, Aseneth undergoes angelic transformation.<sup>60</sup> There thus seems to be an ontological change that takes place in Aseneth, not merely a change in which god she worships. As Andrea Lieber states, "Here conversion is not merely a *metanoia*, a change of mind, but a radical transformation of her ontic condition."<sup>61</sup> In fact, it seems the author does not sharply divide between one's ontological status and who one worships via sacrificial food. As Émile Durkheim argues, "Kin are beings who are made of the same flesh and same blood. And since

57 Cohen, *The Beginnings of Jewishness: Boundaries, Varieties, Uncertainties* (Hellenistic Culture and Society 31; Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), 109-39.

58 This is not to say that the precise rites that Aseneth performs functioned as the rite of initiation into the author's community, as Dieter Sanger (Bekehrung und Exodus: Zum judischen Traditionshintergrund von 'Joseph und Aseneth,') *JSJ* 10 [1979]: 11-36) argues; rather, the narrative dramatically portrays the hidden transformation which the gentile who enters the Jewish community undergoes. On the question of ritual aspects in *Joseph and Aseneth*, see Manuel Vogel, "Einfuhrung," in Reinmuth, ed., *Joseph und Aseneth*, 3-31, esp. 19-22, and Wetz, *Eros und Bekehrung*, 54-103.

59 Penn, "Identity and Transformation," 175: "The honeycomb transforms Aseneth from un-kissable to kissable."

60 Penn, "Identity and Transformation," 176.

61 Andrea Lieber, "I Set a Table before You: The Jewish Eschatological Character of Aseneth's Conversion Meal," *JSP* 14 (2004): 63-77 at 77. As Donaldson (*Judaism and the Gentiles*, 148) notes, "The fundamental assumption underlying Joseph's prayer for her (8:9), her own troubled soliloquies (11:3-14, 16-18), and her own prayer itself (12-13) is that God has the decisive role to play."

food constantly remakes the substance of the body, shared food can create the same effects as shared origin.”<sup>62</sup> Prior to her transformation, Joseph would eat with neither Aseneth nor her family, because he believed it was an abomination (βδέλυγμα) to eat with Egyptians (7:1).<sup>63</sup> Thus, one might suggest that by partaking of celestial food, Aseneth undergoes a transformation akin to gene therapy: she has been transformed from a member of the human species to a member of an angelomorphic humanity.<sup>64</sup>

The preceding argument demonstrates the pains to which the author goes in order to demonstrate the acceptability of conversion. First, he uses the biblical story of Joseph and Aseneth’s marriage to support his argument. Jewish scripture itself mentions the marriage of a Jew to an Egyptian, so there must be some way Jews can legitimately marry non-Jews. Through the construction of an eight-day process, the author emphasizes the great distance originally separating Joseph and Aseneth, and by extension Jews and gentiles, while at the same time providing a dramatic account for the way in which renouncing former gods and worshiping the God of Israel functions to make a person a new creation.<sup>65</sup> The convert is a new creation, a newborn person. *Joseph and Aseneth* thus anticipates later rabbinic claims which compare the proselyte to a newborn Jewish child (e.g. *b. Yebam. 22a*).<sup>66</sup> As David Novak states, “[I]t is not so much that Israel ‘converts’ to the covenant but that the convert is ‘born again’ (*ke-qatan she-nolad dami*), that is, the convert becomes a Jew analogously to the way Jews become Jews: by birth.”<sup>67</sup> As a newborn, Aseneth must undergo an eight-day process akin to the eighth-day circumcision of the new-born Jewish male. Finally, like the Levites whose consecration sets them apart as a distinct entity within Israel, Aseneth leaps the genealogical gap between Jew

62 I am indebted to Lieber (“I Set a Table before You,” 65) for this reference.

63 This refusal contrasts Joseph’s refusal to eat with his Hebrew brothers in Gen 43:32, because Egyptians thought doing so was an abomination (βδέλυγμα).

64 So, too, Lieber, “I Set a Table before You,” 65.

65 Consequently, Donaldson (*Judaism and the Gentiles*, 147) incorrectly claims that “precisely by means of her marriage to Joseph, Aseneth has been joined to the Jewish people.” Rather, her consumption of Jewish/angelic food transforms her into a member of the Jewish people, subsequently enabling her to marry Joseph.

66 Regarding this Talmudic passage, the thirteenth-century scholar Nachmanides argues that the proselyte is comparable to one born of Jewish seed. On conversion in rabbinic materials, see Avi Sagi and Zvi Sohar, *Transforming Identity: The Ritual Transition from Gentile to Jew—Structure and Meaning* (Kogod Library of Judaic Studies 3; London: Continuum, 2007).

67 Novak, *The Election of Israel: The Idea of the Chosen People* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 188.

and gentile, angelomorphic humanity and mere profane humanity, through the angelic visitation and her own angelic transformation.<sup>68</sup> Like other literature of the time period, *Joseph and Aseneth* stresses the considerable distance, apparently unbridgeable, between Jew and gentile. While the situation seems utterly hopeless,<sup>69</sup> the author believes that God has provided repentance and conversion as the bridge to close the gap. In light of this three-fold background to Aseneth's eight-day conversion process, one can see the way in which the author has, as Chesnutt argues, enhanced "the status of converts within a Jewish community deeply divided over the perception of converts and especially over the propriety of marriage between a convert and a born Jew."<sup>70</sup>

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68 Thus John J. Collins (*Between Athens and Jerusalem: Jewish Identity in the Hellenistic Diaspora* [2d ed.; Biblical Resource Series; Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 2000], 234) imprecisely claims that the author thinks that "one may marry into the family of Jacob, provided that one reject the idols of the Egyptians." Again, Aseneth's rejection of idolatry occurs on the first day, while Joseph only comes to her on the eighth day after her angelic transformation.

69 As Donaldson (*Judaism and the Gentiles*, 145) states, the work emphasizes "the ineradicable social barrier separating Jews from Gentiles." On the belief held by some second-temple Jews that Jewish identity was impermeable to gentiles, see Thiessen, *Contesting Conversion*.

70 Chesnutt, "Perceptions of Oil," 117. More fully, see Chesnutt, "The Social Setting and Purpose of *Joseph and Aseneth*," *JSP* 2 (1988): 21-48.