**Joseph and Asenath**

A text from Hellenistic Egypt (ca. 100 B.C.E. to 100 C.E.) tells a romantic story of Joseph and Asenath’s courtship. Initially, Asenath rejects Joseph, but then falls in love with him, only to have Joseph reject her because she is the daughter of an Egyptian priest. It’s only after she repents and changes her allegiance to Israel’s God that Joseph marries her.

[Prof.Patricia D. Ahearne-Kroll](https://www.thetorah.com/author/patricia-d-ahearne-kroll)

Mummy Portrait of a Woman (detail), C.E. 100–110, attributed to the Isidora Master. The J. Paul Getty Museum

When Pharaoh appoints Joseph as viceroy, he also gives him Asenath, the daughter of an Egyptian priest, as a wife:

Gen 41:45 ...and (Pharaoh) gave him for a wife Asenath daughter of Poti-phera, Priest of On. Thus Joseph emerged in charge of the land of Egypt.”

As a daughter of an Egyptian priest, Asenath would have worshiped Egyptian deities, not Joseph’s God. Later Jewish writers, unlike the biblical author, were troubled by this; as the mother of Ephraim and Manasseh (Gen 41:50–52), two future tribes of Israel, Asenath and her allegiance needed clarification.

**Asenath is the Daughter of Dinah**

Targum Pseudo-Jonathan (ca. 7th century C.E.) solves this problem by presenting Asenath as the daughter of Joseph’s sister, Dinah (Gen 41:45):[1]

And he gave him Asenath, whom Dinah had borne to Shechem, and the wife of Potiphera, the prince of Tanis, had brought up, to be his wife.[2]

Extending this exegetical tradition, *Midrash Aggadah* (12th cent.) fills in the details about how Asenath reaches Egypt and is adopted into Potiphar’s house (Gen 41:45):

But wasn’t she Dinah’s daughter? We have heard that when Jacob our father came from Shechem, he wrote out on a golden plate everything that happened to them with [Shechem the son of Hamor]. When Dinah gave birth to Asenath, he put the plate on her neck and set her down by the wall of Egypt.

That day, Potiphar went out for a stroll with his lads, and as they got to the wall, they heard the sound of a crying newborn. He said to his lads “Bring me the child.” He saw the plate and the incidents [described upon it]. Potiphar said to his slaves: “This girl is the daughter of important people, bring her to my home and get a nurse.” And since he brought her up, she is referred to as his daughter…

Centuries earlier, Greek speaking Jews handled the problem of Asenath’s Egyptian identity in a very different way.

**The Hellenistic Story, *Aseneth***

Ninety-one manuscripts of *Aseneth* (the Greek form of Asenath), sometimes called *Joseph and Aseneth*, dating from the 6th to the 17th centuries C.E., preserve all or part of the narrative. The story was written in Greek, and most scholars date the composition to ca. 100 B.C.E. to 100 C.E..[4]

It deviates from the biblical Joseph story in significant ways,[5] and addresses Aseneth’s worship of foreign gods within a larger narrative that has light-hearted moments reminiscent of ancient Greek novels, in which the male and female protagonists fall in love, undergo a series of trials that threaten their union, and emotionally respond to the highs and lows of their plights.[6]

**Aseneth’s Story**

*Aseneth* opens with a brief mention that Joseph is traveling throughout the land to collect grain in preparation for the famine (*Aseneth*1:1–2). The story changes several aspects of the biblical narrative, including presenting Joseph as already at work collecting grain in Egypt before he marries Aseneth, and having Aseneth’s father, not Pharaoh, initiate the idea that Aseneth marry Joseph.

The first part of *Aseneth* focuses on Pentephres (the Greek form of Poti-phera) and his daughter, Aseneth. It describes her beauty in detail:

*Aseneth*1:4 He had a daughter, a *parthenos* (or virgin)[7] (who was) 18 years old, and she was much taller, more attractive and beautiful in appearance than all the *parthenoi* in the land. 1:5She was in no way like the Egyptian *parthenoi* but was in every way like the daughters of the Hebrews; she was tall like Sara, attractive like Rebekka, and beautiful like Rachel. And the name of that *parthenos* was Aseneth. The report of her beauty spread throughout all that land and as far as the ends of the inhabited world, and all the sons of notable men, sons of satraps, sons of all the kings—(all) young and powerful men—were attempting to court her.

The story also notes that Aseneth felt disdain for every man, and that no man had ever seen her, for she lived at the top of her father’s tower with her seven female attendants (*Aseneth*2).

**Joseph Arrives in Heliopolis**

As a priest of Heliopolis and an administrative official, Pentephres has an elaborate gated estate (*Aseneth*3). When Joseph arrives in Heliopolis (the Greek form of On), he sends messengers ahead to Pentephres to request a mid-day break with him and his household. Pentephres takes the opportunity of Joseph’s visit to inform Aseneth that he plans to arrange her marriage with Joseph, working up to the announcement by praising Joseph elaborately:

*Aseneth* 4:7 …“Joseph is a god-fearing man, self-controlled, and chaste like you today; and Joseph is a man adept in wisdom and knowledge, and the spirit of God is upon him and the favor of the LORD is with him. 4:8Come then, my child, and I will hand you over to him as a wife, and you will be his bride and he will be your bridegroom forever.”

Pentephres here mentions several virtues of Joseph in the Genesis narrative: God’s favor is evident in all of Joseph’s encounters (e.g., 39:1–6, 39:20–23); Joseph is self-controlled and chaste when he rejects the sexual advances of Potiphar’s wife (39:7–23); and Pharaoh recognizes Joseph’s wisdom, skill, and divine favor (41:33, 38–39).

Aseneth responds to her father’s plan that she marry by angrily referring to Joseph as a foreigner and an enslaved runaway:

*Aseneth* 4:9 After Aseneth heard these words from her father, much red sweat poured over her upon her face, she became very angry; and she looked sidelong at her father with her eyes and said, “Why is my lord and my father speaking according to these words, to hand me over like a captive to a foreign man, a runaway, and one who was sold?”

Rejecting her father’s catalogue of Joseph’s virtues, she describes him as a lowly Canaanite shepherd who was imprisoned for sleeping with his master’s wife and then freed from prison due to his talent of interpreting dreams, a role more suited to old Egyptian women:

*Aseneth* 4:10 “Isn’t this one the shepherd’s son from Canaan, and wasn’t he caught in the act of sleeping with his female master, and his male master threw him into the dark prison? And Pharaoh released him from prison because he interpreted his dream just as the elder Egyptian women also interpret (dreams)?”

Aseneth’s account of the incident with Potiphar’s wife deviates from Genesis, where Joseph was falsely accused of rape (39:13–20); here, Joseph was caught sleeping with Potiphar’s wife. Aseneth’s catalogue of Joseph’s flaws makes it clear that she feels that Joseph is not fit to marry her.

**Aseneth Has a Change of Heart**

Aseneth changes her mind about Joseph, however, when Joseph enters Pentephres’s estate, riding Pharaoh’s second chariot (made entirely of gold), wearing elaborate garb and a golden crown (a clear embellishment of Joseph’s appearance in Gen 41:42). Aseneth finds him incredibly attractive, and she becomes weak-kneed and soul-stricken, saying to herself:

*Aseneth* 6:2 “What will I do now, miserable as I am? Have I not spoken saying that Joseph, the shepherd’s son from the land of Canaan is coming? And now look, the sun from heaven has come to us in his chariot, and he entered our house today and shines in it like light upon the earth. 6:3 But I, foolish and insolent, scorned him, and I spoke slanderous words about him, and did not know that Joseph is a son of God.”

She reverses her position and prays to Joseph’s God to make this marital union work.

*Aseneth* 6:7 “Now, O LORD, the god of Joseph, be gracious to me because I, on my part, have spoken slanderous words against him in ignorance. 6:8And now, let my father give me to Joseph as a servant and slave, and I will serve him forever.”

With Aseneth’s change of heart, the attention then shifts briefly to Joseph.

**Joseph’s Objections to Aseneth**

When he first meets her, Joseph does not reciprocate Aseneth’s interest. First, he worries that she is like “all the wives and daughters of Egyptian men” who fawn over him (*Aseneth* 7:3).[8] Even after he is convinced that Aseneth will not annoy him like other Egyptian women, he refuses to embrace her because of her veneration to foreign gods:

*Aseneth*8:5 …And Joseph said, “It is not fitting for a god-fearing man who praises the living God with his mouth and eats blessed bread of life, drinks (a) blessed cup of immortality, and anoints himself with blessed oil of incorruption to kiss a strange woman who praises dead and dumb idols with her mouth and eats bread of strangulation from their table, drinks (a) cup of treachery from their drink offering, and anoints herself with oil of destruction.”

He declares that god-fearing men can only kiss god-fearing women and vice-versa (8:6–7).

**Aseneth as a Biblical Heroine**

In response to Joseph’s rejection, Aseneth undergoes a week of repentance, rejecting her veneration of Egyptian gods and choosing instead to revere solely Joseph’s God. After destroying and pitching all remnants of Egyptian gods in her living quarters, Aseneth changes her attire, sits in sackcloth and ashes, weeps and groans, and fasts for seven days.[9] At the end of this week, she offers several prayers of repentance to Joseph’s God.[10] She emphasizes her vulnerable state and admits her errors:

*Aseneth* 11:3 …“What am I to do, lowly as I am, or where am I to go? With whom am I to seek refuge, or what am I to say, I, the *parthenos* and fatherless, (one who is) desolate, abandoned, and hated? 11:4For all have come to hate me, even including my father and my mother because I, for my part, came to hate our gods, and I destroyed them and gave them to be trampled underfoot by people. 11:5For this reason, my father, my mother and all my kindred have come to hate me, saying, ‘Aseneth is not your daughter because she destroyed our gods!’”

Aseneth also narrates God’s delivering acts (12:1–2) and calls upon God’s mercy:

*Aseneth* 13:1 “O LORD, examine my humble state and have mercy on me. Look upon my orphanhood, and have compassion on me, the afflicted one. For see, I fled from everything and fled for refuge to you, O LORD, the only benevolent one toward humanity.”

Dawn is breaking as Aseneth concludes her prayers, and she is visited by an unnamed angel.[11] This encounter legitimates Aseneth’s special status in the story.[12] She will be written first in the Book of the Living;[13] she is renamed “City of Refuge” (to be a refuge for those who repent); she receives secret knowledge by consuming a portion of a miraculous honeycomb; and God will favor her marriage to Joseph (*Aseneth*14–16). This long and complicated story explains why Joseph marries her (*Aseneth*20) and why she is the mother of two tribes.

**Aseneth and Joseph’s Brothers**

Earlier in *Aseneth*, Pharaoh’s son tells his father that he wants to marry Aseneth himself, but his father does not favor the alliance (*Aseneth* 1:7–9). Motivated by intense jealousy, Pharaoh’s son seeks to enlist Levi and Simeon in an attempt kidnap Aseneth and kill Joseph. He believes the brothers can help him because of their infamous exploits at Shechem (*Aseneth*23; cf. Gen 34).[14]

Levi and Simeon refuse the offer, but Dan, Gad, Naphtali, and Asher—the sons of Jacob’s two concubines, Bilhah and Zilpah, who are of lower status—agree to the plan. Pharaoh’s son convinces them with a false story of how he had overheard Joseph blaming *them* for his being sold to the Ishmaelites (*Aseneth*24), a claim that echoes a fear that all the brothers voice in the biblical account: that Joseph would retaliate someday (Gen 50:15). Concerned about their inferior position in the family (see Gen 30:1–13),[15] they place their bets with Pharaoh’s son.[16]

The ambush orchestrated by Pharaoh’s son fails. The sons of Leah, who are not part of the plot, are expert warriors, and they strike down thousands of the Egyptian army. In addition, Benjamin knocks Pharaoh’s son unconscious and wipes out the men accompanying him.[17]

**Aseneth as a Refuge**

At this point, the sons of Bilhah and Zilpah flee. When they come across Aseneth (who is alone) and draw their swords for the kill, Aseneth calls upon God for deliverance and the men’s swords disintegrate before their eyes (*Aseneth*27:7–11). The men then fall upon the ground and beg Aseneth for mercy; they confess their malicious acts and plead for Aseneth to protect them from their brothers who will want revenge: They seek refuge in Aseneth, an event foreshadowed earlier in the story when the angel renames her “City of Refuge.” Aseneth agrees to help them because God-fearing people do not repay evil for evil (*Aseneth*28:1–7).

**Not Repaying Evil for Evil**

The dictum of not repaying evil for evil is a significant theme in *Aseneth*.[18] It first appears when Pharaoh’s son requests Simeon and Levi’s help in his plan to ambush Joseph. Simeon wants to respond by attacking Pharaoh’s son, but Levi withholds Simeon:

*Aseneth* 23:9 And Levi said to Simeon quietly, “Why are you furious with anger against this man? **We are god-fearing men, and it is not fitting for us to repay evil for evil**.”

Instead of retaliating against actions that are unjust, as they did in Shechem (Gen 34), Levi refrains Simeon from being violent.

This dictum is found again after the sons of Bilhah and Zilpah try to kill Aseneth. Aseneth protects them and persuades the sons of Leah to leave it for God to judge them. Speaking to Simeon, she says:

*Aseneth*28:14 “Brother, by no means will you **commit evil for evil** against your neighbor! To the LORD will you give (the power) to punish the insult (done by) them. And your brothers themselves are also kin of our father Israel, and they fled far from your presence. Therefore, grant them pardon.”

They obey her demand. In becoming a refuge for the repentant brothers, and showing leniency when retaliation would have seemed defensible, *Aseneth* matches biblical Joseph’s own leniency with his brothers, when he forgives them for selling him into slavery in Egypt (Gen 45:4–8).

At the end of the story, Benjamin discovers that Pharaoh’s son is still alive, but when he draws his sword to slay him, Levi restrains him, again declaring that god-fearing men do not repay evil for evil. They instead try to tend to the wounds of Pharaoh’s son, but he dies. His father, having grown weak from mourning his son, passes away soon after. Since Pharaoh left his diadem to Joseph, Joseph reigns for forty-eight years, passing on the kingship to Pharaoh’s next heir when the boy comes of age (*Aseneth*29:1–9).

***Aseneth* and Jewish life in Hellenistic Egypt**

The location where *Aseneth* was first composed, and even whether it was written from a Jewish perspective, are subjects of ongoing debate, but the vast majority of scholars view it as a Jewish text from Hellenistic Egypt (ca. 100 B.C.E. to 100 C.E.).[19] Despite its reputation in biblical texts, Egypt was, in much of this period, a hospitable place for Jews.

For many generations during the Hellenistic period, thousands of Jews lived in Alexandria and the countryside as soldiers, farmers, shepherds, police personnel, potters, and others.[20] They had prayer houses (*proseuchai* in Greek), and one archival collection demonstrates that a Jewish community in Herakleopolis had its own civic structure (called a *politeuma*).[21]*Aseneth* filled a need to have a story where Jewish ancestors succeeded and lived well in the foreign land of Egypt.[22]

In this regard, the narrative goes beyond simply solving the problem of Joseph marrying Aseneth by depicting her as changing her allegiance to Israel’s God. *Aseneth* also teaches about negotiating identity and adherence to God in a multicultural environment in which restraining from retaliation best characterizes obedience to God. This theme is most telling when we consider the extent of legal appeals in Ptolemaic Egypt regarding perceived aggression and exploitation.

Inhabitants of all walks of life, including Jews, filed legal appeals with officials (or even royalty) to correct wrongs and render justice against perpetrators so that the plaintiffs could receive compensation and/or peace.[23]Aseneth’s actions in the narrative mirror the function of these appeals: She brings about a resolution to a grievous, hostile act, but her restraint and persuasion of Joseph’s brothers to stand down are examples of following divine will. She, like Joseph, is not only fit for rule (as Aseneth becomes a queen), but she also exemplifies what it means to be God-fearing.

[View Footnotes](https://www.thetorah.com/article/joseph-and-asenath)

1. See also *Pirqe de-Rabbi Eliezer* 38:2.
2. See also *Masekhet Soferim*, add. 1, 1:5.
3. This appears to be a scribal error.
4. All references to *Aseneth* come from my translation, “Joseph and Aseneth,” in *Outside the Bible: Ancient Jewish Writings Related to Scripture*, ed. Louis H. Feldman, James L. Kugel, and Lawrence H. Schiffman (Lincoln: The University of Nebraska Press, 2013), 3:2525–2589. For a more in-depth discussion of the history of scholarship of this text, see Patricia D. Ahearne-Kroll, *Aseneth of Egypt: The Composition of a Jewish Narrative,* Early Judaism and Its Literature (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2020); Randall D. Chesnutt, *From Death to Life: Conversion in “Joseph and Aseneth*,” Journal for the Study of Pseudepigrapha Supplements 16 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1995); and Angela Standhartinger, “Recent Scholarship on *Joseph and Aseneth* (1988–2013),” *Currents in Biblical Research* 12 (2014): 353–406.
5. It begins during the time when Joseph, already in service to Pharaoh, was gathering grain (*Aseneth* 1:1–2 and Gen 41:47), and the narrative later shifts to when Jacob and his sons move to Egypt (*Aseneth*22:1–2 and Gen 46–47). The authors of the story used the Septuagint, the Greek translation of the Tanakh, as their source. Technically, “Septuagint” refers to the translation of the Torah as narrated by the second century B.C.E. narrative, *The Letter of Aristeas*, in which seventy-two Jewish elders completed the first translation of the Torah into Greek.
6. Patricia D. Ahearne-Kroll, “The Portrayal of Aseneth in Joseph and Aseneth: Women’s Religious Experience in Antiquity and the Limitations of Ancient Narratives,” in *Women and Gender in Ancient Religions: Interdisciplinary Approaches*, ed. Stephen P. Ahearne-Kroll, Paul A. Holloway, and James A. Kelhoffer, Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungenzum Neuen Testament 263 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2010), 41–58.” Translations of the classic examples can be found in B.P. Reardon, *Collected Ancient Greek Novels* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989).
7. *Parthenos* (pl. *parthenoi*) is usually translated “virgin,” which does not convey well the nuances of the term in this narrative. In ancient Greek novels, chastity is an outward sign of noble youth, and *parthenos* especially describes the female protagonist, so a female *parthenos* in *Aseneth* is a heterosexually innocent woman who is unmarried, capable of producing offspring, and from a wealthy household.
8. Joseph’s comment is an allusion to narrative expansions of Genesis 39, which precedes the story of Potiphar’s wife (vv. 7–23) with the statement that Joseph was יְפֵה תֹאַר וִיפֵה מַרְאֶה “well built and handsome” (v. 6). James L. Kugel traces this motif of Jacob’s allure for Egyptian women in Jewish literature in *In Potiphar's House: The Interpretive Life of Biblical Texts* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1994).
9. Cf. the mourning rituals in Daniel 9–10, and most notably, Jonah 3:5–9.
10. Although her prayers are not direct copies from the Septuagint, their main structure and imagery are deeply informed by the Psalms (cf. *Aseneth* 12:1–13:15 and Pss 86 and 142).
11. The angel’s appearance is taken from descriptions of Gabriel in the Book of Daniel (cf. *Aseneth* 14:9 and Dan 10:5).
12. Aseneth’s posture and interchange with the angel echo Daniel’s with Gabriel in both wording and content (falling down upon one’s face; being assured “not to fear;” being given secret knowledge; and even the reference to a record of the righteous [“book”]). See Ahearne-Kroll, “Portrayal of Aseneth in Joseph and Aseneth.”
13. In ancient Israelite literature, the “Book of Life / the Living” refers to an enrolled list of the righteous members of the community (Exod 32:32–34, Ps 69:29; Mal 3:16–18), and in Second Temple literature, this concept continues to be used in some circles (1 Enoch 47).
14. The episodes with Joseph’s brothers in *Aseneth* draw upon some biblical stories and images that are outside of the Joseph novella. The characterizations of Joseph’s brothers in the latter part of the narrative refer to their stories in Genesis as well.
15. Nowhere does Genesis itself present such a case about the sons of Bilhah and Zilpah. In the ancient Near East, wealthy patriarchs sometimes depended on female slaves to continue the patrilineal line, and their children were not necessarily of low rank in the household. Another biblical example of such a case is Hagar (Gen 16). See Marten Stol, *Women in the Ancient Near East*, trans. Helen Richardson and Mervyn Richardson (Boston: de Gruyter, 2016), 168–70.
16. Naphtali and Asher have misgivings later on (*Aseneth* 25:5–8).
17. Benjamin’s bravery and ingenuity echo David’s in his battle against Goliath; with nothing but stones from the wadi, the youngest son of Jacob downs fifty cavalrymen and strikes Pharoah’s son in the temple, rendering him unconscious (*Aseneth*27:1–5; cf. 1 Sam 17).
18. Compare this phrase with Joseph’s words when he has his silver goblet placed in his brothers’ travel packs as a pretext for accusing them of theft (Gen 44:1–3):

Gen 44:4They had just left the city and had not gone far, when Joseph said to his steward, “Up, go after the men! And when you overtake them, say to them, ‘Why did you repay good with evil?’”

Proverbs 17:13 also says: מֵשִׁיב רָעָה תַּחַת טוֹבָה לֹא תָמיּשׁ רָעָה מִבֵּיתוֹ “evil will never depart from the house of him who repays good with evil.”

1. For recent reviews of the debate, see Ahearne-Kroll, *Aseneth of Egypt*; Jill Hicks-Keeton, *Arguing with Aseneth: Gentile Access to Israel's Living God in Jewish Antiquity* (Oxford University Press, 2018); and Standhartinger, “Recent Scholarship.”
2. Papyrological evidence about Jewish life in Egypt is found in: *Corpus Papyrorum Judaicarum*, 4 vols. (This includes the most recent volume edited by Noah Hacham, ṬalIlan, I. F. Fikhman, Meron M. Piotrkowski, Zvsuzsanna Szántó, Robert A. Kugler, and Thomas Kruse [Munich: de Gruyter, 2020]); *Urkunden des Politeuma der Juden von Herakleopolis (144/3–133/2 v. Chr.) (P.Polit.Iud.)*, ed. James M.S. Cowey and Klaus Maresch, Pap. Colon.29 (Wiesbaden: Westdeutscher Verlag, 2001); and the additional references in W. Clarysse, “Jews in Trikomia,” in *Proceedings of the 20th International Congress of Papyrologists (Copenhagen, 23–29 August 1992)* (University of Copenhagen: Museum Tusculanum Press, 1994), 193–203.
3. See William Horbury and David Noy, in *Jewish Inscriptions of Graeco-Roman Egypt* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), nos. 13, 22, 24, 25, 27, 28, 117, 125, and 126. On the Jewish *politeuma* of Herakleopolis, see Kugler, *CPJ,* vol. 4, nos. 557–577.
4. John Bauschatz, *Law and Enforcement in Ptolemaic Egypt* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013).