The Complexity of Aseneth's Transformation[1]

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Joseph and Aseneth relates a love story that shares several characteristics with Hellenistic novels or romances.[2] In ancient novels, the beautiful protagonists must overcome a variety of initial obstacles before they are reunited.[3] In *Joseph and Aseneth*, the primary hindrance to the marriage of the protagonists is the fact that Joseph and Aseneth belong to different ethnic groups, each with their distinctive cults. These contrasts, which underlie the plot of the first part of the narrative (1–21), become evident in the initial encounter of the protagonists. Joseph refuses to let Aseneth kiss him because of their divergent religious practices, which in the novel, are intertwined with their membership in different clans and families (8:4–7). To become a woman who can be intimate with Joseph and marry him, Aseneth must undergo a profound transformation that involves several aspects of her being.

The focus on problems caused by the incompatible ethnicities and religious adherences of the protagonists in *Joseph and Aseneth* was probably inspired by Genesis 41:45.50 and 46:20. These are the only verses that mention Aseneth in the Hebrew Bible. In these verses, Aseneth is presented as the daughter of Potiphera, the priest of On. Genesis thus indicates that Aseneth belongs to a different *ethnos* and religion than Joseph, the Hebrew patriarch. Despite their apparent differences, Pharaoh gives Aseneth to Joseph as his wife, and she becomes the mother of his two sons, Manasseh and Ephraim. The idea that the Hebrew patriarch married and had children with the daughter of an Egyptian polytheistic priest, despite the biblical prohibition against intermarriages,[4] apparently puzzled the audiences who later heard or read Genesis, and different justifications were proposed.[5] The most comprehensive explanation of this conundrum

[1] See also Kirsten Marie Hartvigsen, *Aseneth's Transformation* (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2018).

[2] Stephen L. West, "*Joseph and Asenath*: A Neglected Greek Romance", *The Classical Quarterly* 24.1: 1974, 70-81; Richard I. Pervo, "Joseph and Aseneth and the Greek Novel", in George MacRae ed., *Society of Biblical Literature Seminar Papers* 1976 (Missoula: Scholars Press, 1976), 171-181; Howard C. Kee, "The Socio-Cultural Setting of Joseph and Aseneth", *New Testament Studies* 29: 1983, 394-413; Sara Raup Johnson, *Historical Fictions and Hellenistic Jewish Identity: Third Maccabees in Its Cultural Context* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004), 108-120.

[3] Tomas Hägg, *The Novel in Antiquity* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1983). West, "Joseph and Asenath", 77-78.

[4] Ross Shepard Kraemer, "The Book of Aseneth", in Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza ed. *Searching the Scriptures*, (New York: Crossroad, 1993), 859-888, here 859. John J. Collins, "The Transformation", in Anne Hege Grung, Marianne Bjelland Kartzow and Anna Rebecca Solevåg, *Bodies, Borders, Believers: Ancient Texts and Present Conversations* (Eugene: Pickwick, 2015), 93-108, here 96.

[5] Victor Aptowitzer, "Asenath, the Wife of Joseph: A Haggadic Literary-Historical Study", *Hebrew Union College Annual* 1: 1924, 239-306; Christoph Burchard, "Joseph and Aseneth (First Century B.C.-Second Century A.D.): A New Translation and Introduction", in James H. Charlesworth ed., *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha: Expansions of the "Old Testament" and Legends, Wisdom and Philosophical Literature, Prayers, Psalms, and Odes, Fragments of Lost Judeo-Hellenistic Works* (New Haven: Yale University Press,

was offered in the novel *Joseph and Aseneth*.[6] However, the novel also addresses many issues that are not mentioned in Genesis.

The Different Versions of *Joseph and Aseneth*

Joseph and Aseneth survives in sixteen Greek manuscripts, and has been translated into Syriac, Armenian, Latin, Rumanian, Serbo-Slavonic, Modern Greek, and Ethiopic. The various manuscripts have traditionally been sorted into four families, but Christoph Burchard has recently proposed a more complicated model.[7] Scholars have focused mainly on two recensions; a short version and a long version of the text. With some exceptions,[8] most scholars argue that the long version of *Joseph and Aseneth* is closer to the original narrative than the other versions. Although the short and the long versions of *Joseph and Aseneth* share the main elements of the story,[9] there are some variations regarding the portrayal of Aseneth and her transformation process,[10] in particular pertaining to Aseneth's attitudes and behavior. In this essay, I am using the long version edited by Burchard and Uta B. Fink,[11] with quotations from Burchard's English translation of *Joseph and Aseneth*.[12]

Introduction to the Plot of *Joseph and Aseneth*

In the novel, Aseneth is presented as the daughter of Pentephres,[13] an Egyptian polytheistic priest. She initially despises all men, including Joseph, but when she sees him enter her family's residence in all his beauty, she falls in love with the Hebrew patriarch. From the perspectives

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2010), 177-247, here 177. In his article on the legends of Aseneth, Aptowitzer suggested that three types of accounts were given of Aseneth's background and why she could become Joseph's wife and the mother of his children: 1. Aseneth was actually a member of Jacob's tribe and family. 2. She "was the deliverer of Joseph." 3. She was pious and upright. Early on, the emphasis on Aseneth's descent was combined with a focus on her piety and *Joseph and Aseneth* seemingly constitutes a version of this combination. Aptowitzer, "Asenath", 243-260. Although *Joseph and Aseneth* focuses on Aseneth's piety, elements that may indicate her descent are also present (1:5).

[6] On *Joseph and Aseneth* as rewritten Bible, see Susan Docherty, "*Joseph and Aseneth*: Rewritten Bible or Narrative Expansion?" *Journal for the Study of Judaism* 35.1: 2004, 27-48.

[7] Uta Barbara Fink, "Textkritische Situation", in Eckart Reinmuth ed., *Joseph und Aseneth* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2009), 33-44; Christoph Burchard, *Joseph und Aseneth: Kritisch herausgegeben mit Unterstützung von Carsten Burfeind und Uta Barbara Fink* (Leiden: Brill, 2003), 9-34.

[8] Angela Standhartinger, *Das Frauenbild im Judentum der hellenistischen Zeit. Ein Beitrag anhand von "Joseph und Aseneth"* (Leiden: Brill, 1995). Ross Shepard Kraemer, "When Aseneth Met Joseph: A Postscript" in Randal A. Argall et al. ed., *For a Later Generation: The Transformation of Tradition in Israel, Early Judaism, and Early Christianity* (Harrisburg: Trinity Press International, 2000), 128-135.

[9] Collins, "The Transformation", 95.

[10] On the views of women underlying the short and the long versions of *Joseph and Aseneth*, see Standhartinger, *Das Frauenbild im Judentum*.

[11] Burchard, *Joseph und Aseneth: Kritisch herausgegeben*; Uta Barbara Fink, *Joseph und Aseneth: Revision des griechischen Textes und Edition der zweiten lateinischen Übersetzung* (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2008).

[12] Burchard, "Joseph and Aseneth", 202-247.

[13] There are some variations between the novel and the Genesis tradition, such as the name of Aseneth's father.

of the male protagonist and the extradiegetic narrator of the novel, Aseneth is a high-status virgin, but also a foreign polytheist who cannot marry Joseph and be intimate with him unless she is transformed into an insider and becomes Joseph's female counterpart, namely a noble Hebrew virgin who worships the living God. Having met Joseph and received his blessing, Aseneth withdraws to her chamber and undergoes a thorough transformation process, involving multiple aspects of her identity.

Aseneth's transformation from a beautiful and boastful Egyptian woman who blesses "dead and dumb" Egyptian gods, into an angelic, humble Hebrew woman who worships the living God comprises the plot of the first part of the novel (1–21). Her transformation thus involves aspects of her ethnicity, which in the novel are intertwined with her religious affiliation. Moreover, her transformation expresses an altered mindset that involves the embodiment of a new feminine ideal. In the novel, Aseneth's altered religious practices and acceptance of the gendered hierarchy transform her from an ignorant woman to a wise woman. The second part of the novel (22–29) focuses on the result of Aseneth's transformation process and relates the way in which Joseph's family receives and incorporates Aseneth. This essay focuses on the first part of *Joseph and Aseneth*.

The Text-External and Text-Internal Contexts of *Joseph and Aseneth*

The characters, events, and settings portrayed in the various versions of *Joseph and Aseneth* may reflect the religious interests and circumstances experienced by specific audiences in the text-external world, but the religious concerns and contexts of such text-external audiences are difficult to reconstruct and are thus continuously disputed. If *Joseph and Aseneth* constitutes an important literary source for thinking about female conversion in antiquity, identification of the original, text-external audience for which the novel was intended could elucidate Aseneth's transformation process. However, several elements make it difficult to classify and interpret the novel in the light of the context of its intended audience: its fictive character, its symbolic features, and the lack of explicit text-external references. As a result, Aseneth's transformation has been interpreted against the backdrop of different ancient contexts.

The answers to the following questions have been particularly important for discussion of the possible text-external contexts of the novel: Should emphasis be put on the context in which

the oldest manuscripts were found, namely sixth-century Syria?[14] Or should the text-external context be reconstructed based on the characters, events, and settings depicted in the novel, namely Hebrews living in Egypt? These questions are interrelated with the question of whether *Joseph and Aseneth* should be interpreted literally or allegorically.[15] A literal interpretation of the text-internal context would indicate that the Egyptian Aseneth exchanges worship of Egyptian gods for worship of YHWH. In such a context, Aseneth becomes a model convert and a matriarch similar to Sarah, Rebecca, and Rachel (1:5). Scholars who choose this approach tend to date the text between the mid-second century BCE and the early second century CE. If the evidence of the sixth century Syrian manuscripts is given priority, the novel is interpreted allegorically in a Christian context. Consequently, Aseneth converts to Christianity, and the marriage between Joseph and Aseneth symbolizes the marriage between Christ and the church.[16]

These aspects offer some indications as to why scholars have traditionally asked whether *Joseph and Aseneth* is "Jewish or Christian."[17] Early on, scholars such as Pierre Batiffol and Ernest W. Brooks both presented *Joseph and Aseneth* as a Christian text inspired by a Jewish legend.[18] This view was, with some exceptions,[19] common until the middle of the twentieth century.[20] Since then, a new scholarly consensus took shape, based on the notion that the novel was Jewish.[21] Lately, the Jewish origin of the novel has been challenged by several scholars.

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[14] Davila argues that scholars should prioritize the physical manuscript evidence. He claims that regarding *Joseph and Aseneth* as a Christian work of late antiquity "involves the least extrapolation from the earliest physical evidence for the document and perhaps should be our working hypothesis for the present …" see James R. Davila, *The Provenance of the Pseudepigrapha: Jewish, Christian, or Other?* (Leiden: Brill, 2005), 195.
[15] On the allegorical interpretation of the novel, see Randal D. Chesnutt, *From Death to Life: Conversion in Joseph and Aseneth* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1995), 72-73.
[16] Rivka Nir, *Joseph and Aseneth: A Christian Book* (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2012), 177.
[17] John J. Collins, "Joseph and Aseneth: Jewish or Christian?", *Journal for the Study of the Pseudepigrapha* 14.2: 2005, 97-112.
[18] Pierre Batiffol, *Le Livre de la Prière d'Aseneth* (Paris: Leroux, 1889), 30-37. Ernest W. Brooks, *Joseph and Asenath: The Confession and Prayer of Asenath Daughter of Pentephres the Priest* (London: SPCK, 1918), xi-xiii.
[19] Aptowitzer, "Asenath".
[20] Standhartinger, *Das Frauenbild im Judentum*, 5.
[21] Burchard, "Joseph and Aseneth", 187. Edith McEwan Humphrey, *The Ladies and the Cities: Transformation and Apocalyptic Identity in Joseph and Aseneth, 4 Ezra, the Apocalypse and The Shepherd of Hermas* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1995), 32. Chesnutt, *From Death to Life*, 71-76. Randall D. Chesnutt, "*Joseph and Aseneth*: Food as an Identity Marker", in Amy-Jill Levine et al. ed., *The Historical Jesus in Context* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006), 357-365, here 357. Randall D. Chesnutt, "Bread of Life in Joseph and Aseneth and in John 6", in James E. Priest ed., *Johannine Studies: Essays in Honor of Frank Pack* (Malibu: Pepperdine University Press, 1989), 1-16, here 2-3. See also Standhartinger, *Das Frauenbild im Judentum*, 5-20; Gideon Bohak, *Joseph and Aseneth and the Jewish Temple in Heliopolis* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1996), xiii; Anathea E. Portier-Young, "Sweet Mercy Metropolis: Interpreting Aseneth's Honeycomb", *Journal for the Study of the Pseudepigrapha* 14.2: 2005, 133-157, here 134-135.

Ross Shepard Kraemer suggests that the author could be Jewish, Christian, "theosebic", or Samaritan,[22] but she argues that "a strong case can be made for Christian composition and redaction", and she proposes that Syria could be the area in which it was composed.[23] Based on a different approach to ancient manuscripts, James R. Davila reaches a similar conclusion.[24] Recently, Rivka Nir argues that "*Joseph and Aseneth* is a Christian work, composed by Christians for Christian purposes".[25] Nir also situates the work in Syria.[26] However, the majority position held is still that the novel was composed between the mid-second century BCE and the early second century CE in Egypt.[27] I suggest that *Joseph and Aseneth* defies clear classification as "Jewish, Christian, or other".[28] In this essay, emphasis is put on Aseneth's transformation as it occurs within the narrative world depicted in the novel. Consequently, possible text-external religious contexts of the text will not be explored.

This essay focuses on characters, events, and settings that constitute the narrative world, bearing in mind that fiction often mimics aspects of the real world. Through their involvement with different characters and events in the narrative world, the audience may simulate events and their outcomes vicariously.[29] If they identify with Aseneth, they may, for instance, simulate how Aseneth's transformation alters many aspects of her identity to make her a suitable wife for Joseph. Among other things, they experience how Aseneth's transformation process alters her embodiment of female ideals. If *Joseph and Aseneth* was intended for a female readership, as many ancient novels probably were,[30] this simulation could explore both the transformation process involved in moving from one *ethnos* to another and the long-lasting effects of this process on the female identity of the person undergoing such a transformation. Moreover, it would illuminate the female identity of those who already belonged to this *ethnos*. In this respect, the novel presents a female ideal that probably influenced how its female readership interpreted and shaped their role in the community.

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[22] Ross Shepard Kraemer, *When Aseneth Met Joseph: A Late Antique Tale of the Biblical Patriarch and His Egyptian Wife, Reconsidered* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 273-274.
[23] Kraemer, *When Aseneth Met Joseph*, ix.
[24] Davila, *The Provenance*, 190-195.
[25] Nir, *Joseph and Aseneth*, 4.
[26] Nir, *Joseph and Aseneth*, 16-17.
[27] Manuel Vogel, "Einführung in die Schrift", in Reinmuth ed., *Joseph und Aseneth*, 3-31, here 13. On the Egyptian setting, see János Bolyki, "Egypt as the Setting for *Joseph and Aseneth*: Accidental or Deliberate?", in Anthony Hilhorst and George H. van Kooten eds., *The Wisdom of Egypt: Jewish, Early Christian, and Gnostic Essays in Honour of Gerard P. Luttikhuizen* (Leiden: Brill, 2005), 81-96.
[28] Davila, *The Provenance*.
[29] Kirsten Marie Hartvigsen, *Prepare the Way of the Lord: Towards a Cognitive Poetic Analysis of Audience Involvement with Characters and Events in the Markan World* (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2012), 53-71, 87-90.
[30] Thomas Hägg, *The Novel in Antiquity* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1983), 95-96.

Can Aseneth's Transformation Be Classified as Conversion?

From a modern perspective, the religious elements associated with Aseneth's transformation indicate that an analysis of *Joseph and Aseneth* might elucidate important aspects of female religious conversion in antiquity; she destroys her Egyptian gods, confesses her sins, and starts praying to the Hebrew God. However, research on categorization in ancient history has drawn attention to the anachronistic ways that scholars have employed many categories when they analyze ancient texts and concepts, including the term 'conversion.'[31] The perspective from which Aseneth's gradual transformation is viewed, that is, whether ancient or modern, and how conversion is defined may thus decide whether this process could be interpreted as a religious conversion or not. In the introduction to *The Oxford Handbook of Religious Conversion*, Lewis R. Rambo and Charles E. Farhadian argue: "While particular definitions may be appropriate to a certain religion at a specific time and place, there is no universal definition that we believe captures all aspects of religious conversion."[32] Definitions of conversion must therefore be constructed to elucidate specific contexts.

According to recent research on religion in the ancient world, the modern definition of conversion with its focus on individual processes, belief, and intent[33] would not make much sense from an emic perspective. In his article "Jews, Judaeans, Judaizing, Judaism: Problems of Categorization in Ancient History", Steve Mason argues that "there was no category of 'Judaism' in the Graeco-Roman world, no 'religion' too, and that the *Ioudaioi* were understood until late antiquity as an ethnic group comparable to other ethnic groups, with their distinctive laws, traditions, customs, and God".[34] In this context, conversion would be understood as

> a movement from one ethnos to another, a kind of change in citizenship …. There was no "religion" to which one might convert, even if one had wished to do so: taking on the Judaeans' laws and customs was different from, and more than, being initiated in the cult of Cybele or joining a philosophical school,

[31] When labels such as conversion, class, marriage, nation etc. are employed to refer to concepts that did not exist in the same form in antiquity as today, the phenomena presented in the ancient texts are made intelligible to a present-day audience, but the words also veil the differences between the notions portrayed in the texts and modern ideas. See for instance Steve Mason, "Jews, Judaeans, Judaizing, Judaism: Problems of Categorization in Ancient History", *Journal for the Study of Judaism* 38: 2007, 457-512; Ken Stone, "Marriage and Sexual Relations in the World of the Hebrew Bible", in Adrian Thatcher ed., *The Oxford Handbook of Theology, Sexuality, and Gender* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 173-188, here 173-177. Denise Kimber Buell, *Why This New Race: Ethnic Reasoning in Early Christianity* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005).
[32] Lewis R. Rambo and Charles E. Farhadian, "Introduction", in Lewis R. Rambo and Charles E. Farhadian eds., *The Oxford Handbook of Religious Conversion* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 1-22, here 10.
[33] Buell, *Why This New Race*, 158-160.
[34] Mason, "Jews, Judaeans", 457. See also Collins, "The Transformation", 93-94.

> notwithstanding parallels to both. It was a change of ethnic-ancestral culture, the joining of another people, as it had been already in the biblical paradigm, Ruth (1:16): "your people shall be my people."[35]

Denise Kimber Buell's study of ethnic reasoning in early Christianity sheds further light on the differences between ancient and modern conceptions of race, ethnicity, religion, and conversion. Buell points out that in the interpretations of early Christianity, race and ethnicity are often regarded as a "fixed or given facet of identity, while religion is primarily viewed as voluntary".[36] She suggests, however, that both ethnicity and religion can be associated with fixity and fluidity.[37] Buell also draws attention to four roles religion may play in ethnoracial discourse: "to assert the fixity of ethnoracial differences between groups, to accomplish ethnoracial fluidity (as a means by which one can change membership), to make links between two or more distinctive ethnoracial groups, and to make differentiations within a group".[38] *Joseph and Aseneth* may illustrate all these functions, but in this context, emphasis is on the first two. The plot of the first part of the novel is based on the initial ethnic and religious differences between the two protagonists. Whereas the description in 8:5 suggests that ethnicity and religious adherence are fixed, Joseph's blessing (8:9) and Aseneth's subsequent destruction of her Egyptian gods, adherence to the Hebrew God, and incorporation into the family of the Hebrew patriarch suggest that a change of cultic practices and beliefs is intertwined with a change of ethnoracial affiliation (fluidity). Similar to Mason's study, Buell thus enables us to regard "conversion as a social process that entails the crossing of social boundaries. These boundaries may be understood as religious but also as ethnic and racial".[39]

In *On the Virtues,* Philo provides an emic perspective on the movement of an individual from another *ethnos* to the *Ioudaioi*: "abandoning their kinsfolk by blood, their country, their customs and the temples and images of their gods, and the tributes and honours paid to them, they have taken the journey to a better home, from idle fables to the clear vision of truth and the worship of the one and truly existing God".[40] This passage suggests that aspects which currently are associated with religious conversion, such as the substitution of one cult and god for another, were also involved when a person moved from one *ethnos* to another in the ancient world, but because worship was associated with ethnic identity, this was primarily a joining of another

[35] Mason, "Jews, Judaeans", 491.
[36] Buell, *Why This New Race*, 6.
[37] Buell, *Why This New Race*, 6-10.
[38] Buell, *Why This New Race*, 36.
[39] Buell, *Why This New Race*, 158.
[40] Philo, *On the Virtues*, 102. Mason, "Jews, Judaeans", 491.

ethnos.[41] In the words of Buell, "what we might conceive of as a religious process, conversion, could be simultaneously imagined as a process of ethnic transformation."[42]

One can illustrate other differences between an ancient and a more modern approach to conversion by comparing Mason's ideas with the definition proposed in the introduction to *The Oxford Handbook of Religious Conversion*. This definition was earlier presented by Marc Baer and employed in the context of Sunni Islam during the Ottoman Empire:

> [C]onversion is a decision or experience followed by a gradually unfolding, dynamic process through which an individual embarks on religious transformation. This can entail an intensification of belief and practice of one's own religion, moving from one level of observation to another, or exchanging the beliefs and practices in which one was raised for those of another religious tradition. In both cases, a person becomes someone else because his or her internal mind-set and/or external actions are transformed. … Whereas some scholars still posit an artificial distinction between 'exterior' and 'interior' conversion, I argue that conversion has an internal component entailing belief and an external component involving behavior, leading to the creation of a new self-identity and a new way of life.[43]

In contrast to Mason's and Buell's emphasis on the social context of conversion, which highlights ethnic transformation, Baer's definition focuses on conversion as religious transformation, emphasizing the alteration of the internal mindset or belief, and external actions. Conversion is thus regarded as a personal process. Some of the aspects mentioned in Baer's definition seem to occur in *Joseph and Aseneth.* In particular, Aseneth's mindset and actions are profoundly transformed.

In addition to the facets mentioned in Baer's definition, Aseneth's transformation process seemingly corresponds to other important themes explored by contemporary scholars of conversion, such as points of continuity and discontinuity between the past and the present, the agency of converts, the significance of the human body, rituals, etc.[44] For instance, in *Joseph and Aseneth*, the agency of Aseneth is evident throughout 9–18, and both continuity and discontinuity of religious practices and bodily features are important. In this manner, many aspects involved in Aseneth's change of ethnic belonging correspond to those investigated in

[41] Shaye J. D. Cohen argues that there was a shift after the Maccabean revolt. From this point on, the term *Ioudaios* was associated with an ethno-religious identity; see Shaye J. D. Cohen, *The Beginnings of Jewishness: Boundaries, Varieties, Uncertainties* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), 137. See also Mason, "Jews, Judaeans", 494-495. Collins, "The Transformation", 94.
[42] Buell, *Why This New Race*, 139.
[43] Rambo and Farhadian, "Introduction", 11.
[44] Rambo and Farhadian, "Introduction", 7-8.

contemporary research on conversion. It is probably these features of the narrative that have prompted scholars to regard the novel as a story of female religious conversion in antiquity.[45]

Whether *Joseph and Aseneth* portrays rituals or not is a complicated question. In his early research on the novel, Dieter Sänger used the novel to reconstruct a ritual for the admission of proselytes,[46] but he has recently changed his mind, claiming that the novel cannot be utilized to reconstruct such rituals.[47] According to Randall D. Chesnutt, "[t]here is little if any evidence that Aseneth's story preserves a fixed ritual of initiation…. Since Aseneth's experiences are narrated to address certain concerns relating to the sociological dimension of conversion to Judaism, it should not be assumed that her actions reflect rites of initiation regularly practiced in the author's community".[48] In my own research, I argue that the author of the novel probably drew on aspects of genuine rituals, but altered them to suit the requirements of the plot. These rituals were utilized in the novel to elucidate the profound transformation which Aseneth must undergo to become a suitable bride for Joseph. They should not be compared to text-external rituals or used to reconstruct them. Because fiction imitates reality, the novel can draw on the functions of rituals in the real world, namely, to facilitate processes of change. The functions of the ritual components in *Joseph and Aseneth* are complex and are referred to only in passing in this essay.[49]

An Intersectional Approach to Aseneth's Transformation

Baer's definition of conversion and the emic perspective of joining a new *ethnos* both suggest processes that involve the creation of a new self-identity. The novel can therefore be analyzed to define new aspects of Aseneth's identity. The construction of Aseneth's new identity as a Hebrew woman and Joseph's wife is complex; it involves both continuity and discontinuity with features of Aseneth's previous identity as an Egyptian woman. It also involves multiple

[45] On conversion in the novel, see Collins, "The Transformation", 96. Some scholars argue that Aseneth's transformation process cannot be compared to other ancient conversions because of her outstanding position and of the role she plays in the second part of the novel. Collins, "The Transformation", 97 and 102.
[46] Dieter Sänger, *Antikes Judentum und die Mysterien* (Tübingen: J.C.B. Mohr, 1980), 174-187.
[47] Dieter Sänger, "'Brot des Lebens, Kelch der Unsterblichkeit': Vom Nutzen des Essens in 'Joseph und Aseneth'", in David Hellholm and Dieter Sänger eds., *The Eucharist–Its Origins and Contexts: Sacred Meal, Communal Meal, Table Fellowship in Late Antiquity, Early Judaism, and Early Christianity* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2017), 206-210. Collins likewise argues that the novel does not refer to rituals. Collins, "The Transformation", 97.
[48] Randall D. Chesnutt, *From Death to Life: Conversion in Joseph and Aseneth* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1995), 255.
[49] These themes are treated thoroughly in Kirsten Marie Hartvigsen, "The Meal Formula, the Honeycomb, and Aseneth's Transformation", in Hellholm and Sänger eds., *The Eucharist* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2017), 223-251; Hartvigsen, *Aseneth's Transformation*.

aspects. To differentiate between and elucidate various facets of Aseneth's identity, how they are interrelated, and how they are preserved, transformed, or replaced in the narrative, I will draw on the theory of intersectionality.

Intersectionality can be regarded as an analytical strategy that elucidates human life and behavior derived from the experiences of marginalized people.[50] The working definition proposed in the article on intersectionality in *The Oxford Handbook of Gender and Politics* suggests the following:

> Intersectionality consists of an assemblage of ideas and practices that maintain that gender, race, class, sexuality, age, ethnicity, ability, and similar phenomena cannot be analytically understood in isolation from one another; instead, these constructs signal an intersecting constellation of power relationships that produce unequal material realities and distinctive social experiences for individuals and groups positioned within them.[51]

Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza emphasizes that the theory of intersectionality may also "illuminate how identity is constructed at the intersections of race, gender, class, sexuality, and imperialism".[52] The subsequent analysis of Aseneth's identity and of its transformation focuses on phenomena such as Aseneth's ethnicity, religious adherence, gender, social position, age, and physical ability.[53] The analysis is conducted primarily from a text-internal perspective, but at certain points, text-external, critical perspectives are pointed out. The goal is to elucidate those aspects of Aseneth's identity that initially make her a candidate for the role as Joseph's spouse and the facets that prevent her from playing this part. The essay also presents an analysis of how these aspects are transformed in 1–21, and how Aseneth adopts a different feminine ideal when she becomes a Hebrew woman and Joseph's wife. Some of these characteristics are evaluated similarly by Egyptian and Hebrew characters in the narrative world and by the (Hebrew) extradiegetic narrator, while others are evaluated differently. In many instances, a critical reading of the novel from a contemporary text-external perspective provides additional assessments of the phenomena in question.

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[50] Patricia Hill Collins and Valerie Chepp, "Intersectionality", in Georgina Waylen et al. ed., *The Oxford Handbook of Gender and Politics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 58-92, here 58.
[51] Collins and Chepp, "Intersectionality", 58-59.
[52] Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, "Introduction: Exploring the Intersections of Race, Gender, Status, and Ethnicity in Early Christian Studies", in Laura Nasrallah and Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza eds., *Prejudice and Christian Beginnings: Investigating Race, Gender, and Ethnicity in Early Christian Studies* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2009), 1-23, here 6.
[53] Issues of sexuality, in particular virginity, have already been discussed in Marianne Bjelland Kartzow, *Destabilizing the Margins: An Intersectional Approach to Early Christian Memory* (Eugene: Pickwick, 2012), 59-69.

The approach of intersectionality must be employed with care. As I have indicated in the previous subdivision, some of the categories listed in the working definition of intersectionality may be employed differently, or may even be missing, in the ancient context. This caution is particularly important pertaining to the concepts of ethnicity and religion. Because of the limited format of the essay, I can only provide sketches of the various dimensions of Aseneth's transformation.

The Initial Portrayal of Aseneth: Intricate Intersections of Age, Physical Ability, Ethnicity, Sexuality, and Social Position

The protagonists of the ancient novels "come from the upper levels of society" and their beauty and purity are underscored.[54] Similarly, Aseneth is introduced as the attractive, eighteen-year-old virgin daughter of Pentephres,[55] the priest of Heliopolis and the chief of the satraps and noblemen of Pharaoh. Intersections of criteria such as Aseneth's age (appropriate for marriage), physical ability (exceptional beauty),[56] sexuality (virginity), and social position (the daughter of the chief of the satraps) make her a desirable wife for any young and powerful man in the Egyptian society. The novel indeed indicates that all the sons of the noblemen, satraps, and kings, and even the firstborn son of Pharaoh, want to marry her (1:6–8). In *Joseph and Aseneth*, the female protagonist is thus presented as an attractive woman, herself aware of her position in Egyptian society (4:9–11). Aseneth lives in seclusion and resents all men, except perhaps the firstborn son of Pharaoh, whom she wants to wed (4:11).

According to the extradiegetic narrator, the physical features associated with Aseneth's beauty do not relate her to other Egyptian women, but rather to significant Hebrew women. "[S]he was tall as Sarah and handsome as Rebecca and beautiful as Rachel" (1:5). In the novel, Aseneth's physical resemblance to the Hebrew matriarchs may constitute an instance of ethnic reasoning. By focusing on the physical attributes that Aseneth has in common with these matriarchs, the extradiegetic narrator suggests that her Egyptian ethnicity is not clear-cut. The fact that Aseneth resembles these matriarchs suggests her fictive descent from these women, a strategy that may function in a similar manner to a forged genealogical claim.[57] Because important aspects of

[54] West, "Joseph and Asenath", 71-73, at 71. On the beauty of the protagonists, see also Hägg, *The Novel*, 6-7.
[55] In Genesis, Aseneth's father is called Potiphera.
[56] In the novel, the function of the extraordinary beauty of the protagonists may extend our conception of the term physical ability.
[57] According to Buell, genealogical claims "imbue ethnoracial identities with a sense of stability, essence, and longevity" even when the genealogies are fabricated. On the function of genealogical claims, see Buell, *Why This New Race*, 40.

Aseneth's initial physical ability anticipate her later status as Joseph's Hebrew wife, her subsequent entry into God's chosen people (8:9) is facilitated.[58]

In the novel, Aseneth is a privileged woman, but she is restrained to a tower and has limited interaction with other people, probably to secure her sexual purity (2:1.7–9; 15:14). From a text-internal point of view, Aseneth's uncontested virginity constitutes a prerequisite for joining God's chosen people and becoming Joseph's wife.[59] Accordingly, Aseneth's seclusion is a positive feature. Yet from a text-external, critical point of view, it constitutes a negative element; that is, Aseneth's freedom is restricted despite her beauty, power, and social position.[60] This constraint is underscored by the fact that Aseneth is the possession of men throughout the novel. At the beginning of the novel, she is controlled by her father (4:6) and, after her transformation, by Joseph (20:4). When Joseph first visits the family, Aseneth's father thus informs Aseneth that he wants to *give* her over to Joseph (4:8), and later he states that Joseph will *take* Aseneth as his wife (20:8). However, Joseph proposes that Pharaoh should *give* Aseneth to him (20:9; 21:2–8).[61] Aseneth's marriage thus becomes a transaction between important men who surround her; they are the subjects, whereas she is the object of the transaction. At one point, which is discussed below, Aseneth attempts to influence her father and become a subject in this transaction.

Aseneth's Personality and Female Gender Roles

The portrayal of Aseneth's personality reveals how she exemplifies feminine ideals. Initially, she is characterized as a person who "was despising and scorning every man, and she was boastful and arrogant with everyone" (2:1),[62] but to some extent she also recognizes her father's lordship over her (4:6). The characterization of Aseneth in 2:1 is developed further in the scene where Pentephres suggests that Aseneth should marry Joseph (4:7–12). Aseneth becomes furious and speaks of Joseph in a belittling manner and answers her father "daringly and with boastfulness and anger" (4:12). In 2:1 and 4:12, Aseneth's behavior breaks with traditional feminine ideals, which suggest that a man is a woman's master or lord.[63] Because Aseneth's behavior transgresses the bounds of propriety, Pentephres becomes ashamed.

[58] On the permeable boundaries between Hebrews and Egyptians at the beginning of the novel, see B. Diane Lipsett, *Desiring Conversion: Hermas, Thecla, Aseneth* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 95.
[59] Kartzow, *Destabilizing the Margins*, 68-69.
[60] See Kartzow, *Destabilizing the Margins*, 63-65.
[61] On "marriage" in the Hebrew Bible, see Stone, "Marriage", 174-176.
[62] Burchard, "Joseph and Aseneth", 203.
[63] Stone, "Marriage", 176.

From a text-external, critical perspective, the scene where Aseneth refuses to be handed over to Joseph to become his wife (4:9–12) represents Aseneth's attempt to free herself from her role as one of her father's possessions. She wants to marry the king's firstborn son, not the Hebrew patriarch. In order to do so, she argues that her father treats her like a captive and she criticizes Joseph's descent, morals, and behavior. Through this behavior, Aseneth attempts to become a subject of the marriage transaction, but she does not succeed. From the text-external perspective, Aseneth's attempt to free herself from her father's governance is evaluated positively, but from a text-internal perspective, the evaluation is rather negative. In the scene depicted in 4:5–12, the evaluative perspective of Aseneth's Egyptian father corresponds to and merges with the perspective of the Hebrew extradiegetic narrator. As a result, Aseneth's behavior as a young woman who defies her father's suggestion about her future husband is condemned from both an Egyptian and a Hebrew male point of view.[64]

Soon after, when Aseneth sees Joseph and falls in love with him, she realizes that she has been ignorant (6:7), and she wants her father to hand her over to Joseph. The portrayal of Aseneth's personality thus evolves as the plot develops. At this point, Aseneth's wish aligns her evaluative point of view with that of her father and of the extradiegetic narrator. Her subsequent focus on how to become Joseph's slave and serve him (6:8) suggests that she accepts the embodiment of a subservient female gender role. In the narrative world, Aseneth's new mindset apparently constitutes a prerequisite for the transformation process. From a text-internal perspective, this development is thus positive, but from a text-external, critical perspective, Aseneth continues to be governed by the men who surround her.

Introduction of the Conflict that Constitutes the Plot: The Ethnicities and Religious Practices of the Protagonists

Aseneth and Joseph have the following characteristics in common: high social status, exceptional beauty, virginity, and aversion towards members of the opposite sex (8:1), but their ethnicity and the corresponding religious practices differ. The ethnic backgrounds and religious adherence of the protagonists constitute the starting point of the plot of 1–21, a plot which aims at removing these obstacles through a radical transformation of the female protagonist.

[64] The extradiegetic narrator seemingly represents a Hebrew, male point of view in the narrative.

The initial contrast between Joseph and Aseneth is emphasized in the scene where Aseneth is introduced to Joseph. Pentephres encourages Aseneth to kiss Joseph, but he refuses because of their divergent religious adherences and practices. Instead, he provides the following explanation:

> It is not fitting for a man who worships God, who will bless with his mouth the living God and eat blessed bread of life and drink a blessed cup of immortality and anoint himself with 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)[65]

In the novel, Aseneth is portrayed as the daughter of the priest of Heliopolis who worships and sacrifices to Egyptian gods (2:2–3; 3:6). From Joseph's perspective, Aseneth's consumption of staples utilized in the Egyptian cult associates her with death and destruction. Conversely, his own consumption of staples associated with worship of the living God links him with life, immortality, and incorruptibility.[66] Joseph's refusal to kiss Aseneth can be interpreted as a way of marking the boundary between Egyptians and Hebrews and their respective cults.[67] Even though Aseneth resembles the Hebrew matriarchs physically, she is not (yet) a Hebrew.

Joseph's utterance suggests that he can only kiss members of his own clan and family who worship the same deity. If Aseneth wants to kiss him, she must thus first join his *ethnos* and worship his God. According to Mason, conversion could be understood as "a movement from one ethnos to another, a kind of change in citizenship." However, Buell suggests that religion could constitute a means to change membership from one ethnic group to another (ethnoracial fluidity).[68] In *Joseph and Aseneth*, the portrayal of Aseneth's transformation process in all probability draws on aspects of genuine rituals that were altered to suit the plot. Aseneth thus employs new cultic elements prior to her actual incorporation into Joseph's family through her wedding and her subsequent meeting with her father-in-law. For instance, her heavenly visitor

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[65] Burchard, "Joseph and Aseneth", 211-212.
[66] For detailed analyses of the consequences of consuming bread, cup, and ointment in *Joseph and Aseneth*, see Hartvigsen, "The Meal Formula"; Hartvigsen, *Aseneth's Transformation*.
[67] According to B. Diane Lipsett, these staples may function as boundary markers that signal ethnic and religious belonging. Lipsett, *Desiring Conversion*, 104. On oil, food, and drink as markers of Jewish identity, see also Randall D. Chesnutt, "Perceptions of Oil in Early Judaism and the Meal formula in *Joseph and Aseneth*", *Journal for the Study of the Pseudepigrapha* 14.2: 2005, 113-132. Chesnutt, "*Joseph and Aseneth*". On the kiss as a boundary marker, see Christoph Burchard, "Küssen in *Joseph und Aseneth*" *Journal for the Study of Judaism* 36.3: 2005, 316-323, here 319. For a more elaborate interpretation of this scene in the light of the cognitive theory of rituals, see Hartvigsen, "The Meal Formula"; Hartvigsen, *Aseneth's Transformation*.
[68] Buell, *Why This New Race*, 161.

states that she has eaten the staples according to the Hebrew fashion, albeit symbolically (16:16). The novel may thus suggest that cultic elements constitute a factor of the transformation process that precedes Aseneth's incorporation into God's chosen people. Below, Aseneth's transformation is analyzed in more detail as a process constituted by three phases.

First Phase of the Transformation: Emphasis on Aseneth's Mindset and Female Gender Role

In the novel, Aseneth's mindset changes prior to her ethnicity, religious practices, and bodily features. As soon as she sees Joseph, she realizes that her former attitude towards him was "foolish and daring" (6:3), and she states: "let my father give me to Joseph for a maidservant and slave, and I will serve him for ever (and) ever" (6:8).[69] Thus, the noblewoman of the beginning of the narrative, who was attended by seven maidens and other members of the staff in her father's house, wants to become Joseph's slave. When Aseneth later confesses her sins, she describes her former proud and arrogant self (12:5), claims that she spoke of Joseph in ignorance, and repeats her desire to become his slave (13:12–14). Aseneth's wish is soon fulfilled. When Joseph returns and does not recognize Aseneth because of her new, supernatural beauty, she introduces herself as his maidservant (19:5), and she offers to wash Joseph's feet. Aseneth's utterance suggests that she regards him as her lord (gendered hierarchy).

In Aseneth's psalm, which concludes the first plot (21:11–21), Aseneth again revisits the familiar themes of her boastful and arrogant attitude, her trust in her beauty, and her contempt for men. Towards the end of the psalm, she states that her encounter with Joseph made her humble. The transformation process depicted in the novel is thus associated with a meek female ideal. In the novel, meekness also characterizes male Hebrew characters, such as Joseph and Levi (8:8, 23:10).[70] Meekness could thus be a feature associated with a female ideal and with being a proper Hebrew. However, Aseneth's father Pentephres is also characterized as a gentle man (1:3). This feature could thus suggest that Aseneth has become more aligned with the male ideals presented in the novel.

[69] Burchard, "Joseph and Aseneth", 210. See the entire scene.
[70] Humphrey, *Joseph and Aseneth*, 74-75.

Aseneth's revision of her former mindset also involves a development from ignorance to wisdom,[71] a theme which in the novel involves a revised attitude and knowledge about the living God, her former religious practices, her attitude and behavior towards men, and her opinion of Joseph (12–13, in particular 13:11–13).[72] As I pointed out above, Aseneth's evaluations of her former self constitute important clues to the construction of the female gender role and ideology of the novel, which are communicated to the text-external female readers through their vicarious simulation of the plot. Aseneth's initial change of mindset probably explains her willingness to become a member of God's chosen people and perform the appropriate religious rituals that facilitate her entry into the Hebrew *ethnos* and her subsequent supernatural physical transformation (religion as a means to accomplish ethnoracial fluidity).[73]

Second Phase of the Transformation: Profound Transformation of Aseneth's Ethnicity and Religious Practices

After his initial refusal to kiss Aseneth, Joseph blesses her and asks God *inter alia* to "renew her," "form her anew," "make her alive again," let her eat the bread of life and drink a cup of blessing, and number her among God's people (8:9). After his blessing, Aseneth withdraws to her chamber and repents by removing and throwing away her extravagant garments and ornaments engraved with Egyptian gods, replacing them with a black tunic, a rope, and sackcloth. She also destroys the images of her Egyptian gods and throws them through the window together with the food and drink that constitute their sacrifices. In this manner, Aseneth distances herself from her customs, sacred rites, and Egyptian gods.[74] She sprinkles ashes on her head and for a period of seven days, she weeps, sighs, and screams without ingesting food or drink. On the eighth day, she addresses the God of the Hebrews, confesses her sins, and prays for acceptance (11:3–13:14).

Through the actions that take place in 9–13, which can be interpreted as rituals of grief and purification, Aseneth separates herself from the cult of the Egyptian gods and acknowledges the superiority of the cult of the Hebrew living God. Like her altered opinion of Joseph, her newfound wisdom also makes her realize that the Egyptian gods which she used to worship are

[71] See also Gallagher, "Conversion and Community in Late Antiquity", *The Journal of Religion* 73.1: 1993, 9-10. On Aseneth as Wisdom, see Ross Shepard Kraemer, "Aseneth as Wisdom", in Athalya Brenner and Carole Fontaine eds., *Wisdom and Psalms* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1998), 218-239.
[72] On ignorance, wisdom, and gender, see Kraemer, "Aseneth as Wisdom", 238-239.
[73] Buell, *Why This New Race*, 36.
[74] See Philo, *On the Virtues*, 102.

"dead and dumb idols", and that she had worshipped them in ignorance (13:11). Aseneth's actions and confessions prepare not only her chamber but also her body for the arrival of a heavenly visitor, which is Joseph's heavenly counterpart, in Aseneth's first chamber (14:1–17:10).

After the rites of separation, Aseneth's heavenly visitor tells her to go into her second room and put off her garments of mourning and dress in an untouched linen robe and a twin girdle of virginity.[75] Moreover, she removes the ashes and washes her hands and face with living water, which probably should be interpreted as a ritual of purification. When she returns, the visitor states: "you will be renewed and formed anew and made alive again, and you will eat blessed bread of life, and drink a blessed cup of immortality, and anoint yourself with blessed ointment of incorruptibility" (15:5).[76] Through this utterance, the heavenly visitor reminds Aseneth of Joseph's blessing. Furthermore, his status as a supernatural being indicates that she will in fact be able to participate in Hebrew religious practices in the future. He also promises her that she will become Joseph's wife, and gives her a new name and function, i.e., City of Refuge. Finally, he tells her to dress as a bride.

The appearance of the heavenly being, his statement that her acts of humiliation and confession of her sins have been seen and heard (15:2–3), and his promises to Aseneth (15:5–6), corroborate the information according to which her name has been entered into the "book of the living in heaven" (15:4). By mentioning the entry of her name in the heavenly register of citizenship, the heavenly being confirms her membership with God's chosen people.

Aseneth's transformation involved distancing herself from her family, customs, sacred rites, and images of the gods (9:1–13:14).[77] Instead, she became a member of a new *ethnos* and could practice its customs and rites. Moreover, she was promised to marry Joseph and thus become a member of his family. As Joseph's wife and a member of God's chosen people, she would function as a City of Refuge, a function that to some extent depersonalizes Aseneth by relating her to the cities that performed this function. In the second part of the novel (22–29), this name and function constitute an important part of the plot.[78]

[75] According to Marianne Bjelland Kartzow, Aseneth's virginity could be a premise for Aseneth's conversion. Kartzow, *Destabilizing the Margins*, 68-69.
[76] Burchard, "Joseph and Aseneth", 226.
[77] See Philo, *On the Virtues*, 102.
[78] See Hartvigsen, *Aseneth's Transformation*.

When Aseneth subsequently invites her heavenly visitor for a meal of bread and wine, he insists that she should also bring him a honeycomb, but she does not have one in her storeroom (15:14–16:7). The heavenly visitor then, through a speech-act, produces a heavenly honeycomb made "from the dew of the roses of life" in paradise, and the heavenly man and Aseneth both eat a portion of the comb of life. Subsequently, the heavenly visitor interprets this event in the following manner: "Behold, you have eaten bread of life, and drunk a cup of immortality, and been anointed with ointment of incorruptibility" and he states that her body will be renewed (16:16).[79] Through her consumption of the heavenly honeycomb of life, Aseneth has apparently ingested the food of angels and taken part in religious practices equivalent to those earlier mentioned by Joseph (8:5). Moreover, by ingesting the angelic food of life, she becomes associated with the living God in a manner that prepares her for eternal life.[80] This event thus realizes Joseph's blessing and the promises of the heavenly visitor in the narrative world.

By ingesting a piece of the honeycomb of life, Aseneth becomes connected with the living God and the religious practices of the Hebrews. This confirms that she has become a full member of God's chosen people, which in turn suggests that religion may constitute a means to accomplish ethnoracial fluidity.[81] Because the ethnicity of both protagonists from this moment on is Hebrew, the main obstacle preventing the two protagonists from getting married is removed, and they are permitted to kiss.[82] Aseneth's membership in the Hebrew *ethnos* and her consumption of the honeycomb of life prepare her for the transformation of Aseneth's body.

Third Phase of the Transformation: Enhancement of Aseneth's Physical Ability

Since Aseneth already looks like an ethnic Hebrew woman, becoming a member of the Hebrew *ethnos* should not require supernatural physical transformation. However, the narrative portrays a significant change regarding Aseneth's bodily features. When Aseneth dresses as a bride (18:5–11), her innate beauty is transformed, and she looks like an angelic being. In this manner, Aseneth's initial physical ability, i.e., her renowned beauty, is enhanced beyond human measure. In the novel, supernatural physical ability is a feature that the transformed Aseneth

[79] Burchard, "Joseph and Aseneth", 229.
[80] For similar insights, see Collins, "The Transformation", 100. According to Lieber, Aseneth's consumption of angels' food transforms her into an angel; Andrea Lieber, "I Set a Table before You: The Jewish Eschatological Character of Aseneth's Conversion Meal", *Journal for the Study of Pseudepigrapha* 14.1: 2004, 63-77, here 65.
[81] On this function of religion, see Buell, *Why This New Race*, 36.
[82] For a more thorough analysis of this scene, see Hartvigsen, *Aseneth's Transformation*. Hartvigsen, "The Meal Formula".

shares with male and female Hebrew characters.[83] The fact that Aseneth's transformation into an angelic being occurs when she dresses as a bride may suggest that the main public ritual that marks her transition to the Hebrew *ethnos* is the wedding.[84]

In the novel, Aseneth is gradually transformed. The first aspect of Aseneth's physical transformation occurs when she changes from the black robe into the new, untouched linen robe. Having removed the ashes and washed her hands and face with living water, she puts on a linen veil. Her heavenly visitor tells her to remove the veil "[f]or you are a chaste virgin today, and your head is like that of a young man" (15:1).[85] In this manner, Aseneth's transformation process seemingly enables her to transcend traditional gender divisions,[86] at least during the liminal phase constituted by the heavenly visit. Aseneth's resemblance to a young man may underscore the fact that at this point, she has become more aligned with the noble ideals associated with the male characters and the (male) extradiegetic narrator of the novel.

As I indicated above, Aseneth's ingestion of a piece of the heavenly honeycomb initiates the process which alters her body into something her heavenly visitor can only compare to nature in its paradisiac state. "Behold, from today your flesh (will) flourish like flowers of life from the ground of the Most High, and your bones will grow strong like the cedars of the paradise of delight of God, and untiring powers will embrace you, and your youth will not see old age, and your beauty will not fail forever" (16:16). Ingesting a piece of the honeycomb of life gives her eternal life. However, Aseneth's physical appearance does not explicitly change until she dresses as Joseph's bride in a robe "like lightning in appearance" (18:5–11).[87] In this scene, Aseneth discovers her supernatural beauty:

> And Aseneth leaned (over) to wash her face and saw her face in the water. And it was like the sun and her eyes (were) like a rising morning star, and her cheeks like fields of the Most High, and on her cheeks (there was) red (color) like a son of man's blood, and her lips (were) like a rose of life coming out of its foliage, and her teeth like fighting men lined up for a fight, and the hair of her head (was) like a vine in the paradise of God prospering in its fruits, and her neck like an all-variegated cypress, and her breasts (were) like the mountains of the Most High God. (18:9)[88]

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[83] See below.
[84] On this function of the wedding, see Collins, "The Transformation", 101.
[85] Burchard, "Joseph and Aseneth", 225-226.
[86] Burchard, "Joseph and Aseneth", 226.
[87] On how light and shining signifies correspondence with divinity in Hellenistic romances, see Meredith J. C. Warren, "A Robe Like Lightning: Clothing Changes and Identification in Joseph and Aseneth", in Kristi Upson-Saia et al. ed., *Dressing Judeans and Christians in Antiquity* (Farnham: Ashgate Publishing, 2014), 137-153.
[88] Burchard, "Joseph and Aseneth", 232. According to Humphrey, Aseneth "has taken on the vastness of a strong and protected land of God: fields, vegetation, fighting men, protective mountains (18.8)". Humphrey, *Joseph and Aseneth*, 101.

Aseneth's supernatural physical transformation underscores her incorporation into God's chosen people. Similar to the main Hebrew characters in the novel, she is depicted as an angelomorphic being.[89] The portrayals of the Hebrew matriarchs, Joseph, Jacob, Levi, and Benjamin indicate that they all possess extraordinary physical features; in some cases, their attractiveness borders on heavenly beauty, in other cases, they have superior intellectual and physical capacities (see 1:5; 5:4–7; 22:7–8:13; 23:2, 8–15; 26:6; 27:1–6; 28:9; 28:17). Some aspects of the supernatural appearance of Aseneth and of other Hebrew characters are reminiscent of characters in apocalyptic literature who are transformed into angelic beings.

The portrayals of Aseneth in 16:16 and 18:9 are complex and may evoke different intertextual contexts which are thematically interrelated. The comparisons of Aseneth's bodily features to plants may evoke depictions of the Garden of Eden/Paradise and motifs in the Song of Songs. The Garden of Eden/Paradise is also evoked by the description of the garden surrounding Aseneth's abode (2:11–12). Aseneth's garden functions as a safe haven for some of the bees mentioned in 16:22–23. This feature is reminiscent of Aseneth's new name and function in the second part of the novel, namely City of Refuge (15:7). However, the comparison to plants is a device also employed to portray the personified, female Wisdom in Sir 24:13–17. These portrayals of Aseneth may therefore also underscore her newfound wisdom.[90]

After the transformation of Aseneth's personality, her inclusion in the book of the living in heaven, her consumption of the honeycomb, and her preparation for her future wedding—all confirming her position as a Hebrew woman—Aseneth's new status becomes visible through the supernatural enhancement of her physical ability. Whether the exceptional physical abilities of the Hebrew characters in the novel pertain to Hebrews in general, or just to prominent members of Joseph's immediate family, is difficult to ascertain. In the novel, the Hebrew characters are all members of Joseph's family. The depiction of Joseph's half-brothers (27:7–28:8) and the scene with the two types of bees (16:17–23) may, however, indicate that supernatural physical ability is not a characteristic of all Hebrews.

[89] George J. Brooke, "Men and Women as Angels in *Joseph and Aseneth*", *Journal for the Study of Pseudepigrapha* 14.2: 2005, 159-177.
[90] See also Hartvigsen, *Aseneth's Transformation*, 67-137.

In the novel, supernatural abilities are not only associated with the Hebrew characters. Pentephres, the Egyptian priest, counselor of Pharaoh, and Aseneth's father, also possesses a superior intellectual ability (1:3). In 4:7–8, his knowledge of the merits of the living God[91] and the virtues of Joseph lead him to suggest a wedding between his daughter and the Hebrew patriarch. Although Aseneth is a stranger who must be transformed into a supernatural member of God's chosen people, the position and insights of her father make her a suitable candidate for the role as one of the Hebrew matriarchs.

Summary

This essay has analyzed Aseneth's transformation using insights from current research on conversion and the theory of intersectionality. Intersections between Aseneth's ethnicity, religious adherence, gender, social position, age, and physical ability were emphasized. Some of these aspects, such as her social position and physical ability, made Aseneth an attractive wife for most men, including Joseph, whereas others made her unfit to be Joseph's wife.

In the novel, *Joseph and Aseneth,* Aseneth is presented as a privileged, female member of a wealthy, Egyptian family, and her father is an influential satrap and a polytheistic priest. Moreover, she possesses an extraordinary physical ability, namely her astonishing beauty. From a Hebrew point of view, however, Aseneth's admirable social position and physical ability were not sufficient to allow her to become Joseph's bride. To marry him, she must distance herself from her Egyptian customs, sacred rites, and gods,[92] and join the Hebrew *ethnos* that worships the living god. Certain elements of Aseneth's physical ability, such as her resemblance to the Hebrew matriarchs, as well as her father's recognition of the Hebrew god facilitate this development of the plot.

In *Joseph and Aseneth,* ritual elements are employed to depict Aseneth's separation from her Egyptian *ethnos* and her subsequent incorporation into the Hebrew *ethnos.* Aseneth's efforts to become part of the Hebrew *ethnos* are acknowledged since her name is written in the book of the living in heaven. Moreover, she is allowed to eat the heavenly honeycomb of life, which corresponds to the blessed bread of life, blessed cup of immortality, and the blessed ointment of incorruptibility that are consumed by those who bless the living God (8:5, 16:16). As a proper

[91] According to Lipsett, Egyptian characters, including Aseneth's parents, speak of a singular God. Lipsett, *Desiring Conversion,* 99.
[92] See Philo, *On the Virtues*, 102.

Hebrew woman, she constitutes a suitable wife for Joseph and a worthy matriarch. When Aseneth dresses as a bride, her novel status as a Hebrew woman is confirmed by the angelomorphic transformation of her body.

In sum, Aseneth's comprehensive transformation alters her mindset, ethnicity, religious adherence, and physical appearance, and she becomes a humble and wise angelomorphic Hebrew woman who worships the living God. Studies of categorization in ancient history and ethnic reasoning in early Christianity has enabled us to view Aseneth's conversion process as a social process, that is, the joining of a new *ethnos*.

Aseneth's behavior as a woman develops in the narrative. In an initial dispute with her father over whom she should marry, Aseneth challenges Pentephres's role as her lord. Through this act, Aseneth dissociates herself from the feminine ideals which Egyptian and Hebrew women are expected to embody. As soon as she sees Joseph, however, Aseneth herself begins to conform to the evaluative points of view and feminine ideals held by the extradiegetic narrator and important male characters in the narrative. Through her gradual transformation, Aseneth thus learns and accepts how proper (Hebrew) women should behave. From a text-internal perspective, Aseneth's acceptance of her position in the gendered hierarchy is regarded as a positive development; and through vicarious simulation of the plot, the female values and ideals embraced by Aseneth are conveyed to the addressees of the novel, who were probably also women.