ORPHANHOOD AND PARENTHOOD IN JOSEPH AND ASENEH
INTRODUCTION

Joseph and Aseneth was one of the most popular and widely disseminated works of the Old Testament Pseudepigrapha. The work provides a window into the process of conversion in ancient Judaism and/or Christianity. Frustratingly, however, the story contains some perplexing puzzles. Among these is the question of why Aseneth repeatedly refers to herself as abandoned, hated, and disowned by her family (11.3–5, 12–13, 16; 12.5, 12–13; 13.1–2) when in fact the work narrates nothing of the sort. Instead, as scholars note, Aseneth maintains only the most cordial relations with her family prior to and after her conversion. She continues to live in her

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1 This essay follows the spelling ‘Aseneth’ (for Ἀσενέθ) as it appears throughout Joseph and Aseneth, even when referring to the Genesis text. All Scripture references use the LXX versification, with the MT in brackets where different.

2 Though anachronistic in the context of Genesis, this paper uses the terms ‘Jew/Judaism’ and ‘gentile’ because they represent categories that were contemporary to the author and audiences of Joseph and Aseneth.

3 This essay follows the versification system introduced by P. Riessler (Altjüdisches Schrifttum außerhalb der Bibel [Augsburg: Filser, 1928], pp. 497–538). Christoph Burchard and Uta Barbara Fink use Riessler’s system in their reconstructed text of Joseph and Aseneth, which is the basis for this paper: Christoph Burchard, ed., Joseph und Aseneth, PVTG 5 (assisted by Casten Burfeind and Uta Barbara Fink; Leiden: Brill, 2003), pp. 69–335; Uta Barbara Fink, Joseph und Aseneth: Revision des Griechischen Textes und Edition der Zweiten Lateinischen Übersetzung, FSBP 5 (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2008), pp. 171–97. Marc Philonenko introduces his own system in his critical text: Joseph et Aséneth: Introduction, Texte Critique, Traduction et Notes, StPB 13 (Leiden: Brill, 1968). The shorter text of Philonenko (as opposed to the longer text of Burchard-Fink) lacks large blocks of material found in the longer version (11.1x–18; most of chs. 18 and 19; 21.10–212; 22.6b–9a) and is in total about one-third shorter. The thesis of this paper does not change substantially if one uses the Philonenko text, as the motifs of orphanhood and parenthood are strongly present there as well.

parents’ house and even refers to her parents’ land as her inheritance (16.4; see also 12.15), which implies that she has not been disinherited. By all accounts, then, Aseneth’s statements cannot be straightforward descriptions of events. Why, then, are these declarations so prominent in her soliloquies, and what is their function?

Scholars take different approaches to explaining the motif of Aseneth’s abandonment by her family. Several examine the motif in terms of the potential conflict that proselytes faced from families in the time of the composition of Joseph and Aseneth. Commenting on 11.3, Christoph Burchard writes that the abandonment theme recalls the complaint or lament psalms, such as Ps. 26.10 [27.10], and that such language naturally appears in texts dealing with conversion. Indeed, he writes, converts to Judaism probably did often face such estrangement. Burchard continues, ‘The counterpoint is that it is expected that God will be a new and better father . . . .’ Randall D. Chesnutt likewise suggests that the familial and social ostracism that Aseneth envisions fits within a traditional theme regarding proselytes that corresponds in some sense to actual tensions between converts to Judaism and non-Jews. He states that, due to the fact that Aseneth’s

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5 Burchard, *OTP* 2:218 n. o, citing 1QH 9.34f. (i.e., 1QH 17.34–36), Philo, *Spec.* 4.179, and Mk. 13.12 (see also Mt. 10.21; Lk. 21.16).

6 Howard C. Kee makes a similar point: ‘Socio-Religious Setting’, p. 189.


ostracism does not appear in the actual narration of events in Joseph and Aseneth, the motif functions to indicate the sincerity of Aseneth’s embrace of Judaism. In other words, she recognizes the troubles that she could face and continues anyway.

Rees Conrad Douglas takes an anthropological approach to Joseph and Aseneth, outlining how Aseneth’s conversion corresponds to recognized categories in the anthropology of initiation: separation, liminality, and aggregation into a new community. Aseneth’s soliloquies, then, including the orphan language, identify her as being in a liminal situation. At the same time, such language also fits traditional themes, such as abandoning one’s family for a higher good and experiencing persecution as a proselyte. Finally, George J. Brooke interprets Joseph and Aseneth as a mythical account of Aseneth’s conversion that resolves a series of oppositions. The conversion overcomes the parent-child opposition at least in part through the orphanning language, which stresses Aseneth’s separation from her father. Even more, the theme of God’s parental status plays a prominent role because ‘God’s fatherhood compensates for Aseneth’s

Catherine Hezser situates Joseph and Aseneth among the Greek erotic novels, such as Chariton’s Chaereas and Callirhoe and Achilles Tatius’s The Adventures of Leucippe and Clitophon: “Joseph and Aseneth” in the Context of Ancient Greek Erotic Novels, Frankfurter Judaistische Beiträge 24 (1997), pp. 1–40. Because the Greek erotic novels (with the possible exception of Longus’s Daphnis and Chloe) often feature the protagonists’ temporary separation from home and family, Aseneth’s references to her estrangement from her family fit within the genre (Hezser, “Joseph and Aseneth”, pp. 31–32). Although the theme of separation from family in the genre of Greek erotic novel may have influenced the inclusion of the orphanning motif in Joseph and Aseneth, the specific way that this motif is employed—particularly in the context of references to the parenthood of God—merits further attention.


orphan state’.\textsuperscript{14} The conversion thus highlights Aseneth’s movement from being the daughter of Pentephres to an orphan to the daughter of God.\textsuperscript{15}

Through examining the social background of Joseph and Aseneth, Burchard, Chesnutt, and others rightly suggest that Aseneth’s soliloquies about her rejection may be voicing the actual concerns of proselytes in the time of the composition of Joseph and Aseneth while also fitting a traditional literary connection between proselytes and the socially ostracized. At the same time, Douglas and Brooke perceive how the orphanhood language rhetorically highlights Aseneth’s separation from her family and her transition into being a daughter of God. This essay draws upon the insights of these scholars by examining how the orphanhood motif functions within Joseph and Aseneth’s larger aim of undermining ethnicity as a determinative factor of religious identity. In particular, this essay argues that the orphanhood language creates a rich network of allusions to Psalms and Isaiah in order to emphasize how Aseneth metaphorically leaves one family tree—the impure, idolatrous one headed by the devil—and becomes securely incorporated into the lineage of Israel as a daughter of God. The author stresses Aseneth’s change of lineage in order to argue that the boundaries of the family of God are in fact more porous than is suggested by those who closely link physical pedigree and status before God. In this way, the work participates in Jewish and Christian conversations about the place of gentiles in the community.

\textsuperscript{14} Brooke, ‘Joseph, Aseneth, and Lévi-Strauss’, p. 194

GENEALOGICAL DIVISIONS IN JOSEPH AND ASENETH

In order to enhance the rhetorical force of its message, Joseph and Aseneth first seems to adopt the very position that it will undermine, namely a purely genealogical model of the people of God. Indeed, the very first chapter seems to assume that parentage is all important. The narrator introduces Aseneth as the daughter of the greatest of Pharaoh’s councilors (1.3). The sons of the noblemen (μεγιστάνοι) and others fight for Aseneth’s hand (1.6). In fact, even Pharaoh’s son wants to marry Aseneth (1.7). Pharaoh, however, responds that Aseneth is beneath his son (1.8–9). Instead, he wants his son to be content with the daughter of the king of Moab. Pharaoh’s answer betrays his assumption that pedigree and value are closely allied, with only the daughter of the ruler of another kingdom being a fitting wife for the son of the ruler of Egypt. From the very beginning, then, the audience is immersed in a culture in which parentage is the determining factor of a person’s status.

Aseneth’s conversation with Pentephres next betrays her own assumptions about the significance of pedigree, which turn out to be remarkably similar to those of Pharaoh. Pentephres attempts to persuade her to marry Joseph (4.7–8), but Aseneth becomes infuriated that he would hand her over to an alien (ἀλλογενής), a fugitive, and a slave (4.9). In a condemnation that she will later recall with regret (6.2; 13.13), she then points to Joseph’s identity as the son of a shepherd from Canaan (ὁ υἱὸς τοῦ ποιμένος ἐκ γῆς Χαναὰν; 4.10). Although she continues to list

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16 For a similar description of the rhetorical unfolding of Joseph and Aseneth, see Matthew Thiessen, ‘Aseneth’s Eight-Day Transformation as Scriptural Justification for Conversion’, JSJ 45 (2014), pp. 229–49. Thiessen observes that the work first accepts that a great divide separates Aseneth and Joseph before indicating that Aseneth can in fact overcome this divide through a transforming new creation.


18 Note that there is uncertainty whether the word in 4.9 should be ἀλλογενής or ἀλλόφυλος (Burchard, Joseph und Aseneth, p. 373).
details of Joseph’s seemingly checkered past, she has already voiced the core of her objection to him: his parentage.\(^{19}\) Next, Aseneth contrasts Joseph with Pharaoh’s firstborn son, stating, ‘I will be married to the king’s firstborn son’ (4.11–12).\(^{20}\) She does not list any attributes of Pharaoh’s son; on the basis of parentage alone (not a contrast of attributes), she knows that Pharaoh’s firstborn son is inherently better than Joseph.

Aseneth’s views will soon be turned upside-down when she observes Joseph and realizes his exalted origins. She twice refers to him as the son of God (6.3, 5) and recognizes his uniqueness such that he could not have been birthed by any human being (6.4). She contrasts her earlier view that Joseph is the son of a shepherd with her realization that Joseph is the son of a God (6.2–5; see also 13.13; 18.11; 21.4; 23.10).\(^{21}\) As a result, Aseneth goes from seeing herself as superior to Joseph to viewing Joseph as superior to her. Once again, the narrative does not challenge the basic assumption that status is tied to parentage. The status of one’s father still plays a decisive role; Aseneth just discovers that Joseph’s father (God) trumps her own father, which by implication means that Joseph is greater than Aseneth.

Despite Aseneth’s shock at this revelation, the story continues and even suggests that the dividing line between Joseph and Aseneth can be overcome. Upon seeing Aseneth, Joseph expresses fear that she is a ‘strange/foreign’ (ἀλλότριος) woman (7.5).\(^{22}\) Joseph thus refers to

\(^{19}\) This seems to be evident from the fact that her later repetition of the ‘evil words’ that she spoke about Joseph only includes the reference to his parentage (6.2; 13.13). Her statement at this point might also be ironic, given the references to God as a shepherd in Genesis (49.24) and elsewhere (e.g., Ps. 22.1 [23.1]).


\(^{21}\) Aseneth emphasizes the uniqueness of Joseph’s identity as a son of God, even though the narrative will later refer to multiple sons of God (16.14; 19.8).

Aseneth’s foreign origins in a way similar to her original condemnation of Joseph’s foreign origins (i.e., that he was born in Canaan; 4.10). Later, when Aseneth tries to kiss him, Joseph underscores this distance by refusing to kiss her and by physically preventing her from coming closer (8.5). He calls her a ‘strange/foreign woman’ (γυναῖκα ἀλλοτρίαν). Joseph then claims that one can only kiss one’s mother, biological sister, sister from one’s clan and family, and wife (8.6). By refusing to kiss Aseneth, Joseph thus underscores how Aseneth does not fall into any of those categories of kinship.²³

This rejection leaves Aseneth devastated (8.8a). Despite the apparent possibilities for Aseneth and Joseph to overcome the separation between them and marry each other, Joseph reasserts the boundary.²⁴ From the very beginning, then, Joseph and Aseneth immerses the audience in a world where parentage is a preeminent concern, and nothing suggests that parentage can change. The division between non-Jews and Jews seems insurmountable.

THE REJECTION OF GENEALOGICAL DIVISION IN JOSEPH AND ASENETH

Joseph and Aseneth 1–21

The rest of Joseph and Aseneth recounts how in fact Aseneth is able to be incorporated into the family tree of Israel despite her physical parentage.

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²³ Of course, Joseph leaves open the possibility that he could kiss Aseneth when she is his wife. Although this is where the story ultimately leads (see the kiss in 21.7), at this point in the narrative, Joseph’s labeling of Aseneth as ἀλλότριος seems to negate any possibility that she can be his wife. After all, ἀλλότριος is the very kind of woman Joseph must avoid (8.5).

²⁴ Rees Conrad Douglas writes, ‘The combination of similar characteristics [of Aseneth and Joseph] and radical antitheses emphasizes the Gentile-Jewish boundary separating Aseneth and Joseph’ (‘Liminality and Conversion’, p. 35). See also Lipsett: ‘If kisses mark kinship, then refused kisses sharpen boundaries’ (Desiring Conversion, p. 104).
Aseneth’s Soliloquies (11–13)

After Joseph leaves, Aseneth begins the process of turning from her former way of life by discarding her idols, donning sackcloth and ashes, and fasting (9.1–10.17). Later, her conversion is recognized and completed in the encounter with the man from heaven (chs. 14–17).25 Most of chs. 11–13 consist of long soliloquizing prayers by Aseneth that provide crucial interpretations of the events of her conversion. In 12.9–11, embedded within the course of these prayers, Aseneth proclaims the following.

For behold, the wild old lion persecutes me, because he is (the) father of the gods of the Egyptians, and his children (τέκνα) are the gods of the idol maniacs (εἰδωλομανῶν). And I have come to hate them, because they are the lion’s children, and have thrown all of them from me and destroyed them. And the lion their father furiously persecutes me, but you, Lord, rescue me from his hands, and from his mouth deliver me, lest he carry me off like a lion . . . .26

The lion clearly represents the devil, as scholars widely acknowledge.27 Aseneth, then, recognizes two major competing lineages on the cosmic level. On the one hand, God stands as the metaphorical father of the sons of God, with Joseph being the prototypical son of God in the story so far. On the other hand, the devil stands as the father of the gods of the Egyptians, and the

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26 The passage contains some text-critical problems (Burchard, OTP 2:221 n. c2; Burchard, Joseph und Aseneth, pp. 160–61). The general sense of the passage, however, is clear.

27 Sänger, Antikes Judentum und die Mysterien, p. 177; Burchard, OTP 2:221 n. c2; Chesnutt, From Death to Life, p. 237 n. 74; Martin Vogel, ‘Einführung in die Schrift’, in Joseph und Aseneth, ed. Eckart Reinmuth, Sapere 15 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2009), p. 31. See, for instance, 1 Pet. 5.8; Mk. 4.15. The connection to the devil is explicit in the shorter text (12.9).
Egyptians who worship these gods thus align themselves with this family tree. The contrast between the fatherhoods of God and of the devil are stronger because an extended comparison of God as a father and Aseneth as a child (12.8) comes immediately before 12.9–11. Aseneth’s conversion, then, has cosmic dimensions, as she has clearly distanced herself from the father of the gods of the Egyptians through her destruction of her idols but has not yet been incorporated into the family of God.

Within the context of Aseneth’s soliloquies, she expresses her distance from the family of the devil by describing herself as an orphan (11.3–5, 12–13, 16; 12.5, 12–13; 13.1–2). Aseneth’s first reference to her orphaned status comes at the beginning of her first soliloquy (11.3–5):

What shall I do, miserable (that I am), or where shall I go; with whom shall I take refuge, or what shall I speak, I the virgin and an orphan and desolate and abandoned and hated? All people have come to hate me, and on top of those my father and my mother, because I, too, have come to hate their gods and have destroyed them . . . And therefore my father and my mother and my whole family have come to hate me and said, ‘Aseneth is not our daughter because she destroyed our gods’.

Although these words specifically envision Aseneth’s separation from her biological parents, the cosmic view in 12.9–11 casts her family in a different light. Her father is a pagan priest and has presumably provided the idols that Aseneth formerly worshipped (2.3). As a result, in view of 12.9–11, he and the rest of the family are representatives of the family tree of the lion. Indeed, the motivations of the devil and of Aseneth’s family align with each other. The devil presumably acts because Aseneth destroys the gods of the Egyptians, the devil’s children (12.9). Similarly,

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28 Jos. Asen. 12.8 reads, ‘For (just) as a little child who is afraid flees to his father, and the father, stretching out his hands, snatches him off the ground . . . and the child clasps his hands around his father’s neck . . . and rests at his father’s breast, the father, however, smiles at the confusion of his childish mind, likewise you too, Lord, stretch out your hands upon me as a child-loving father, and snatch me off the earth’.

29 Aseneth’s father may at times sound like a worshipper of God (e.g., 3.3), but he continues to be an Egyptian priest, which remains a problem.
Aseneth’s parents’ conceived actions in disowning Aseneth stem from their anger at her destruction of the idols of these same gods (11.4, 5; 12.12).

Aseneth’s parents’ imagined rejection of her parallels the imagined persecution (καταδιώκω) of the devil in 12.9, 10. Aseneth refers to herself as being in the paws and mouth of the lion in 12.11. The story does not narrate the devil’s persecution of Aseneth, and Aseneth clearly is not in the paws or mouth of the lion in any literal sense. Instead, the references to the lion’s persecution as well as the references to Aseneth’s abandonment by her family rhetorically indicate the distance that she has created between herself and the family tree of the devil.

Although her family does not disown her on the level of the story, Aseneth recognizes both the possible estrangement from them that might occur and the division from them on the cosmic level. Aseneth, once firmly aligned with the devil’s family (2.3), now stands in a liminal space outside of that family and the larger family of the devil with which Aseneth’s biological family is associated.

In addition to distancing Aseneth rhetorically from the cosmic family of the devil—which is opposed to God and the family of God—Aseneth’s words indicating estrangement from her family also foreshadow and even help to effect her inclusion into the family of God. Her words

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30 The contrast between Aseneth’s biological father Pentephres and soon-to-be cosmic father, God, occurs explicitly in 12.15: ‘For behold, all the gifts of my father Pentephres, which he gave me as an inheritance, are transient and obscure, but the gifts of your inheritance, Lord, are incorruptible and eternal’.

The enmity of Pharaoh’s son in chs. 22–29 does not appear to be in view in the references to persecution in 12.9–10. After all, this persecution clearly comes in the context of Aseneth’s conversion and is not immediately related to her marital status, which is the circumstance that drives Pharaoh’s son’s actions in chs. 22–29.

do this in two primary ways. First, Aseneth’s words parallel the words of Israel’s Scriptures. Rossi Kraemer in particular observes how Aseneth’s soliloquies draw deeply upon the language of the Psalms and Isaiah. For instance, in 11.3 she cries out that she is ‘an orphan and desolate and abandoned (ἐγκαταλελειμμένη) and hated (μεμισημένη)’. By claiming to be an orphan, Aseneth’s speech establishes her in the categories of those who are protected by the Lord (Pss. 9.35 [10.14]; 145.9 [146.9]). The estrangement from her family that she envisions corresponds to Ps. 26.10 [27.10]: ‘my father and my mother abandoned (ἐγκατέλιπόν) me, but the Lord accepted me (προσελάβετό με).’ In 11.13, which closely parallels 12.13, Aseneth describes God as the ‘protector’ (ὑπερασπιστής) and ‘helper’ (βοηθός), both of which terms commonly appear in the Psalms, sometimes even together. Aseneth’s speeches, then, portray her as mirroring the Jewish speakers of the Psalms in a way that invites the audience to imagine her as belonging to the people of Israel. Moreover, by placing herself in the category of people protected by God and referring to God’s protection and help, Aseneth’s words invite God to save her in her distress.

32 Of course, in the imagined time recounted in the book of Genesis (i.e., the setting of Joseph and Aseneth), speaking of the Psalms and Isaiah is anachronistic, but these books are familiar to the audience of Joseph and Aseneth.


34 Translations of the LXX are the author’s. For the Psalms connection, see Burchard, OTP 2:218 n. o. A further conceptual, although not a lexical link with Ps. 26.10 [27.10], may appear in Jos. Asen. 12.8, where Aseneth envisions God as father ‘taking up’ (ἀρπάζω) a child.

35 ‘Protector’ (ὑπερασπιστής) appears in Pss. 17.3, 31, 36 [18.2, 30, 35]; 19.2 [20.1]; 27.7, 8 [28.7, 8]; 30.3, 5 [31.2, 4]; 32.20 [33.20]; 36.39 [37.39]; 39.18 [40.17]; 58.12 [59.11]; 70.3 [71.3]; 83.10 [84.9]; 113.17–19 [115.9–11]; 143.2 [144.2]. ‘Helper’ (βοηθός) is found in Pss. 17.3 [18.2]; 27.7 [28.7]; 32.20 [33.20]; 39.18 [40.17]; 113.17–19 [115.9–11]. The root of ‘persecuted’ (διώκω), which also appears in Jos. Asen. 11.13, 12.9, 10 commonly appears in Psalms as well, e.g., Pss. 7.6 [5] 70.11 [71.11]; see also 17.38 [18.37].
Furthermore, the specific combination of words in Jos. Asen. 11.3 ‘abandoned and hated’ (ἐγκαταλελειμμένη καὶ μεμισημένη) is found in only one place in the LXX: Isa. 60.15. Even more, the words in Isa. 60.15 match the gender of Jos. Asen. 11.3. In Isa. 60.15, Zion (personified as a woman) has been ‘abandoned and hated’, but the prophet envisions her restoration. By comparing her situation to that of the soon-to-be-restored Zion, Aseneth’s words thus rhetorically invite God to act in the same salvific manner toward her. Therefore, the soliloquies rhetorically place Aseneth parallel to the psalmists and to Lady Zion in a way that foreshadows and facilitates her coming inclusion into the family of God.

The second way that Aseneth’s prayers referring to her orphanhood foreshadow and even help to effect her transition into the family of God is related to the first. One of the strongest allusions to the Psalter in the soliloquies comes in 11.13: ‘Perhaps he will see this desolation of mine and have compassion on me, or see my orphanage (ὀρφανία) and protect me, because he is the father of the orphans (ὁ πατήρ τῶν ὀρφανῶν), and a protector (ὑπερασπιστής) of the persecuted, and of the afflicted a helper (βοηθός)’. In addition to the lexical connections of ὑπερασπιστής and βοηθός to the Psalter noted above, Aseneth’s words strongly allude to Ps. 67.5–6 [68.4–5]: ‘[God’s enemies] shall be troubled before the one who is the father of orphans (τοῦ πατρὸς τῶν ὀρφανῶν) and judge of widows’. The phrase ‘father of the orphans’ appears nowhere else in the Septuagint. This verse thus explicitly links the motif of Aseneth’s status as orphan

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36 See Kraemer’s discussion of the daughter Zion and daughter Jerusalem traditions (When Aseneth Met Joseph, pp. 27–30).

37 Note that, in addition to matching the wording of Isa. 60.15, Jos. Asen. 11.3 matches the gender.

38 Interestingly, the same psalm has a reference to envoys coming from Egypt (67.32 [68.31]) and contains a section that could be taken to echo the angel’s visit in Jos. Asen. 14.1; 18.9 (Ps. 67.34 [68.33]). Such connections are difficult to establish, though. The closest conceptual parallel to Jos. Asen. 11.13 besides Ps. 67.6 [68.5] is Sir. 4.10, ‘Be a father to orphans (γίνοι ὀρφανοῖς ὡς πατήρ), and be like a husband to their mother; you will then be like a son of the Most High, and he will love you more than does your mother’ (NRSV).
with her eventual assimilation as a daughter of God into the holy lineage, almost as a cause and effect. Because Aseneth is an orphan, she will not merely be ‘accepted’ (προσλαμβάνω) by the Lord (along the lines of Ps. 26.10 [27.10]), but the Lord will in fact become her father. In the wider cosmic context, Aseneth’s estrangement from the family of the devil and (in her imagination) from her own family, then, places herself under the fatherhood of God. The repetition of the identification of God as the father of orphans in 12.13 then underscores how important the allusion is within the narrative. Despite the persecution that she receives, Aseneth clings to the hope that is offered by God’s identity as father.

In summary, in the soliloquies of Jos. Asen. 11–13, Aseneth repeatedly identifies herself as the orphan abandoned by her family. The motif thus opens up space for God to be Aseneth’s father by rhetorically distancing her from her biological family and the cosmic family of the devil with which her family is associated. The allusions to the Psalms and Isaiah serve to connect her to the figures that God protects and restores. Further, the double references to Ps. 67.6 [68.5] in 11.13 and 12.13 invite God to be Aseneth’s father, just as God is the father of Joseph (12.13–14).

Aseneth’s Incorporation into the Family of God (14–21)

Although the narrative has not yet identified God as Aseneth’s father in chs. 11–13, the subsequent chapters relate her full assimilation into the family of God. The first confirmation of Aseneth’s new status comes in chs. 14–17 with the visit of the man from heaven.39 This man informs Aseneth that her prayers have been heard (15.2–3), thus connecting the events of the

39 In the soliloquies, Aseneth comes close to identifying God as her father but never quite does. She identifies God as a father in 11.13 and 12.13–15. Indeed, in 12.15 she contrasts the inheritance of her father Pentephres with the inheritance of God. Yet, these references do not refer to God as Aseneth’s father specifically.
vision specifically to Aseneth’s words and actions in chs. 9–13. The description of Metanoia, who is a daughter of God (15.7), implies that Aseneth can be transformed into the daughter of God (21.4). Like Aseneth, Metanoia is very beautiful (15.6), devoted to prayer (15.7), and a virgin (15.8). By seeing the parallels between Aseneth and Metanoia, daughter of God, the audience can pick up hints that God is accepting Aseneth as a daughter, too.

A fuller confirmation occurs after Aseneth eats the angelic honeycomb (16.15), food that is specifically called the food of the ‘sons of the Most High’ (οἱ υἱοί τοῦ ὑψίστου; 16.14). The angel then relates that she ‘shall be like a walled mother-city (μητρόπολις) of all who take refuge with the name of the Lord God’ (16.16). Along the same lines, Joseph later declares to Aseneth that ‘the sons of the living God will dwell in your City of Refuge’ (19.8). The text leaves unspecified the kind of protection that Aseneth offers those who seek refuge. She can intercede for such people like Metanoia (15.7), as well as give ethical instruction (as in 28.9–14). The main way that the author intends for Aseneth to provide refuge, however, is likely through her

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41 Along the same lines, Metanoia is the sister of the heavenly figure (15.8). Joseph is similar to the heavenly figure (see 15.9; Loader, ‘The Strange Woman’, p. 226; John J. Collins, Between Athens and Jerusalem: Jewish Identity in the Hellenistic Diaspora, 2nd ed., Biblical Resource Series [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000], pp. 235–36). The shared sibling status of Metanoia and the heavenly figure—with both being children of God—parallels the shared (metaphorical) sibling status of Aseneth and Joseph, which was denied in 8.1–5. Both Aseneth and Joseph will, however, be recognized as children of God.

42 The portrayal of Aseneth as a city connects back to the angel’s identification of her as a ‘City of Refuge’ (15.7), and it recalls the prayer of Aseneth in which she used language taken from personified Zion passages in Isaiah (Jos. Asen. 11.3). Aseneth specifically will be a refuge to proselytes. The motif of proselytes needing a place of refuge appeared often in Aseneth’s prayers for herself (e.g., 11.3, 11), and it can be found in Philo as well (Spec. 1.52; see also 1.309). Proselytes can now find refuge in Aseneth, under her wings (15.7; see Ps. 90.4 [91.4]; Ruth 2.12).

example as a model proselyte and protector to future proselytes. Proselytes can look to Aseneth and take courage that they too can become sons and daughters of God.

The ultimate recognition of Aseneth’s incorporation into the family of God comes during her wedding to Joseph. Pharaoh declares in 21.4–5 that ‘justly the Lord, the God of Joseph, has chosen you [Aseneth] as a bride for Joseph, because he is the firstborn son of God. And you shall be called a daughter of the Most High and a bride of Joseph from now on and for ever.’ Aseneth and Joseph then share a kiss in 21.7 that the story has already indicated is a boundary marker separating Jews from non-Jews (8.1–7). Aseneth then bears Manasseh and Ephraim to Joseph, both of whom become progenitors of full tribes of Israel. In this way, Aseneth becomes a physical mother assimilated into the lineage of the Israelites, the sons of God. Moreover, her identification as a mother-city indicates that she is a mother figure to future proselytes. As both a daughter of God and a mother of sons of God, she has become a vital link in the genealogy of Israel.

In summary, then, the narrative at first seems to adopt a strongly genealogically conceived notion of the family of God by presenting the prototypical son of God, Joseph, as insurmountably separated from the Egyptian daughter of a pagan priest. The account of Aseneth’s conversion, however, indicates that the boundary between the family of God and the family of the devil is permeable in a way that Jos. Asen. 1.1–8.8a has not suggested. Within the account of Aseneth’s conversion, the language of her orphaned status plays a central role in

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marking her transition from being firmly within the metaphorical lineage of the devil to being in the lineage of God. On the one hand, the language of orphanhood rhetorically distances Aseneth from her natural family and—by extension—from the cosmic family of the devil. On the other hand, Aseneth’s claims to be an orphan invite God to become her father in two primary ways. First, her prayers take up the language of the Psalms and Isaiah in a way that rhetorically inserts her into the story of Israel and connects her to figures whom God protects. Second, the allusion to Ps. 67.6 [68.5] in 11.13 and 12.13, in which Aseneth recognizes God as the father of orphans, invites God to be her father. If God is the father of orphans, and Aseneth is an orphan, then God must be her father. The subsequent chapters make clear that God has in fact heard Aseneth’s prayers and that she is merged fully into the family tree of God. Indeed, as a model proselyte, she becomes a mother figure to all those who imitate her actions and embrace Judaism. Even more, she becomes the physical mother of Ephraim and Manasseh, the progenitors of two tribes of Israel. Her example shows how proselytes can and should be full-fledged members of the people of God.

**Joseph and Aseneth 22–29**

Chapters 22–29 confirm the message of chs. 1–21 by underscoring Aseneth’s secure place among the children of God. In Jos. Asen. 22, the patriarch Jacob accepts Aseneth as his daughter-in-law (22.8), and the narrative makes clear that Jacob is like a father to Aseneth (22.3, 9). Pharaoh’s son, however, refuses to accept Aseneth’s incorporation into Israel and desires to make her his wife by force (23.4). Based on 12.9–11, the audience recognizes Pharaoh’s son as a representative of the family of the devil. Indeed, his desire to kill his father Pharaoh and his promise to provide inheritances to his allies represent his attempts to establish a family line that
stands opposed to Joseph’s family. He wants to be a father figure in the lineage of the devil in a way that mirrors Aseneth’s status as a mother figure in the family of God. All the plans of Pharaoh’s son fail, however. Rather than successfully establishing himself as an alternative father figure to Joseph, he dies in shame, presumably without any offspring (29.7). Aseneth’s position within the family of Joseph—and not the alternative family that Pharaoh’s son tries to establish—is resoundingly confirmed. Not only does God fight for Aseneth to protect her from falling into the hands of Pharaoh’s son or dying (see 28.1), but Aseneth also exercises her role as a refuge to the sons of Bilhah and Zilpah (28.7, 10, 14–15). Because even these biological sons of Jacob take refuge in Aseneth, the narrative reaffirms her status as a mother-city of the sons of God. The sons of Bilhah and Zilpah, having aligned themselves with the alternative family that Pharaoh’s son tried to form, must seek refuge in Aseneth in a way that parallels how proselytes can find refuge in her example. Therefore, chs. 22–29 confirm Aseneth’s place in God’s family by describing the failure of the attempt to take her out of that family and by showing her value as a refuge to proselytes.

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[45] Pharaoh’s son speaks of killing his father in 24.14 and then makes a failed attempt in 25.1–4. He offers ‘great inheritances’ (κλήρους μεγάλους) to Simeon and Levi in 23.18 and tells Dan, Gad, Naphtali, and Asher that they will be his ‘brothers’ (ἀδελφοι) and ‘fellow heirs’ (συγκληρονόμοι) in 24.14. The hostility to Pharaoh arises because Pharaoh is ‘like a father to Joseph’ (24.12; see also 21.9 and 29.4). Indeed, Pharaoh has been supportive of Joseph’s marriage to Aseneth and even solemnized the marriage at their wedding (21.2–9). Pharaoh also speaks positively of the Jewish God and pronounces blessings in this God’s name (21.3–5). By killing Pharaoh, Pharaoh’s son would be ensuring that his family line is hostile toward Joseph.


JOSEPH AND ASENETH WITHIN JEWISH AND CHRISTIAN COMMUNITIES

Having argued that Joseph and Aseneth uses orphanhood and parenthood language to undermine assumptions that the boundaries of the family of God are fixed along genealogical lines, I now turn to the way that this message could have functioned in both Jewish and Christian communities. Scholars debate whether Joseph and Aseneth originated in a Jewish or Christian context. The majority opinion still seems to be that it is Jewish in origin, but the extant manuscripts show that Christians widely adopted the work. Given the fact that Joseph and Aseneth very possibly circulated in both Jewish and Christian communities, this section examines how the work could have served the theologies of both groups.

Joseph and Aseneth in a Jewish Context

Ample evidence suggests that some Jews in the time of the composition of Joseph and Aseneth denied the possibility of—or at least were highly suspicious of—conversion because they held to a purely genealogical conception of what it means to be Jewish. For instance, Josephus writes

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that some opposition to Herod stemmed from the fact that he was a native Idumaean, not a Judaean (A. J. 14.403). Indeed, Antigonus equates being an Idumaean with being a ‘half Judaean’ (ἡμιιουδαίος). The fact that Nicolas of Damascus, either on his own or at the request of Herod, could falsify Herod’s ancestry by saying that he was descended from the Judaeans of the golah may indicate that more Judaeans than just Antigonus found Herod’s Idumaean ancestry problematic.\footnote{Matthew Thiessen, \textit{Contesting Conversion: Genealogy, Circumcision, and Identity in Ancient Judaism and Christianity} (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), p. 98. Thiessen also presents the following evidence for potential resistance to Herod on the basis of his ancestry: the reference to God’s coming judgment on a foreign king in \textit{Ps. Sol.} 17 and the listing of Idumaeans among the nations from which the people of Israel must separate in 1 Esd. 8.66 (Thiessen, \textit{Contesting Conversion}, pp. 94–101).}

Similarly, Herod’s grandson, Agrippa I, faced criticism for entering into the temple grounds because he was not native born (ἐγγενής; Josephus, A. J. 19.332–34).\footnote{See the discussion in Thiessen, \textit{Contesting Conversion}, pp. 103–6. The inscriptions on the temple mount similarly warned that no foreigner (ἀλλιγενής) could enter into the temple grounds (Thiessen, \textit{Contesting Conversion}, p. 105).}

\textit{Jubilees} also provides evidence for resistance to conversion among some Judaeans. In addition to deflating the status of those outside the chosen line in the genealogies, \textit{Jubilees} seems to betray a theology that holds no possibility for conversion at all. The author writes, ‘Anyone who is born whose own flesh is not circumcised on the eighth day is not from the sons of the covenant which the LORD made for Abraham since (he is) from the children of destruction. . . . And there is therefore no sign upon him so that he might belong to the LORD because (he is destined) to be destroyed and annihilated from the earth’ (15.26).\footnote{The English text is from O. S. Wintermute, \textit{OTP} 2:35–142.} Such people who do not circumcise their sons are the ‘sons of Beliar’ (15.33).\footnote{The \textit{Animal Apocalypse} (1 En. 85–90) similarly imagines an ‘unbridgeable genealogical gap between Jews and all other peoples’ (Thiessen, \textit{Contesting Conversion}, pp. 89–94, quote from p. 89).} Since proselytes would presumably not

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\footnote{centuries CE: \textit{When Aseneth Met Joseph}, pp. 225–44. See also the history of scholarship in Standhartinger, ‘Recent Scholarship’, pp. 371–74.}
\end{footnotesize}
have been circumcised on the eighth day, Jubilees seems to indicate that their eternal destiny has been decided. They are ‘sons of Beliar’ and ‘children of destruction’. Jubilees also promotes a ban on intermarriage with Gentile in a way analogous to Ezra-Nehemiah. Immediately after the retelling of the slaughter of the Shechemites because of the rape of Dinah, Jubilees issues an injunction against intermarriage, giving death as the penalty (30.7–15). The genealogical lines of Jews and non-Jews are to remain eternally distinct with no possibility of admixture. Although Jubilees does not directly address the issue of conversion, it provides strong evidence that some communities rejected proselytes completely.

Diaspora communities may have been more welcoming of proselytes than those in Judaea proper, but even in the diaspora some proselytes may never have fully been incorporated into some Jewish communities. A number of Greco-Roman inscriptions identify people as proselytes. Shaye Cohen questions why they continued to be identified as proselytes if they were fully accepted into the Jewish community. He concludes, ‘The membership status of the proselyte was anomalous, and the proselyte felt obligated (was obligated?) to call attention to this fact’. Moreover, Philo frequently praises the trials that proselytes must undergo for their decision to convert (e.g., Spec. 1.51–52, 308–309), yet Chesnutt observes, ‘Philo’s repeated insistence on the parity of the proselyte with the native Jews and the obligation of the latter to


56 See Christine Elizabeth Hayes, Gentile Impurities and Jewish Identities: Intermarriage and Conversion from the Bible to the Talmud (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), pp. 73–81. Jubilees does not seem to condemn Joseph’s marriage to the daughter of Potiphar, the priest of Heliopolis (40.10).


honor and befriend the convert betrays a situation in which such high esteem did not always prevail’.  

Proselytes thus occupied an uncertain position in ancient Jewish communities. On the one hand, many texts speak highly of proselytes. On the other hand, the texts indicate continued ambivalence and even hostility toward conversion. A strongly genealogically conceived understanding of Judaism precluded the possibility for conversion because parentage cannot be changed. While many Jews may not have concluded with *Jubilees* that Gentiles were ‘sons of Beliar’, they might very well have had doubts whether Gentiles could fully become part of the chosen line. In summary, even though many Jewish communities accepted gentile proselytes, such a practice was not universal. If Joseph and Aseneth were composed in a Jewish community, it enters into this debate by showing how God fully accepts gentile converts into the family alongside native Israelites.

**Joseph and Aseneth in a Christian Context**

Joseph and Aseneth’s message about conversion and the place of non-Jews in the family of God also found a voice in Christian communities. Although many Christian communities accepted gentile converts early on, early Christian leaders struggled to justify this practice theologically (see, for example, Acts 10.45; 11.1–8; 13.46–48; Gal. 3.14; Eph. 3.6; Col. 3.11). According to Acts 15, early leaders of the church even had to meet in Jerusalem to discuss the place of uncircumcised gentile proselytes. The apostle Paul wrestles with the concept of a genealogically closed people of God and uses ‘adoption’ (νήπησία) as a central metaphor when writing of the

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59 Chesnutt, *From Death to Life*, p. 171. Even Philo at one point seems to imply the inferiority of those who are not native-born Hebrews, even those who have a Hebrew father and Egyptian mother and follow the customs of the Hebrews (Mos. 1.147). He writes that those joining Hebrews are as an illegitimate (νήπησία) crowd who are with a legitimate crowd (γνησίος).
position of gentiles in the people of God (Gal. 4.5; Rom. 8.15, 23; 9.4; see also Eph. 1.5). In the crucially important chapters of Romans 8–9, Paul recognizes a genealogical component to Israel’s identity, as he uses the term ‘kinsmen’ (συγγενῶν) and ‘according to the flesh’ (κατὰ σάρκα) in 9.3. At the same time, he argues that both Jews (9.4) and gentiles (8.15, 23; see 1.13) have received adoption. Such a juxtaposition of adoption language in 8.15, 23 and 9.4 indicates that Paul is intensely aware in Rom. 8–9 of the tension between the privileges of Israel as an ethnic entity and the adopted status of believing gentiles. Indeed, as Paul’s argument in Rom 9 unfolds, Paul makes clear that ethnic descent is not so determinative as to exclude gentiles from being part of God’s family (e.g., 9.6–8, 23–26). Neither Paul nor the author of Joseph and Aseneth drops the language of children of God or adopts a universalistic model of the fatherhood of God/the gods, as some Greco-Roman philosophical systems advocated (e.g., Plato, Resp. 6.509b; Hymn of Cleanthes; Epictetus, Diatr. 1.9.4; see also Acts 17.28). At the same time, neither author can adopt a purely genealogical conception of the family of God that would exclude gentiles; they must find ways to express the incorporation of gentiles into this family.

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62 Brendan Byrne notes that the fact that υἱοθεσία appears first in the list of Israel’s privileges in 9.4–5 indicates that it is ‘the central privilege as far as Paul is concerned’ (Romans, SP 6 [Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1996], p. 285).

63 Gottlob Schrenk and Gottfried Quell, ‘πατήρ’, TDNT 5:954–57; James D. G. Dunn, Romans 1–8, WBC 38A (Waco, TX: Word, 1988), p. 451. While some Jewish writers followed this trend (especially Philo), others retained God as the father of Israel alone (4 Ezra 6.58; see also 3 Macc 7.6). For Philo, see Spec. 1.96; Ebr. 30; Mos. 2.134. See also Schrenk and Quell, ‘πατήρ’, TDNT 5:954–57.
In summary, the controversies in early Christian literature indicate that not all Christian communities were equally receptive to gentile converts. Nevertheless, as the Christian movement grew, the percentage of gentiles in its midst increased substantially. Whether or not Joseph and Aseneth originated in a Christian community, the work unsurprisingly came to find an audience among Christians because it compellingly supported their practice of accepting gentile converts.

CONCLUSION
This essay has examined the motif of Aseneth’s abandonment by her family in light of the parenthood imagery that appears throughout Joseph and Aseneth. Aseneth’s parents do not literally disown her, as her words suggest. Instead, the motif of Aseneth’s being orphaned rhetorically emphasizes how Aseneth metaphorically leaves one family tree—the impure, idolatrous one headed by the devil. Her imagined estrangement from her biological family corresponds to an actual estrangement from the family of the devil with which her biological family is affiliated. Then, through the rich resonances with the Psalms and the figure of Zion in Isaiah, her words foreshadow her incorporation into the lineage of Israel as a daughter of God and mother figure to sons of God. The author stresses Aseneth’s change of lineage in order to argue that the boundaries of the family of God are in fact more porous than is suggested by those who closely link physical pedigree and status before God. Aseneth’s conversion thus undermines the strong emphasis on pedigree and its deterministic role that is present in Jos. Asen. 1.1–8.8a, as well as in certain communities in the time when Joseph and Aseneth was composed. In this way, the work participates in conversations over religious identity and the place of proselytes in Jewish and Christian communities.