

The Conversion of Aseneth in a Christian Context

A few biblical verses about Joseph and his Egyptian wife, Aseneth, provide the basis for a love story which describes how Aseneth, a beautiful virgin, devoted to idol worship, falls in love with Joseph. But Joseph does not want to kiss her because "it is not fitting for a man who worships God, who blesses with his mouth the living God, and eats the blessed bread of life, and drinks a blessed cup of immortality, and anoints himself with blessed ointment of incorruptibility, to kiss a strange woman who blesses with her mouth dead and dumb idols". Therefore Asenath decides to convert to God. She smashes her idols and for an entire week she repents, confessing her idolatrous sins and praying for forgiveness. On the eighth day, a divine man of God appears to her. He instructs her to take off her mourning clothes, to wash her face and hands and to put on new clothes. He tells her that after she has eaten the blessed bread of life and drunk a blessed cup of immortality and been anointed with the blessed ointment of incorruptibility, she will be given to Joseph as a bride forever after. While she is setting a table for him, he

asks for a honeycomb, and she miraculously finds one in her storehouse. He breaks off a small piece, eats from it himself, and puts the remaining portion into Aseneth's mouth.

The story goes on to describe the transformation of Aseneth to the "city of refuge", the signing of a form like a cross on the comb and the thousands of bees springing out of the honeycomb, surrounding Aseneth, and building an identical new comb on her lips. The story ends with the burning of the first honeycomb while much fragrance fills the chamber.

It is virtually undisputed that Aseneth's conversion, with the description of the "bread of life", the "cup of immortality" and the "ointment of incorruptibility" and its symbolical honeycomb episode, constitutes the most crucial scene for uncovering the theological identity of this composition.

It is precisely this scene which gave rise to the nineteenth century view that it is a Christian work. Towards the second half of the 20th century a new consensus situated *Joseph & Aseneth* within "Jewish Hellenistic literature" and the conversion of

Aseneth is understood as Jewish Diaspora propaganda, aimed at persuading non-Jews to convert to Judaism. There are, however, several objections that this commonly-held opinion must overcome. It has, for example, to explain why such an apparently 'lawful' Jewish work makes no reference to dietary laws to impurity and purification laws or to any other specific aspect of the Law. But the main problem with such an understanding is that it can not provide sufficient explanation for the symbolical scene of the honeycomb as a whole.

In contrast to this commonly-held opinion, I suggest that the scene of Aseneth's conversion should be understood in a Christian context, namely, Aseneth was converted not to Judaism but to Christianity. At the center of this allegorical conversion story stands the Eucharist, the main sacrament in the Christian initiation cult, which is expressed in the "bread of life" and the "cup of immortality" and is illustrated by the honeycomb.

Scholars agree that the honeycomb's description is based on the biblical Manna fed to the Israelites in the desert. Both are seen as a wondrous white bread, which originates in heaven, food of the angels and as sweet as honey. But in spite of these similarities, the honeycomb in *Joseph and Aseneth* has a special and unique feature. This honeycomb is a "bread of life" which bestows immortality: whoever eats it will not die and will live forever. This idea of a manna which grants immortality has no parallel in any Jewish sources.

This aspect connects the honeycomb in *Joseph and Aseneth* to parallel ideas in the Hellenistic world which have been documented and fully analyzed by Ross Shepard Kraemer in her book: 'When Aseneth met Joseph'. Thus, in the writings of Porphyrius the third century Neoplatonist, honey is the food of gods which grants life and conveys immortality. These similarities were one of the arguments which led Kraemer to the conclusion that *Joseph and Aseneth* was composed by a Jew or a

Christian, she couldn't decide, not earlier than the third century, and might have originated in a Neoplatonist environment.

I shall go further than Kraemer by attempting to show that Aseneth's conversion story could be composed **only** by a Christian author whose aim was to describe, by symbolical means, the process and practices of the Christian initiation rites.

I. The honeycomb and the meal with the bread and the wine symbolize the Eucharist:

1. Christian tradition identifies manna, the bread from heaven, with the body of Jesus and as a symbol of the Eucharist.

According to John 6, Jesus is "the bread of life," "which comes down from heaven and gives life to the world". Anyone who eats this bread will not die and will live for ever. Likewise Paul, in the first letter to the Corinthians (10:1-4), connects the miracle of the manna with the last supper, and in Revelation (2:17), Jesus promises the "hidden manna" which might allude to the food at the heavenly banquet - a reflection of the Eucharist.

2. The terms "bread of life" and "a cup of immortality" were the usual terms for the Eucharist. Ignatius of Antioch said that the Eucharistic Bread is "a medicine that brings immortality, an antidote that allows us not to die but to live at all times in Jesus Christ" and Irenaeus says that "Our bodies receiving the Eucharist are no more corruptible, having the hope of eternal resurrection".

3. The mentioning of the "bread of life" before the "cup of immortality" in our story is compatible with the main version of the Eucharist, according to which the blessing over the bread precedes the blessing over the wine. This order is based on the bread and wine that Melkizedek offered to Abraham which became the prototype of the Eucharist .

4. Honey was part of the Eucharistic liturgy of the ancient Church. Hippolytus records that with the bread and the wine, sacraments of the body of Christ, the bishop blessed at Mass "milk and Honey mingled together" to point to the fulfillment of the promises about the land in which will stream milk and honey."

II. The liturgical aspects of the meal reflect the Eucharist

But it is the liturgical aspects of the scene which are the main support for my claim.

According to Christian sources, the liturgy of the Eucharist is comprised of four actions: The first act is the offertio (offertory) when the bread and wine are 'taken' and placed on the table together.

The second is a prayer of thanksgiving pronounced by the president over the bread and the wine.

The third act is the fraction when the bread is broken

And the fourth action is the communion, the *koinwni/a* when the consecrated elements, the bread and the wine are distributed together at the communion of the faithful.

These four stages can be clearly identified in our story.

After Aseneth found the honeycomb she "put it on the table which she had prepared before him", exactly like in the offertory.

This act is based on Psalm twenty three, five (23: 5) : "Thou hast prepared a table before me" which was interpreted by the Fathers of the Church as a figure of the Eucharistic banquet. Cyrillos of Jerusalem says in reference to this verse: "Before your coming, the demons prepared for men filthy tables, full of diabolic powers. But when you came, O Lord, you prepared a table before me, which is none other than the sacramental and spiritual table which God has prepared for us".

Ambrosius bishop Milan put this same verse on the lips of the newly baptized, coming before the altar to assist at Mass for the first time: "He comes near, and seeing the holy altar made ready, he cries out: "Thou hast prepared a table before me."

After the table was prepared by Aseneth, the man of God gives a blessing of thanksgiving (16:7-8): He stretches out his hand and holds fast Aseneth's head, and says: Blessed are you,.

Aseneth, because the ineffable things of God have been revealed to you, and blessed are those who attach themselves to God in repentance because they eat from this honeycomb. Because this

honey was made by bees of Paradise and the angels of God eat from it and those who eat from it will not die forever".

Then comes the third act when the man of God stretched his right hand and broke a small portion off the comb.(16:15).

Breaking the bread (a)po/klasij, kla/sij) is a symbol of eating Christ's body, and it became the liturgical term given to this service of the Eucharist. It is based on Jesus's instructions in the Last Supper, and it is attested in many early Christian writings.

Thus in the Didache it is said: "On the Lord's own day, when you gather together, break bread and hold Eucharist".

And last comes the communion, when: "The man of God himself ate and what was left he put with his hand in Aseneth's mouth and he said to her "eat" and she ate."

As in our story, it is typical of the Eucharist ceremonies that the one who holds the sacrament has to eat from the broken part himself, and to command the participants "to eat" in the same manner.

Like the sacrament of the Eucharist, the eating from the honeycomb in Joseph and Aseneth is seen as a mystery and

likewise it has eschatological aspects. It symbolizes the coming Paradise and the beginning of the Messianic era, and it might allude to the heavenly Messianic banquet which will take place, according to Christian sources, at the beginning of the new world at the end of times.

And finally, the fact that this meal takes place on Sunday of the twenty fifth of April, thus, might be at Easter, ties in very well with my interpretation.

III. The connection of the ointment to the Eucharist

One of the main arguments of scholars against the Eucharistic interpretation of this meal is the claim that there is no connection between the "ointment of incorruptibility" and the meal formula. In my opinion the ointment blessing is combined very well in this Eucharistic liturgical scheme.

We have some sources which attest to the existence of a blessing over ointment as the third part of the blessing over the bread and the cup in the Eucharist:

In a fragment of the Coptic version of the Didache 10:8 which was found at Oxyrhynchus in Egypt, dated to the fourth or fifth

century, there is a passage, which has no parallel in the Greek, and which includes a blessing to be said over the ointment (muron), along with those over the bread and cup.

Scholars are divided as to whether this blessing was included in the older Greek version of the Didache, and if the Coptic term which it uses, alludes indeed to ointment. But for us, the most important thing is that it was so understood by the author (or editor) of the seventh book of the Constitutiones Apostolorum, a reworking of the Greek Didache, which includes this blessing, and here it is clearly a blessing over the ointment.

The blessing over the ointment is also attested by Cyprianus, by the Egyptian Euchologium of Serapion¹ and by Pseudo-Dionysius, and according to The Apostolical Traditions of Hyppolitus, it had to be said in the same manner as the blessing over the bread and the cup.

This connection between the ointment and the Eucharist is expressed in the habit of introducing a lamp into the meals of the community, as described in The Apostolical Traditions of Hippolytus. There it is called : lux incorruptibilis "incorruptible

light" – exactly the same adjective used to describe the ointment in our story.

IV The acts Aseneth performs before

Also, the acts which Aseneth performs before partaking of the Eucharist are compatible with the liturgy and practices of Christian initiation rites.

After her decision to convert, she mourns for seven days, during which she fasts and prays. And on the eighth day she rises on her knees, turns to the east, spreads her hands out towards heaven and confesses while renouncing the Satan.

Prayer and Fasting were regular practices in the initiation rites to Christianity.

Justin Martyr says: "Those who are convinced and believe that what we say and teach is the truth, and pledge themselves to be able to live accordingly, are taught in prayer and fasting to ask God to forgive their past sins, while we pray and fast with them."

Fasting was a common practice to gain purification and remission of sins, especially those of idolatry, and it was seen as means of renouncing the Satan which was embodied in idol worship. Moreover, there is evidence (by Dionisius of Alexandria, the Pilgrimage of Etheria and Cyrillos of Jerusalem), of the habit of fasting for one week, as Aseneth did, before Easter, which was the pre-eminent time for partaking of the Eucharist and its antecedents.

As for the position of praying, prayers in Christianity, and especially those at fasts were, like Aseneth's, in the posture of kneeling.

Thus according to Tertullianus "At fasts and Stations, no prayer should be made without kneeling", and according to Origenes, "It should be known that bending of the knees is necessary when any one is about in supplication to confess his sins before God, that they may be forgiven and that he may be healed from them". Hegesippus relates of James the Just, that his knees

became as callous as the knees of a camel from continuous kneeling.

Similar to Aseneth, the eastward position in prayer was used in Christianity from the earliest times because the east, a)natolh/// symbolizes Christ.

St. Clement of Alexandria said that: "Prayers are made looking towards the sunrise in the East, and that because the East is the image of our spiritual nativity, and from thence the light first arises and shines out of darkness".

Praying towards the east was especially significant in the initiation rites because the East symbolizes Paradise which was open to the candidate after renouncing the Satan.

According to Cyrillos of Jerusalem, "When you have renounced Satan and broken the old pact with Hades, then the Paradise of God opens before you, the Paradise that He planted in the East from which our first father was driven out because of his disobedience. The symbol of this is that you turn from the West to the East which is the region of light."

Also, spreading the hands out is characteristic of prayer in Christianity as it symbolizes the Cross. Thus it is said in the Odes of Solomon,

"I stretch out my hands and worship the Lord. For the extension of my hands is his sign, and my expansion is the upright cross".

These liturgical steps prepared Aseneth as a model of a catechumen for the baptism which, alongside the Eucharist, constitutes the second central sacrament in the initiation rites.

V. Baptism

The question of whether baptism is mentioned in the story is disputed between scholars.

In contrast to the commonly held view, I claim that the story contains a description of Aseneth's baptism.

In Chapter 14, according to the short version, the man of God commands Aseneth to strip off her black cloth, then to wash her face and hands with "living water", to dress in a new bright - white robe (*kainh\ kai\ lampra/*)²untouched and distinguished (or

holy)¹ and to gird her waist and breast with a double girdle of her virginity.

These elements are characteristics of the Christian baptism.

Taking off the clothes in preparation for the baptismal bath was a regular step in preparation for baptism and was interpreted by various authors in a symbolical sense: "Take off the old man like a soiled garment" says Gregory of Nyssa and "Receive the tunic of incorruptibility which Christ is offering you".

Baptism in early Christianity had to be done in "living water" ^{en} u(/dati zw=nti as is seen from Didache.

But especially characteristic of the Christian baptism is the white new robe which the catechumen had to put on after being baptized.

"After Baptism", says Ambrosius, "you have received white garments, that they may be the sign that you have taken off the clothing of sin and that you have been clad in the pure garments of innocence"³. "Clothing of incorruptibility" or "shining

According to Batiffol and Philonenko's versions,¹ (a)/qikton which means: holy, sacred)

garment" are the technical expressions for Christian Baptism which signify at once purity of soul and incorruptibility of body. The clothing with white garments alludes again to the symbolism of paradise. The white garments are a symbol of the restoration of the vestment of light which was Adam and Eve's before the fall. As Gregory of Nyssa says:

"Thou hast driven us out of Paradise and called us back; Thou hast taken away the fig leaves, that garment of our misery, and clad us once more with a robe of glory"⁴.

This connection of the white garment to Paradise also explains Aseneth's double girdle of virginity, which takes the place of those Adam and Eve put on after their sin.

And finally, the words of the man of God to Aseneth after this scene that "today you will be renewed and reformed anew and you will be endowed anew with life" are compatible with the idea of Christian baptism as new life, rebirth and regeneration.

By going through fasting and praying, by participating in the two main sacraments of initiation – baptism and Eucharist,

Aseneth constitutes a model for gentiles who are called, like her, to leave behind them the world of idols, to join the Church and to share with her a spiritual and virginal way of life in Paradise.

In her transformation to the “city of refuge,” described as the heavenly Jerusalem and as Paradise and through the scene of the bees and the new honeycomb, Aseneth represents the earthly and the heavenly church of the Gentiles, which grants salvation and the promise of resurrection to its believers symbolized by the bees. But this part of the story will be interpreted in my lecture next year.

Thank you.

¹ Anton Baumstark, "Aegyptischer oder antiochenischer Liturgietypus in A K 1-7?" *OrChr* 1, 7 (1907) 388-407. *Ibid*, 395. Thus, The Apostolic Tradition of Hypolitus and the Euchologe de Serapion (Funk, II, 178, 180) know a prayer of the blessed oil which comes after the Eucharistia. **There are other references to this blessing in Cyril of Jerusalem, MC XXXIII, 1092A. The formula 'oil of the eucharistia' shows up in Cyprian**

² *lampro/j*, bright, brilliant, of white objects)Liddell and Scott, an Intermediate Greek-English Lexicon, p. 464.

³ (De Myst. 34; Botte, 118)
⁴ (XLVI, 600A)