

From Text to Context: The Social Matrix of *Joseph and Aseneth*

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The task of drawing inferences from a literary text about its social and historical context is considered passé by many. Deconstructionism has raised serious doubts about the possibility and even the desirability of the task. In a time of dramatic epistemological shifts and postmodern skepticism toward historical inquiry, is our Pseudepigrapha Group's choice of topic appropriate? Is a session entitled "*Joseph and Aseneth*: Moving from Text to Social and Historical Context" a viable and worthwhile enterprise?

I, for one, believe that it is. I remain convinced that literary texts contain encoded within them the raw materials for historical and social reconstruction. Indeed, I believe that such reconstruction is not only a justified, but an essential, part of a responsible effort to understand and appreciate a work of fiction such as *Joseph and Aseneth*.¹ This is not to say that a text can be read in only one way, or that authorial intent and historical setting are always and easily retrievable. To be sure, the data are complex, and the interpreter is always a part of the interpretation. The concrete realities behind an ancient text are, at best, *constructed* and not merely *discovered*. Conclusions about the circumstances of composition are therefore likely to be a chimera, and are certain to be provisional.

Nevertheless, neither the tentativeness of our proposals nor the unbounded multiplicity of possible interpretations so highly prized in ahistorical versions of literary theory should force us into methodological docetism. The text of *Joseph and Aseneth* provides at least some clues regarding the historical, ideological, and social location of its author and community. These clues—however sketchy and painstakingly difficult to extract and synthesize—are sufficient, in my judgment, to warrant scholarly discourse in which hypotheses are formed and tested, certain reconstructions are judged better than others because they account more fully than others for the various aspects of the text, and explanatory conclusions are drawn based on the better reconstructions. On this modest premise a responsible and profitable discussion of our topic can proceed.

¹I am persuaded by the sociology-of-knowledge emphasis that ideas should be understood in terms of the social context in which they come to expression and which they embody. See especially the landmark work by P. Berger and T. Luckmann, *The Social Construction of Reality: A Treatise in the Sociology of Knowledge* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1966). Whether the object of study is an idea, a culture, or a text, the interpreter's task is "to rescue the 'said' ... from its perishing occasions and fix it in perusable terms" (C. Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays* [New York: Basic Books, 1973] 20-21).

One other preliminary must be addressed in order to clarify the limitations and scope of this essay. For purposes of this study I assume the strong—though not unanimous—consensus on the following literary and historical matters: (1) the long text of *Joseph and Aseneth* published by C. Burchard lies closer to the original than the short version edited and defended by M. Philonenko;² (2) Greek is the original language;³ (3) the work is Jewish and evidences no Christian redaction in its earliest attainable form;⁴ (4) the provenance is most likely Egypt;⁵ (5) the date of composition lies between *circa* 100 BCE and 115 CE;⁶ and (6) the literary genre is the Hellenistic novel or romance.⁷ In assuming these working hypotheses I do not mean to take the

²See C. Burchard, *Untersuchungen zu Joseph und Aseneth: Überlieferung-Ortsbestimmung* (WUNT 8; Tübingen: Mohr, 1965) 1-90; and esp. idem, "Zum Text von 'Joseph und Aseneth,'" *JSJ* 1 (1970) 3-34. Burchard's preliminary edition of the long version, published first as "Ein vorläufiger griechischer Text von Joseph und Aseneth," *Dielheimer Blätter zum Alten Testament* 14 (1979) 2-53, and supplemented in "Verbesserungen zum vorläufigen Text von Joseph und Aseneth," *Dielheimer Blätter zum Alten Testament* 16 (1982) 37-39, is available most conveniently in an appendix in A.-M. Denis, *Concordance grecques pseudépigraphes d'Ancien Testament* (Louvain: Université Catholique de Louvain, 1987) 851-59. M. Philonenko's edition and defense of the short recension appears in the first half of his monograph, *Joseph et Aséneth: Introduction, texte critique, traduction et notes* (SPB 13; Leiden: Brill, 1968). Although some recent translations and studies have relied on Philonenko's short version, no recent study of which I am aware has offered a defense of his textual theory vis-à-vis Burchard's. R. Kraemer is among those who favor the short version. See, e.g., *Her Share of the Blessings: Women's Religions among Pagans, Jews, and Christians in the Greco-Roman World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992) 110-12.

³Among others, Burchard, *Untersuchungen*, 91-99, argues this convincingly.

⁴*Ibid.*, 99-107. Dissenting voices on this issue are T. Holtz, "Christliche Interpolationen in 'Joseph und Aseneth,'" *NTS* 14 (1968) 482-97; and H. F. D. Sparks, *The Apocryphal Old Testament* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1984) 469.

⁵Burchard, *Untersuchungen*, 142-43; and Philonenko, *Joseph et Aséneth*, 99-109.

⁶Burchard, *Untersuchungen*, 143-51; and Philonenko, *Joseph et Aséneth*, 108-09. The *terminus post quem* of *circa* 100 BCE is set by the extensive dependence of *Joseph and Aseneth* on the LXX. See on this G. Delling, "Einwirkungen der Sprache der Septuaginta in 'Joseph und Aseneth,'" *JSJ* 9 (1978) 29-56. As will be noted below, G. Bohak, '*Joseph and Aseneth*' and the Jewish Temple in Heliopolis' (Unpublished Dissertation, Princeton University, 1994) 208-15, argues for an earlier date, but I do not believe that it can be much earlier than 100 BCE. The *terminus ante quem* is largely a corollary of Egyptian provenance, although there are some corroborative data. Because Egyptian Jewry was reduced to virtual oblivion by the revolt of 115-17 CE, a Jewish text concerned with conversion and reflecting a viable Jewish community must predate that devastating revolt. Attempts to pinpoint a more precise date within the rough termini of 100 BCE and 115 CE are tenuous.

⁷In spite of universal agreement on this broad generic classification, the numerous attempts to pigeonhole *Joseph and Aseneth* within known or supposed species of the romantic genre have generated no consensus and are thus far inconclusive. See, among other studies, Philonenko, *Joseph et Aséneth*, 53-98; S. West, "'Joseph and Aseneth': A Neglected Greek Romance," *Classical Quarterly* 24 (1974) 70-81; H. C. Kee, "The Socio-Cultural Setting of Joseph and Aseneth," *NTS* 29 (1983) 394-98; R. I. Pervo,

"introductory" questions lightly or to forestall discussion of them by our panelists. Rather, because I have defended these positions at some length elsewhere, and because they represent the consensus of most scholars who have published recently on *Joseph and Aseneth*,⁸ I assume them here and proceed to deal with some aspects of the text's social matrix on which no such consensus has emerged.

Clearing the Air

Before I propose my own understanding of the social setting and purpose of *Joseph and Aseneth*, let me clear the air by pointing out certain problems which I see in previous proposals. Explanations of the socio-historical setting and purpose of *Joseph and Aseneth* can be grouped conveniently—if somewhat arbitrarily—into two types.⁹ The first may loosely be called a history-of-religions approach in that it relies heavily on supposed parallels between the religious ideas and practices reflected in this text and those which characterize one or more known groups in the larger religious world of late antiquity. Close parallels between *Joseph and Aseneth* and the Essenes,¹⁰ the Therapeutae,¹¹ the mystery religions (especially the Isis Cult),¹² Merkabah Mysticism,¹³

"Joseph and Aseneth and the Greek Novel," *SBLSP 1976* (ed. G. MacRae; Missoula, MT: Scholars Press, 1976) 171-81; and idem, *Profit with Delight: The Literary Genre of the Acts of the Apostles* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1987), *passim*.

⁸See my history of research and assessment of the present state of opinion on these six points in *From Death to Life: Conversion in Joseph and Aseneth* (JSPSup 16; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1995) 19-93.

⁹At the time of this writing I have not yet seen Angela Standhartinger's recent study, so I do not know where or whether her approach fits into this scheme. I know only that she explores the connection with the Jewish wisdom tradition, which I regard as a very promising line of inquiry (as I indicated in *From Death to Life*, 268). On the wisdom connections see D. Sänger, *Antikes Judentum und die Mysterien: Religionsgeschichtliche Untersuchungen zu Joseph und Aseneth* (WUNT 2/5; Tübingen: Mohr, 1980) 191-208; and idem, "Judisch-hellenistische Missionsliteratur und die Weisheit," *Kairos* 23 (1981) 231-42.

¹⁰K. G. Kuhn, "The Lord's Supper and the Communal Meal at Qumran," *The Scrolls and the New Testament* (ed. K. Stendahl; New York: Harper and Brothers, 1957) 65-93; W. Nauck, *Die Tradition und der Charakter des ersten Johannesbriefs* (WUNT 3; Tübingen: Mohr, 1957) 169-71; and R. T. Beckwith, "The Solar Calendar of Joseph and Asenath: A Suggestion," *JSJ* 15 (1984) 90-111.

¹¹Kuhn, "The Lord's Supper and the Communal Meal at Qumran," 65-93; and esp. M. Delcor, "Un roman d'amour d'origine thérapeute: Le Livre de Joseph et Aséneth," *BLE* 63 (1962) 3-27.

¹²G. D. Kilpatrick, "The Last Supper," *Exp Tim* 64 (1952) 4-8; M. Philonenko, *Joseph et Aséneth, passim*; idem, "Initiation et mystère dans Joseph et Aséneth," *Initiation* (ed. C. J. Bleeker; Supplements to Numen, Studies in the History of Religions 10; Leiden: Brill, 1965) 147-53; idem, "Un mystère juif?" *Mystères et syncrétismes* (Etudes d'histoire des religions 2; Paris: Geuthner, 1975) 65-70; and Kee, "Socio-Cultural Setting," 394-413.

¹³H. C. Kee, "The Socio-Religious Setting and Aims of 'Joseph and Asenath,'" *SBLSP 1976*, 183-92; and idem, "Socio-Cultural Setting," 394-413.

and Gnosticism¹⁴ have all been alleged, and it is largely on the basis of such connections that the socio-historical context and purpose of the work have been understood. For example, those who have drawn close connections between *Joseph and Aseneth* and the mystery religions have posited an environment in which mystery initiation held great appeal. The work is thus seen as a piece of missionary propaganda designed to attract converts by representing conversion to Judaism in the guise of initiation into a mystery.¹⁵ Similarly, those who have found analogies to Aseneth's experiences in the beliefs and practices of Jewish groups such as the Essenes or Therapeutae have naturally understood the community behind the text in terms of the social and theological complexion of those groups as they are known to us from other sources.

However, as I have argued at length in my recent monograph, most such approaches rest on a premature effort to elucidate phenomena in *Joseph and Aseneth* by reference to external sources without sufficient prior attention to those phenomena in their own right within their own literary context. These comparative studies have also tended to exaggerate the similarities while ignoring major differences.¹⁶ For example, the language of "ignorance" in *Joseph and Aseneth* has nothing of substance in common with the gnostic systems with which it has often been compared. In *Joseph and Aseneth*, "ignorance" simply denotes the non-acknowledgment of God and the worship of idols instead. In no instance does it have the gnostic sense of unawareness of the soul's divine origin, subsequent imprisonment in the world of matter, and inability to return to its native abode without supramundane revelation. Such a metaphysical framework is completely lacking in *Joseph and Aseneth*, where the human predicament, conversion, and salvation are all conceived quite differently.¹⁷ Likewise, while many have been quick to associate the "meal" language in *Joseph and Aseneth* with the sacred meals of the Qumran sect, any similarities are far overshadowed by more fundamental differences. Even if an actual ritual meal lies behind the language of eating and drinking in *Joseph and Aseneth*—and this is debatable—absent from this text are the strict regimen, the messianic and eschatological yearnings, the sectarian exclusiveness, and the priestly obsession with purity which characterized the Qumran meals. Neither in the "meal" passages in particular nor the larger ideology and praxis reflected in *Joseph and Aseneth* in general do we find any similarities with the Essenes beyond what is reasonable to expect from two movements sharing any sort of Jewish heritage, and the differences are so marked as to rule out any use of the Qumran scrolls to locate *Joseph and Aseneth* socially and historically.¹⁸ The same can be said of the parallels which have been noted between mystery initiation and Aseneth's conversion. Similarities, and perhaps even influences, may be discernible on individual points—although I think even this has been exaggerated—but there is nothing to suggest that

¹⁴H. Priebsch, *Die Josephsgeschichte in der Weltliteratur* (Breslau: n.p., 1937) 11, 135; Philonenko, *Joseph et Aseneth*, 83-89; and M de Goeij, *Jozef en Aseneth; Apokalyps van Baruch* (De Pseudepigraphen 2; Kampen: Kok, 1981) 13-22.

¹⁵Kilpatrick, "Last Supper," 4-8; and E. W. Smith, Jr., 'Joseph and Aseneth' and *Early Christian Literature: A Contribution to the Corpus Hellenisticum Novi Testamenti* (Unpublished Dissertation, Claremont Graduate School, 1974) 23, 32-45.

¹⁶*From Death to Life*, 96, 149-50, 185-253 et passim.

¹⁷*Ibid.*, 202-07.

¹⁸*Ibid.*, 186-95; and similarly on the Therapeutae, pp. 195-98.

Aseneth's story was shaped appreciably by mystery initiation or that the Judaism reflected in the work was influenced on any large scale by the mystery religions.¹⁹

Notwithstanding the perils of superficial comparisons, parallelomania²⁰ is alive and well in the study of *Joseph and Aseneth*. Understandings of the social setting and purpose of the work have been influenced too much by premature and methodologically flawed comparisons and too little by the social profile which appears in the text itself. What is needed is more careful attention to the social tensions in the narrative as possible indicators of the social reality behind the text. Surely such data provide a more reliable index to the milieu of *Joseph and Aseneth* than do supposed analogies with external phenomena.

The second approach is a literary-historical (at times, even allegorical) attempt to relate the characters, plot, and language of *Joseph and Aseneth* to known and datable events in the history of Judaism, especially Egyptian Judaism. The central methodological issue which arises from this approach is the degree of detail which we can reasonably expect to recover from this narrative about its historical and social setting. Although I believe—and will argue below—that the evidence allows us to reconstruct in a general way the social and religious issues which form the generative problematic of the work, connecting the work to specific times, places, and events requires more supporting evidence than the text is likely to yield, and certainly more than has thus far been adduced.²¹ Reference to two attempts to define the specific historical circumstances that led to the composition of *Joseph and Aseneth* will suffice to illustrate the point.

D. Sanger has proposed that the story mirrors in very specific ways the experiences of Alexandrian Jews living under Roman rule. The characters, according to Sanger, represent actual groups in the author's world. Joseph and the members of his family who are portrayed favorably represent the majority of Egyptian Jews, who tried to live at peace with their pagan neighbors. Aseneth stands for proselytes. Pharaoh and Pentephres represent sympathizers or God-fearers from the governing class. Pharaoh's son personifies the militant anti-Judaism of those gentiles who were jealous of the Roman administration's friendly treatment of the Jews. Those sons of Jacob who side with Pharaoh's son against Joseph and Aseneth represent an opportunistic faction of Alexandrian Jews who collaborated with the anti-Jewish forces for personal advantage. The most likely time frame for such a work is *circa* 38 CE, when, in a well-known episode reported by Philo,²² precisely such smoldering tensions led to a pogrom against the Alexandrian Jews while Flaccus was prefect of Egypt and Gaius Caligula was emperor.²³

¹⁹Ibid., 217-53. Sanger, *Antikes Judentum und die Mysterien*, 190, concludes similarly.

²⁰The term is from S. Sandmel's classic methodological essay, "Parallelomania," *JBL* 81 (1962) 1-13.

²¹J. J. Collins, *Between Athens and Jerusalem: Jewish Identity in the Hellenistic Diaspora* (New York: Crossroad, 1983) 90-91, writes similarly: "The story of chapters 22-29 is evidently paradigmatic of Jewish-gentile relations in the Egyptian Diaspora, although it is by no means a simple historical allegory. ... The details of the story do not have precise historical equivalents."

²²Flaccus 4-12; *Embassy to Gaius* 16-20, 25-27; see also Josephus *Ant.* 18.8.1.

²³"Erwagungen zur historischen Einordnung und zur Datierung von 'Joseph und Aseneth,'" *ZNW* 76 (1985) 86-106.

Although Sanger is correct that clues about the social groupings and problems in the real world of the author are to be found in the persons and events in the narrative, the association of the details of the story with the particular events of 38-41 CE is unwarranted. Nothing in the text invites us to compare the hostility of Pharaoh's son toward Joseph with the anti-Judaism that led to the pogrom in 38 CE. Such anti-Judaic sentiments do not even appear in the text except in Aseneth's own comments before she meets Joseph (4:9-11). The author attributes the hostile actions by Pharaoh's son not to his anti-Judaism but to his passionate desire to have Aseneth for himself. Certainly the episode narrated in chaps. 22-29 illustrates the ever-present potential for conflict when Jews live in a gentile environment, but specific links with the events of 38 CE are lacking. Other occasions of intense conflict punctuated the history of Judaism in Greco-Roman Egypt, even if the disturbances of 38-41 CE happen to be better known to us because of Philo's involvement in them. Indeed, it could even be argued that *Joseph and Aseneth's* positive portrayal of the gentile monarch and conciliatory stance toward gentiles would have been more likely before rather than during or soon after the bloody conflicts of 38-41 CE.²⁴

The most comprehensive and creative attempt to relate the book to specific events in Jewish history is that by G. Bohak.²⁵ Bohak contends that *Joseph and Aseneth* was written in and for the Oniad Jewish settlement which was founded in Heliopolis in the wake of the turbulent events in Jerusalem in the 170s and 160s BCE.²⁶ The key to the novel, according to Bohak, is the hitherto unexplained episode about the bees in 16:8-17:3, and the key to this scene is the detail that the bees had "wings like purple and violet and scarlet and gold-woven linen cloaks" (16:18).²⁷ Because the four

²⁴Because there is nothing in the story which reflects the presence of the Romans, and Egypt is depicted as an independent country with rulers favorably disposed toward the Jews, several have in fact argued for a date of composition in the Ptolemaic period before the Roman conquest in 30 BCE. So, e.g., G. D. Kilpatrick, "Last Supper," 5; idem, *The Eucharist in Bible and Liturgy: The Moorehouse Lectures 1975* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983) 59-60; and, with caution, Collins, *Between Athens and Jerusalem*, 89-91. However, the traditional picture of overwhelmingly hostile Roman attitudes toward Judaism is exaggerated, as J. Gager, *The Origins of Anti-Semitism: Attitudes Toward Judaism in Pagan and Christian Antiquity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1983) 35-38, correctly insists. Other than including most Jews among the non-citizen residents of Egypt subject to the *laographia*, Augustan policy afforded the Jews a very favorable position during the early imperial period prior to the violence of 38-41 CE. Moreover, we must not suppose that the specific political structures reflected in the story are those of the author's own time rather than those dictated by the story's fictional setting. In any case, pinpointing a date of composition on the basis of a one-to-one correspondence between the political details in the story and precise historical equivalents is extremely tenuous.

²⁵The following summary is based on Bohak's 1994 Princeton dissertation, '*Joseph and Aseneth*' and the Jewish Temple in Heliopolis (see note 6 above). I have not yet seen his article, "Aseneth's Honeycomb and Onias' Temple: The Key to *Joseph and Aseneth*?" which the dissertation lists as forthcoming in *Proceedings of the Eleventh World Congress of Jewish Studies*.

²⁶Josephus *Ant.* 12.9.7; 13.3.1-3; *B. J.* 1.12; 7.10.2-3.

²⁷This and all subsequent quotations from *Joseph and Aseneth* are my own translation of Burchard's Greek text. See note 2 above.

textiles named here appear in Biblical and other passages dealing with the Jewish temple and priesthood, the bees must symbolize Jewish priests. Thus we have "firm grounding on which to base an interpretation of the whole scene."²⁸ The honeycomb must represent the Jerusalem temple, and the bees' departure from one honeycomb to build another symbolizes Onias IV's withdrawal from Jerusalem to build a new temple in Heliopolis. The bees who wanted to sting Aseneth represent Jewish opposition to the Oniad project, their deaths point to the inevitable failure of any opposition to this divinely-foretold project, and their resuscitation signals a second chance for Onias' Jewish opponents. The burning of the first honeycomb portends the destruction of the Jerusalem temple (which the Oniads probably would have welcomed), and the honeycomb which is left over stands for the one and only remaining Jewish temple—the one in Heliopolis.

Having established the Oniad provenance of *Joseph and Aseneth* from the work's "central scene," Bohak re-examines the remainder of the novel in light of this connection and finds that certain other elements of the story become much more easily explainable. For example, the author's elaborate description of military maneuvers in chaps. 22-29 becomes understandable in light of the military character of the Oniad settlement in Heliopolis and its strategic importance to the Ptolemies. The Oniad colony's dependence on the patronage of the Ptolemaic court would explain why our author portrays the Pharaoh so positively even while holding such disdain for Egyptians in general. The designation of the property which belonged to Pentephres and his wife (and later to Joseph and Aseneth) as "the field of their (our) inheritance" (3:5; 4:2; 16:4; 24:15; 26:1) would make sense as part of a case that Onias and his followers were not robbing anyone by settling in Egypt but were merely reclaiming territories which their ancestors rightfully owned. The author's Oniad priestly ties would account for both the prominence of Levi in the narrative and the fact that Aseneth's house is described so as to resemble a temple, and her room an inner sanctum.

Bohak concludes that *Joseph and Aseneth* is a piece of Oniad propaganda written in the Ptolemaic period (most likely in the mid-second century BCE) to defend and legitimate the Jewish settlement and temple in Heliopolis. Contrary to scholarly consensus, the central feature of the work is not conversion but the apocalyptic "foretelling" (*vaticinium ex eventu*) of the construction of Onias' Heliopolitan temple.

Bohak's novel thesis has the merit of attempting to decipher a passage which, by all estimates, is the most difficult in *Joseph and Aseneth*. The episode of the bees is highly symbolic, and Bohak's allegorical reading is as plausible as any other. But the sole argument which he cites to make his interpretation of the scene more than merely plausible—namely, the exclusively priestly connotations of the four types of material—fails to do so. These materials appear frequently in various combinations to connote extravagance and/or royalty, as well as temple and priesthood.²⁹ Moreover, even if the combination of textiles were exclusively priestly, it would hardly provide the definitive key to the whole scene, much less the entire work, as Bohak claims. To make *any* interpretation of such a problematic passage the interpretive key to the entire work is extremely precarious.

Apart from the episode about the bees, the parallels which Bohak claims between *Joseph and Aseneth* and the history and interests of the Oniad settlement in Heliopolis

²⁸*Joseph and Aseneth' and the Jewish Temple in Heliopolis*, 32.

²⁹E.g., Isa 3:21-24; Jer 4:30; Esth 1:6; 8:15; Prov 31:21-22; Ezek 27:16; Luke 16:19; Rev 8:12, 16.

are forced and unconvincing. Although Levi does figure prominently in *Joseph and Aseneth*, he is esteemed for his *prophetic* rather than his *priestly* qualities. Moreover, since Levi and Simeon appear together in Genesis 34 as protectors of Dinah, their appearance here as protectors of Aseneth is not surprising. One need not evoke a priestly obsession to account for Levi's prominence. The ambivalence represented in the concern for separation from gentiles, on the one hand, and the positive image of gentile rulers, on the other hand, was not peculiar to the Oniad settlement but was more broadly characteristic of Jewish life in the Ptolemaic and early Roman periods.³⁰ The semitized expression "the field of their (our) inheritance" hardly evidences the developed scheme of Oniad propaganda which Bohak deduces from it. The suggestion that Aseneth's quarters are described so as to resemble a temple is strained; the motif of a lovely maiden secluded in an ornate penthouse is a commonplace in Hellenistic romances, and the trappings of idolatry in Aseneth's tower are crucial for the way her conversion story functions within the novel (as we shall see below) and do not necessarily indicate a house-as-temple concept.

Is *Joseph and Aseneth*, then, related in any way to the Oniad community of Heliopolis? Such a connection is entirely possible. A sizable colony of Jews lived there for well over two centuries and occupied a very important strategic role for more than a century. But at least in its present state of development, Bohak's Oniad hypothesis is as speculative as it is ingenious. Confirmation would require from *Joseph and Aseneth* greater anachronistic specificity about the author's own time and place than this work of literary fiction set in the patriarchal era is likely to yield.

Narrative Conflict and Historical Context

In the foregoing I have suggested that explanations of the social setting and purpose of *Joseph and Aseneth* have been influenced too much by supposed parallels with external phenomena and too little by the social and religious tensions in the story itself. I have also expressed my view that these literary conflicts are very revealing about the general social setting of the work, though not necessarily about the specific occasion or context of its composition. It is time now to examine these neglected elements in the story as they bear on our topic. Three principal frontiers of social distinction and conflict in *Joseph and Aseneth* invite consideration: that between Jews and gentiles, that within the Jewish community, and that between the convert to Judaism and the convert's gentile family. These deep-seated tensions so permeate the narrative that we must reckon with the possibility that they are not merely literary but echo social reality in the author's community.³¹

Jews and Gentiles

The most obvious and categorical of these distinctions is that between Jew and gentile.³² That the author is concerned with this distinction and its ramifications is

³⁰See note 24 above.

³¹The following argument is a condensed version of the case which I have developed in "The Social Setting and Purpose of *Joseph and Aseneth*," *JSP* 2 (1988) 21-48; and *From Death to Life*, 96-117, 256-65.

³²Of course, these terms would be anachronistic in the patriarchal context in which the story is supposedly set, and are not used in *Joseph and Aseneth*. Yet they accurately represent a fundamental distinction which the author draws and which is integral to the story.

evident in many ways in the opening chapters (e.g., 1:5) but becomes most explicit in the account of Joseph's first visit in Pentephres' house. Here the hosts set a separate table for Joseph "because Joseph would not eat with the Egyptians since this was an abomination to him" (7:1). Then when Aseneth comes forth to kiss Joseph, he will not allow it, saying:

It is not proper for a man who worships God, who blesses with his mouth the living God and eats blessed bread of life and drinks a blessed cup of immortality and is anointed with blessed ointment of incorruption, to kiss a strange woman, who blesses with her mouth dead and dumb idols and eats from their table bread of strangling and drinks from their libation a cup of deceit and is anointed with ointment of destruction. Rather, the man who worships God will kiss his mother and the sister born of his mother and the sister from his tribe and kinsfolk and the wife who shares his bed, who bless with their mouths the living God. Likewise, it is not proper for a woman who worships God to kiss a strange man, because this is an abomination before the Lord God (8:5-7).

These words of Joseph follow a form attested with only slight variations several other times in the work: "it is not proper for a man (woman) who worships God to ..." (21:1; 23:9, 12; 29:3). Other passages also specify how "the man (men) who worship(s) God" must behave (23:10; 28:5-7). The repeated use of these stereotyped expressions to define conduct befitting the people of God suggests that situations akin to those addressed by the formulas existed in the real social world of the text. This inference is confirmed by the last sentence in the passage cited above: "Likewise, it is not proper for a woman who worships God to kiss a strange man, because this is an abomination before the Lord God" (8:7). This final interdiction is different from what has preceded it in that nothing in the story line calls for it; there is no Jewish woman in the story for whom exogamy is a possibility. The generalization from the specific case at hand to a related situation not actually represented in the narrative betrays a didactic interest in clarifying Jewish identity and appropriate Jewish conduct in a gentile environment. The story is addressing vital social issues. The milieu of *Joseph and Aseneth* evidently was one in which Jews lived in dynamic tension with gentiles and struggled to maintain a distinctive Jewish identity. The polluting effect of intermarriage and of table fellowship with gentiles was of grave concern. According to this author there can be no intimacy, and certainly no intermarriage, between the worshiper of God and the idol worshiper.

The following chapters express in a variety of ways the fundamental distinction between pagan existence and existence as God's elect people. In Joseph's prayer in 8:9, the one is designated darkness, the other light; the one error, the other truth; the one death, the other life. The barrier separating the two is defined most specifically in terms of idolatry and the pollution associated with it—a fact graphically illustrated in the account of Aseneth's conversion. Before her conversion she is utterly bound up in idolatry (2:3; 3:6; 8:5-7), and her conversion consists precisely of the renunciation of idols. The author not only details Aseneth's smashing of her idols and disposal of all the sacrificial food and vessels (9:2; 10:12-13), but has Aseneth reiterate this accomplishment and express her contempt for the gods repeatedly in the remainder of the story (11:4-5; 12:12; 13:11). In her soliloquies (11:7-9, 16) and prayer (12:5), and later in her psalm (21:13-15; not in Philonenko's text), Aseneth links her alienation from God and from the people of God directly to her idolatry. Even Aseneth's announcement to Joseph that she has converted epitomizes the whole of her conversion in the one definitive act of repudiating idols: "I am your maidservant Aseneth; and all the idols I have cast away from me and they have been destroyed" (19:5; not in Philonenko's text). Clearly, for

this author idolatry is what comprises the gulf separating Aseneth from Joseph, gentile from Jew. Jewish self-identity, the essence of gentile existence as viewed from the Jewish standpoint, the predicament of Aseneth which her conversion resolves, and the nature of conversion itself are all conceived in terms of idolatry and its opposite, the worship of the true God and dissociation from the defilement of idols. Only with great peril to the understanding of *Joseph and Aseneth* can this basic fact be ignored and superficial comparisons drawn with other texts or phenomena where the social boundaries are drawn quite differently.

The advantages of Aseneth's newfound (Jewish) existence over her former (idolatrous) state are articulated at length in chaps. 14-17 by the "man from heaven," who commands Aseneth to dress in a manner consonant with her new status (14:12), assures her that her name has been written in the book of the living in heaven (15:4), and tells her that she will be "renewed and refashioned and given new life" and that she will "eat blessed bread of life and drink a blessed cup of immortality and be anointed with blessed ointment of incorruption" (15:5). This whole complex of expressions implies an unmistakable contrast with Aseneth's former existence. The wretchedness and defilement and destruction which are the lot of the idol worshiper stand in contrast to the blessedness and renewal and immortality which accrue to the worshiper of God. In 15:6 Aseneth is told that she is to be Joseph's bride—another striking indication of her elevation in status since earlier as a "strange woman" she could not even sit at table with Joseph or kiss him or have any association with him (7:1-6; 8:5-7). The enigmatic incident involving the honeycomb in chap. 16 expresses yet again the blessings which accrue to the people of God. All those who penitently attach themselves to the true God eat from this comb and thereby eat the same immortal food as that eaten by the angels of God in paradise (16:12-13). This honeycomb is the spirit of life; everyone who eats from it will live forever; to perceive its true origin and nature is to know "the ineffable mysteries of the Most High"; to eat it is to eat bread of life, drink a cup of immortality, and be anointed with ointment of incorruption (16:14-16; not in Philonenko's text).

The potential for direct confrontation when Jews live in a gentile environment is illustrated in chaps. 22-29, where Pharaoh's son plots to murder Joseph and abduct Aseneth. In the course of this narrative the formula "it is not proper for the man who worships God to ...," which was used earlier to prescribe proper Jewish behavior toward gentiles (8:5, 7; 21:1), appears several more times for the same purpose (23:9, 12; 29:3). Other passages within this section lack the expanded formula but nevertheless specify how "men who worship God" must behave in situations of conflict (23:10; 28:5, 7). The use of these stereotyped expressions to define the proper ethic for the people of God in their dealings with gentiles suggests that this is an important concern in the shaping of the narrative and that uneasy relations with gentiles characterized the real social world of the text.

The author's high estimation of Jews and Judaism is evidenced in this final part of the story by the glowing portraits of individual Jewish characters such as Joseph (18:1-2, 11; 21:1, 4, 21), Jacob (22:3, 7, 10), Levi (22:13; 23:8, 10; 26:6; 28:15-17; 29:5-6), and Benjamin (27:1-5), and the favorable portrayals of the Jewish people in general vis-à-vis gentile characters (23:2; 24:3, 7; 23:15-24:1; 27:6). While clearly expressing a sense of Jewish supremacy, the author is careful to avoid leaving the impression that the Jews are vengeful people who take undue advantage of their superiority. They rather hold the ideal that "it is not proper for us to repay evil for evil" (23:9; see also 28:5, 10, 14; 29:3), that "it is not proper for a man who worships God to harm anyone in any way" (23:12), that "men who worship God" respect every person (28:7). Although some of the sons

of Jacob do become embroiled in the plot instigated by Pharaoh's son, the Jewish characters who are positively portrayed consistently reject any such subversive activity and denounce retaliation of any sort beyond what is necessary for defense. Indeed, Jewish characters on both sides of the conflict periodically articulate the principle of clemency toward offenders which clearly represents the author's ideal.

The tension between Jews and gentiles which permeates *Joseph and Aseneth* and which has been summarized briefly here is more than a literary backdrop for Aseneth's story; it is a crucial part of the document's *raison d'être*. The very predicament of Aseneth which her conversion story resolves is that she is a gentile and a worshiper of idols, and the emphasis in the narrative of her conversion is therefore not upon ritual formalities but upon her renunciation of idols. The Jewish self-identity that emerges from the story is defined vis-à-vis the characteristic elements of paganism, namely, idolatry and the defilement associated with it. The hostile action instigated by Pharaoh's son and narrated in chaps. 22-29 pits gentile against Jew. The ethical instruction which is sprinkled throughout the narrative has to do largely with Jewish relations with gentiles, disallowing social interaction with gentiles but urging respect and magnanimity toward them in situations of conflict. The pervasiveness of this tension, the expression of Jewish self-identity in terms of it, the narrative of Aseneth's conversion in the context of it, and the obvious concern to regulate Jewish conduct within it suggest that the tension is not merely literary but echoes social reality in the author's community.

Internal Jewish Dissension

In addition to the tension between Jews and gentiles, there is obvious conflict among the Jewish characters in *Joseph and Aseneth* following the couple's marriage. The hostility which these two encounter in chaps. 22-29 comes not only from Pharaoh's son but from some of Jacob's sons as well. Even before Pharaoh's son proposes his plot against Joseph and Aseneth, we learn of a rift among the sons of Jacob over the way the couple is to be perceived. Simeon and Levi treat them cordially, "but the sons of Zilpah and Bilhah, the maidservants of Leah and Rachel, did not accompany them because they were envious and hostile toward them" (22:11; see also 24:2). The wide range of responses to the plot proposed by Pharaoh's son illustrates the scope of the discord among the sons of Jacob. Simeon and Levi refuse to have any part in such a plot and pledge their support for Joseph, but with divergent ideas about appropriate retaliation against the gentile instigator. Simeon is inclined to take up the sword immediately, while Levi counsels non-retaliation unless Pharaoh's son persists in his evil plan (23:6-17). Dan, Gad, Naphtali, and Asher align themselves against Joseph and Aseneth, but there is at least some vacillation on the part of Naphtali and Asher (25:5-6). The remaining sons, Reuben, Judah, Issachar, Zebulun, and Benjamin, all join Simeon and Levi in coming to the aid of Aseneth and Joseph, but again with varying notions of appropriate vengeance against the plotters (29:1-5).

By itself the antagonism of some of Jacob's sons toward Joseph and Aseneth in the last part of the story would not prove the existence of real dissension within the author's Jewish community, much less the nature of that dissension. But alongside the bitter strife in the Israelite community in chaps. 22-29 is indirect but significant evidence earlier in the narrative to suggest that such problems did in fact exist in the author's community and that they centered upon attitudes toward the gentile convert to Judaism and the marriage of a convert and a born Jew.

The strongest such evidence is the author's obvious and belabored effort to exalt Aseneth and establish the propriety of her marriage to Joseph, as if writing for those with

contrary opinions. In spite of Aseneth's distance from the people of God as the story opens, she is also carefully portrayed in such a way as to demonstrate her potential worthiness to be Joseph's wife. Thus the reader is informed already in 1:5 that Aseneth bore no likeness to Egyptian women but was "in every way similar to the daughters of the Hebrews; and she was as tall as Sarah and as graceful as Rebecca and as beautiful as Rachel." The author is even careful to portray Aseneth in terms which closely parallel the portrayal of Joseph. Just as Joseph was extremely handsome and was the constant object of the desires and seductions of all the women of Egypt (7:3), so Aseneth was "very tall and graceful and beautiful to behold more than all the virgins on the earth" (1:4); indeed, the fame of her beauty spread and there was great competition for her hand (1:6). Yet, just as Joseph consistently rejected these annoying advances and remained a "virgin" (4:7; 8:1; see also 7:4-5), so Aseneth was "a virgin hating every man" (7:8; see also 1:4-6; 2:1). Similarly, the exalted attributes ascribed to Joseph, such as "mighty man of God" (3:4; 4:7; 18:1-2; 21:21) and "son of God" (6:3, 5; 18:11; 21:4), find counterparts in the description of Aseneth as one "adorned as the bride of God" (4:1) and as "daughter of the Most High" (21:4). The description of Joseph in 6:2-6 borders on an ascription of angelic status, but the same can be said of the descriptions of Aseneth in 18:9-11 and 20:6-7: she is likened to the sun just as Joseph is; heavenly beauty is ascribed to both; and both are said to radiate great light. When Joseph first arrives at the house of Pentephres, he is clad in an exquisite white tunic and a golden crown with precious stones and has a royal staff in his hand (5:5); later Aseneth too dresses in a radiant white garment and wears a golden crown with costly stones and has a scepter in her hand (14:12-15; 18:5-6). In the heat of the conflict described in the last part of the story, Joseph's brothers acknowledge that "the Lord is guarding him [Joseph] like the apple of his eye" (25:5); soon thereafter Aseneth too is assured, "the Lord is with you and he will guard you like the apple of his eye" (26:2). In the same context, the sons of Bilhah and Zilpah realize "the Lord is fighting against us for Aseneth" (28:1), just as earlier they had warned each other, "the angels of God will fight for him [Joseph] against you" (25:7). Aseneth's depiction as a near mirror image of Joseph shows that she is in no way inferior to him.

There are also significant parallels between Aseneth and Levi, who is highly esteemed in this work. Aseneth has access to "the ineffable mysteries of the Most High" (16:14) just as Levi does (22:13); she ranks among "those who devote themselves to the Most High God" (15:7; see also 16:14: "all those who devote themselves to the Lord God") just as Levi is "one who devoted himself to the Lord" (22:13); and she urges clemency toward enemies with the same magnanimous language used earlier by Levi for the same purpose (28:7, 10, 14; cf. 23:9-12; 29:3). Again Aseneth demonstrates qualities that put her on a par with the most revered sons of Israel.

The author's concern to establish the convert's parity within the Israelite community is suggested also by the affable reception which both Jacob and Joseph accord to the newly-converted Aseneth. Early in the story Jacob warned his children: "be on strong guard against a strange woman so as to have no association with her, for association with her is destruction and corruption" (7:5). However, later this same Jacob warmly receives the converted Aseneth as his daughter-in-law, blessing her, kissing her, and eating and drinking with her (22:8-9). Similarly, Joseph's own perception of Aseneth undergoes a radical *volte-face*. When she was a "strange woman" he would have nothing to do with her and in fact articulated in no uncertain terms the most intransigent interdiction against intimacy between Jews and gentiles (8:5-7), but he eagerly receives her as his wife upon learning of her conversion to Judaism (19:8-21:9). Far from violating the prohibition regarding "strange women," Joseph's

marriage to Aseneth and Jacob's full acceptance of her serve to show that Aseneth is no longer a "strange woman"; by crossing over to the Jewish religion she has become Jewish; she is now one of the people of God.

The author seems intent upon portraying Aseneth as deserving of full acceptance into the Israelite community and as worthy to be the wife of the patriarch. The frequency and variety of means employed to verify this suggests the existence in the Jewish world of the text some less favorable opinions about the convert and especially about marriage to the convert. Again it seems that we are dealing with something which is not merely literary but indicative of real social tensions in the author's community which have profoundly shaped the narrative.³³

Still other elements in *Joseph and Aseneth* corroborate this inference. For example, the detailed account of Aseneth's self-abasement, asceticism, and repudiation of idolatry serve to confirm the sincerity and genuineness of her conversion, as if there were those inclined to doubt this. The claim that as a convert Aseneth was no longer a "strange woman" but a legitimate member of the Israelite community and a legitimate mate for Joseph would have been undermined had the author left any room for doubt that her conversion was genuine and complete; hence the extended narrative of Aseneth's destruction of her idols, bitter mourning in sackcloth and ashes, fasting, confession, and prayer. No one tells Aseneth to do these things; they are rather voluntary acts of penitence (11:10-11). Moreover, as Aseneth repents, she is fully aware of the ostracism from her family and friends that will result (11:4-6; 12:12-14; 13:1-2); she is under no illusion that worldly advantage will accrue to her; she has no ulterior motives. The stress on Aseneth's self-abasement, voluntary ascetic rigor, humiliation, and decisive abandonment of idolatry in full cognizance of the social consequences, together with the very biblical and Jewish flavor of the piety expressed in her soliloquy and prayer, leave little room for the reader to doubt that her repentance is sincere and her conversion genuine and complete. Indeed, within the narrative itself, Aseneth's affliction and acts of penitence are cited as signs of the genuineness of her conversion (13:1-11; 15:2-3).

The angelic being's visit in chaps. 14-17 serves further to authenticate Aseneth's conversion by showing that her professed change corresponds to transcendent objective reality. I have argued elsewhere that Aseneth's conversion is already a *fait accompli* when the angelic visitor arrives. The angelophany is neither the cause nor the occasion of her conversion.³⁴ Rather, as D. Sanger has perceived, the literary function of chaps. 14-17 is to provide heavenly confirmation of a conversion that has already taken place and to articulate the benefits of conversion to the true God and membership in the elect people of God.³⁵ Thus the man from heaven assures Aseneth that her name

³³G. Anderson, *Ancient Fiction: The Novel in the Graeco-Roman World* (Totowa, NJ: Barnes and Noble, 1989) 81, correctly states that "the point of the Hellenistic Jewish romance of Joseph and Asenath is to glorify the conversion of the pagan Egyptian noblewoman Asenath to the worship of Yahweh," but he does not discuss the social context or rhetorical function of this emphasis.

³⁴*From Death to Life*, 121-25.

³⁵"Bekehrung und Exodus: Zum judischen Traditionshintergrund von 'Joseph und Aseneth,'" *JSJ* 10 (1979) 29-30; and idem, *Antikes Judentum und die Mysterien*, 156-57, 182.

has been written irrevocably in the heavenly book of the living (15:4),³⁶ that she has eaten the same food as that eaten by Joseph and by the angels in paradise (16:14-16; cf. 8:5-7), and that she has become a partaker of life, immortality, and incorruption (16:14-16)—to reiterate but a few of the benefits enumerated. This heavenly ratification of Aseneth's conversion, expressed in such exalted language by God's chief angel—the veracity of whose words is itself confirmed by the miraculous appearance of the honeycomb as he had promised (17:1-2)—leaves no room for any perception of this convert as inferior or unworthy. That Aseneth qualified to receive the heavenly visitor and the many blessings announced by him is proof positive of the heavenly recognition of her conversion and her full status as one of the people of God.

God's protection of Aseneth from her persecutors in the final chapters provides further proof of divine regard for this convert and divine disfavor toward any who would challenge her rightful place in the community of Israel. When Aseneth is the target of a murderous conspiracy at the hands of Jews, God intervenes more than once to deliver her (26:6; 27:11; 28:10). Joseph's words of assurance to Aseneth before the ambush thus proved true: "the Lord is with you and he will guard you like the apple of his eye" (26:2). Even the sons of Jacob who had tried to kill Aseneth come to realize: "the Lord is fighting against us for Aseneth" (28:1).

Not only does the narrative clarify God's stance in this situation; it also incorporates more direct appeals for those "men who worship God" to be indulgent and respectful in their treatment of their "brothers ... who worship God" (23:9-17; 25:5-7; 28:5-14). This ethical material is couched in the same stereotyped language used to define proper Jewish conduct in situations of conflict between Jews and gentiles, and it is directed toward both the aggressors and those in a position to retaliate. Here again we have a strong indication that the tension within the Israelite community at the literary level reflects actual internal conflict in the author's Jewish community.

The mysterious scene with the honeycomb and the bees in 16:17-23 also should be mentioned in this connection, though its interpretation is quite uncertain. At the very least we can say that the episode parallels the foiled plot against Aseneth by some of the sons of Jacob in chaps. 22-29. The malicious bees who die because they want to sting Aseneth represent her Israelite antagonists (Israelite because some continuity is implied between these bees and the ones mentioned in 16:14), and the restoration of the dead bees to life represents the eventual restoration of those antagonists to good standing in the community of Israel in spite of their evil deeds (28:10-16).³⁷ Again there is evidence—however problematic—of intramural Jewish conflict.

³⁶Because of the long-standing Jewish tradition regarding the inscribing of the names of the righteous in the book of life (e.g., see Exod 32:32-33; Ps 69:28; Dan 12:1; Mal 3:16-17; *Jub.* 30:22; *1 Enoch* 47:3; *1QM* 12:2; Luke 10:20; Rev 3:5; 13:8; 20:12, 15), Aseneth's enrollment in this book is especially expressive of her elevation to full standing as one of the people of God.

³⁷See the discussion of this episode by Burchard, "Joseph and Aseneth," *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha* (2 vols.; ed. J. H. Charlesworth; Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1983-85), 2.230 n. h2; Bohak, who of course sees this as the central episode in the book and exploits its allegorical potential to the fullest, nevertheless agrees in broad outline with the interpretation proposed here: the honeycomb scene is a preview of the evil brothers' scheme against Aseneth, the failure of that plot, and the forgiveness of these brothers in spite of their treachery (*'Joseph and Aseneth' and the Jewish Temple in Heliopolis*, 154, 198-99).

The cumulative effect of the intertwined motifs discussed above is to suggest that some disharmony existed in the author's Jewish community and that at least part of it centered on attitudes toward the convert to Judaism and the Jew by birth who marries the convert. As in the case of the tension between Jews and gentiles discussed earlier, so also in the case of the internal Jewish discord treated here, we are dealing with social issues which seem to have had a decisive role in shaping the story.

Familial Ostracism of the Convert

A third area of social tension is that between the new convert to Judaism and the convert's former friends and family. Upon destroying her idols and turning to the God of Israel, Aseneth finds herself "an orphan and desolate and abandoned and hated" (11:3). Even her parents have disowned her: "and therefore my father and my mother and my whole family have come to hate me, and they have said, 'Aseneth is not our daughter because she has destroyed our gods'" (11:5; see further 11:12-14; 12:5-12). Ostracized by family and friends, cut off from all familial and social support, Aseneth expects severe persecutions and can seek refuge only in God, who is "the father of the orphans, and a protector of the persecuted, and a helper of the oppressed" (12:13).

Even though this motif of familial and social ostracism runs throughout Aseneth's soliloquy and prayer, in the story line itself Aseneth has only the most cordial relations with her parents. The motif of the convert's loss of familial and social support is traditional, as is attested most clearly in Philo,³⁸ and it no doubt reflects the true plight of many Jewish proselytes in the Hellenistic world. But because it does not impact the plot when Aseneth and her parents actually interact, we probably should not see in it a strong social current underlying and influencing the composition of *Joseph and Aseneth* in a major way.

Why, then, does this traditional motif figure so prominently in Aseneth's soliloquies and prayer? We may suggest that it functions to buttress the aforementioned case for the convert's sincerity and worthiness. That she was fully aware of the ostracism and persecution which often accompany conversion to Judaism provides another link in the chain of arguments that she was sincere in embracing the God of Israel; she had no ulterior motives, no illusion that she stood to gain worldly advantage. Rather, she crossed over to Judaism in full awareness of the serious problems that would ensue. Thus it appears that the theme of the convert's severance from relatives and friends does not reflect a programmatic social undercurrent in *Joseph and Aseneth* on the order of the other two areas of tension treated above. It seems rather to be related to the tension within the Jewish community in that it serves to enhance the perception of the convert among Jews who held divergent opinions about the convert's relative status.

³⁸*Special Laws* 1.9, 57; 4:34; *On the Virtues* 20. Proselytes, according to Philo, "have left ... their country, their kinsfolk and their friends" in crossing over to the Jewish religion. They are to be classified along with orphans and widows as those who have been cut off from their natural means of protection and support and who stand "most helplessly in need" of God's pity and compassion. Having "turned his kinsfolk ... into mortal enemies," the convert has entered the most humble and desolate circumstances, an "orphan-like desolate state." Only in God can he hope to find a helper and a place of refuge. The striking verbal similarities confirm the traditional character of the motif. See also *Num. Rab.* 8.2 and Josephus *Ant.* 20.2.4; 20.4.1-2.

Conclusions: The Setting and Purpose of
Joseph and Aseneth

We have seen that the narrative of *Joseph and Aseneth* is permeated by social and religious conflict which is not merely literary but which mirrors to a significant degree the real matrix in which the work was composed. That matrix was one in which Jews lived in dynamic tension with gentiles and struggled to maintain a distinctive Jewish identity, one in which there was some contention about the status of gentile converts, and one in which intermarriage with gentiles, including marriage between a convert to Judaism and a born Jew, were live issues. If it seems unnecessary to stress these tensions, which, after all, were the common experience of Jews throughout the Hellenistic world and scarcely unique to this document, it should be reiterated that precisely these social dimensions of the narrative have been obscured by the preoccupation with the ritual features of Aseneth's conversion as the basis for comparative study and the key to the socio-religious setting and purpose of *Joseph and Aseneth*. Recognition of the general social and religious atmosphere of the text may not be as satisfying as detailed reconstructions based on supposed analogies with events and communities known from other sources, but I believe that such "analogies" stretch the evidence too far. The social and religious conflicts reflected in the text itself provide a more reliable—if incomplete—guide to the setting and purpose of the work than do the concerns imported from other texts and phenomena with which *Joseph and Aseneth* has been compared. It is appropriate, therefore, to close with some account of the likely audience and purpose of *Joseph and Aseneth* which is informed by the foregoing investigation.

Although many have understood *Joseph and Aseneth* as missionary propaganda designed to win gentiles to the Jewish faith, the work is not well-suited for missionary purposes. The author's assumption that the readers are familiar with the biblical narratives, especially the patriarchal stories, suggests instead a Jewish audience or at least readers who stood very close to Judaism. Moreover, the repeated formula "it is not proper for a man (woman) who worships God to ..." and the other attempts to define the conduct befitting "those who worship God" are clearly directed inward, to Jews, and not outward. The very problem in scripture for which the story furnishes a midrashic solution—namely, the marriage of the patriarch Joseph to the daughter of a pagan priest (Gen 41.45, 50; 46:20)—is a problem to the Jewish conscience.

Neither the polemic against idolatry nor the exalted opinion of Jews and Jewish tradition which permeates *Joseph and Aseneth* suggests that the work was written for gentiles. V. Tcherikover correctly insisted that Jews themselves needed to have their esteem bolstered by hearing their people and heritage extolled, and to be reminded of their distinctiveness vis-à-vis gentiles and of the danger of assimilation to gentile culture.³⁹ Moreover, Jews who were not accommodating toward converts and who had reservations about the propriety of marriage to them—and we have argued above that such concerns did in fact exist in the Jewish community behind the work—needed reassurance that true conversion entails the utter repudiation of idols and everything associated with idols, and therefore that marriage to a convert is no concession to paganism. Such intramural concerns seem best to account for the detailed narrative of Aseneth's renunciation of her idols; there is no reason to think that the polemic against idolatry is propaganda calculated to win converts.

³⁹"Jewish Apologetic Literature Reconsidered," *Eos* 48 (1956) 169-93.

The Jewish community represented in the narrative itself certainly lacks any missionary impulse. Joseph does not attempt to proselytize Aseneth; indeed, when he first sees her he urges that she be sent away (7:2, 6). Later he prays for her conversion only after her parents have taken the initiative to bring the couple together (7:7-8), and following the prayer he leaves and does nothing more for her. Neither does Joseph show any interest in converting Aseneth's family, and even the narrator seems unconcerned to have Pharaoh or Pentephres convert in spite of the fact that both are favorably disposed toward Judaism and its God (3:3-4; 4:7-8; 7:7-8; 20:6-7; 21:4-6). This disinterest seems incompatible with the view that the document was written to proselytize gentiles. *Joseph and Aseneth* certainly reflects openness to converts and a high opinion of them, but not an active desire to seek them.⁴⁰

If *Joseph and Aseneth* is not missionary literature, what do the social and religious tensions which we have seen in the narrative reveal about the purpose of the work? It may be unwise to think of a single overarching purpose, but the exalted portrayal of the convert suggests that one of the primary purposes was to enhance the status of converts within a Jewish community divided over the estimation of converts. Through the story the author demonstrates that converts are beneficiaries of all the blessings and privileges of the people of God and that as such they are to be received fully into the community of Israel and are suitable mates for Jews. Even God's own chief angel appears in the story to provide heavenly endorsement of the conversion and marriage of the prototypical convert.

At the same time, the author is obviously concerned to extol Jewish life and religion and to warn against exogamy and idolatry, perhaps in order to show that the openness to gentile converts is no concession to paganism and no threat to a distinctive Jewish identity. Since Aseneth was not acceptable as a wife for Joseph until she fully repudiated her idols, her story entails no concession to idolatry and its polluting effect. Similarly, opposition to exogamy is not compromised but confirmed in this story; Aseneth could marry a "son of God" only because she had become a "daughter of the Most High." Neither does full acceptance of the convert entail any diminution of the blessed status enjoyed by Jews as the people of God. These blessings are in fact affirmed and articulated at great length in the story, but with the emphasis that the Jew by conversion participates in them every bit as fully as the Jew by birth. Membership in the people of God according to *Joseph and Aseneth* is not even determined by ethnic descent but by acknowledgment of the true God, and is characterized by "proper" conduct. Thus, the true convert is on equal footing with the Jew by birth, and the latter must avoid the contamination of idols and engage in "proper" conduct in order to retain God's favor. "Proper" conduct is defined to include not only the avoidance of gentile impurity but also the treatment of both Jews and gentiles with magnanimity and respect in situations of conflict.

Pace G. Bohak, conversion is indeed the central theme of *Joseph and Aseneth*, but it is central because of the social conflicts surrounding it and not because of its ritual formalities or missionary appeal. The exalted estimation of converts in *Joseph and Aseneth* seems designed not so much for potential converts as for Jewish readers who had reservations about the full integration of converts. Even the reminders to Jews of their privileged status and responsibilities seem designed for a community in which the

⁴⁰C. Burchard, "Der jüdische Asenethroman und seine Nachwirkung. Von Egeria zu Anna Katharina Emmerick oder von Moses aus Aggel zu Karl Kerényi," *ANRW* 2.20.1 (1987) 655-56, draws the same distinction.

perception of converts was the basic issue which brought these other concerns to the fore.