

[Note by James Bruggeman: Please note that the following story is ancient fiction. Nevertheless, it is a nice, pleasant story to enjoy on that basis.]

THE ROMANCE OF JOSEPH AND ASENATH

By **REV. G. H. LANCASTER**

The very interesting and conclusive article which was written by Major John Samuels, V.D., for the special number of the Banner, March 10th, 1920, in which he produced strong evidence to prove the Semitic nationality of Asenath, has met with such pleasure from our readers that I am tempted to trace as briefly as possible the story of the romance of Joseph and Asenath as told in an early Hellenistic-Jewish text, belonging perhaps at the latest — say the modern editors of these early documents, the Rev. W.O.E. Oesterly, D.D., and the Rev. Canon G.H. Box, M.A.—to the commencing years of the second century A.D.

THE ORIGINAL DOCUMENT

This particular document — or rather its translation — was published by the Society for Propagating Christian Knowledge, England some two years ago. It is a beautiful love story of the highest tone, and far and away transcends the modern novel, or even the romances of a Scott or the idylls of a Tennyson. It is entitled "Joseph and Asenath — the Confession and Prayer of Asenath, Daughter of Pentephres the priest." Originally composed in Greek by a Jewish writer, it must — to have reached its present form — have passed through the hands of Christian revisers, for it savours of both Judaism and Christianity, and is clearly based upon the narrative in the book of Genesis, though it is possible that Hebrew tradition may have suggested certain elements which appear in the romance, but which are unknown to Genesis.

THE VERSIONS

The document in question soon appeared in many different and variant versions. From its Hellenistic-Jewish origin can be traced Latin, Greek and Armenian versions, while one of the most important MSS. was that of the Syriac version which was ' made in the sixth century. Further, an old Slavonic version is known, as are also Ethiopic and Arabic translations, from the latter of which another Latin translation was made in 1460, and which is now preserved in Vienna.

THE ROMANCE

The reader will remember that in the book of Genesis ' Asenath is mentioned three times only (chaps. 41: 45,50,46: 20). Once it is stated that Pharaoh gave Joseph, Asenath daughter of Potiphera, priest of On, to wife, and in the other two places we are told that she became the mother of Manasseh and Ephraim. More than that the Scriptures do not say, but the romance with its details of magnificence, splendour, orientalism, idolatry, confession, conversion, love, marriage, added to the very highest spirituality, lift one aloft to the realms of divine rhapsody and glory, and

the document brings out — doubtless in entire sub-consciousness on the part of its original author and redactors — the birthright inheritance of Joseph, "the Son of the Most High." Almost is the story inspired, so full is it of beauty and blessing, and so eloquent is it in its perfect delineation of the spotless and sublime characters of Joseph and Asenath. Surely Asenath, "the mother of us all," must have been a Semite!

Well, Asenath was the daughter of Pentephres (Genesis, Potiphra) "of eighteen years, tall and comely, and beautiful to behold exceedingly beyond every virgin upon the earth." She "bare no likeness to the daughters of the Egyptians, but was in all points like the daughters of the Hebrews, being tall as Sarah and comely as Rebecca, and beautiful as Rachel; and the fame of her beauty spread abroad into all that land, so that all the sons of the princes and the satraps desired to woo her, nay, and the sons of the kings also, all young men and mighty (including Pharaoh's firstborn son). And there was great strife among them because of her, and they essayed to fight against one another."

But Asenath was not going to be wooed too quickly, so she "set at nought and scorned every man," and shut up herself and her seven virgins in a tower containing ten chambers, adjoining her father's palace. Within "gods of the Egyptians, whereof was no number, gold and silver, were fixed, and all these Asenath worshipped, and she feared them, and she performed sacrifices to them every day."

ENTER JOSEPH

Then it happened that Joseph came to Heliopolis (Gen., "On") to collect the corn of that district, and sent a message to Pentephres advising him of his forthcoming call. The latter replied, "Blessed be the Lord God of Joseph, because my lord Joseph hath thought me worthy." A great dinner was then prepared, and Asenath "hasted to her chamber where her robes lay, and put on a fine linen robe made of crimson stuff and interwoven with gold" (here follows a detailed description of the magnificence of her toilette, even to the engraving of the names of her Egyptian gods" both on the bracelets and the stones").

Asenath is then bidden by her father to sit between him and her mother, and he says, "Dearest child! Lo, Joseph, the mighty one of God, cometh to us today, and this man is ruler of all the land of Egypt... he worshippeth God, and is discreet, and a virgin as thou art today, and a man mighty in wisdom and knowledge, and the spirit of God is upon him, and the grace of the Lord is in him. Come, dearest child, and I will give thee over to him to wife, and thou shalt be to him for a bride, and he himself shall be thy bridegroom for ever."

ASENATH'S WRATH

But Asenath became exceeding angry, and defied her father. "Wishest thou to give me over as a captive to an alien and a fugitive and one that hath been sold? Is not this the son of the shepherd (see Gen. 46: 34) from the land of Canaan? Nay, but I will be married to the king's firstborn son for he himself is king of all the land." Then suddenly during this tirade, a young servant sprang in and stated, "Lo! Joseph standeth before the door of our court." And when Asenath grasped the situation, "she fled from the face of her parents and went up into the loft (in her tower) stood at the great window

looking east to see Joseph coming into her father's house."

THE SPLENDOUR OF JOSEPH

Then there follows a magnificent description of the arrival of Joseph seated in the second chariot of Pharaoh. He was "clad in a tunic white and rare, and the robe that was thrown round him was purple, made of fine linen interwoven with gold, and a golden wreath was upon his head, and round his wreath were twelve (for the twelve tribes) choice stones, and above the stones twelve golden rays, and in his right hand a royal staff, which had an olive branch outstretched, and there was abundance of fruit thereon" (see Gen. 49:22). Immediately all the kindred of Pentephres made obeisance to Joseph, save Asenath, whose curiosity overcame her anger, for she was peeping from a window!

ASENATH'S REMORSE

Then "mirabile dictu!" Asenath is filled with grief and remorse, for the sight of Joseph's personal beauty and stately splendour overcame her! Groaning, she said, "Alas, me miserable! where now shall I, the wretched one, go away? or where shall I be hidden from his face? or how shall Joseph the son of God see me; for that I have spoken evil things about him? And how may the God of Joseph be gracious to me, because in ignorance I have spoken wicked words against him? Now he hath come to us as the sun from heaven, and he entered our house today and he shineth unto it like light upon the earth. But I am foolish and bold because I scorned him and spoke evil words about him, and did not know that Joseph is a son of God. For who among men will ever beget such beauty, or what woman will give birth to such light? Now, therefore, let my father give me to Joseph for an handmaid and a bondwoman rather, and I will be in bondage to him for ever."

JOSEPH SEES ASENATH

But Joseph meanwhile is being received and feted, when of a sudden he looks up and sees Asenath peeping out of the window, and knows not who she is. Remembering his past experience, and his father's injunctions to his sons to "keep yourselves from strange women," Joseph peremptorily commands, "Let that woman depart from this house." But her father replies that she is his daughter, "a virgin hating every man, and she is as thy sister." Then Joseph rejoiced exceedingly, and he said to his host and hostess, "If she is your daughter and a virgin, let her come, for that she is my sister, and I love her today as my sister." (N.B. — It is an Eastern custom for the host to introduce his daughter as the sister of the guest).

ASENATH COMES DOWN TO BE BLESSED

After Joseph sounds this polite, and perhaps political, note of affection for the daughter of Pentephres, the mother of Asenath goes up into the loft and constrains her daughter to come down, then saying in the presence of Joseph, "Kiss thy brother, because he also is a virgin even as thou today, and hateth every strange woman, even as thou hatest every strange man." And Asenath said to Joseph, "Hail, lord, blessed of God Most High." And Joseph replied, "God who quickeneth all things shall bless the damsel."

Then there follows in very beautiful language the speech which Joseph made to Asenath, a speech in which we can detect the eucharistic touch made by the Christian reviser. Asenath's eyes became filled with tears, "and Joseph, when he saw her weeping, pitied her exceedingly, for that he was mild and merciful, and one who feared the Lord."

Joseph immediately "lifted up his right hand above her head" and gave her a very beautiful blessing in which we can trace what we now call the Israel (Anglo-Saxon, Celtic) covenant blessings, saying, 'Lord God of my fathers Israel, the Most High and the Mighty God... bless thou this virgin also,... and number her with Thy people who thou chooses before all things were made, and let her enter into Thy rest which Thou preparedst for Thine elect, and let her live in Thine eternal life for ever.'

ASENATH'S CONVERSION AND CONFESSION

We are next told of the way in which Asenath rejoiced exceedingly over Joseph's blessing, as she returned to her loft, and wept when she thought of her idolatry and unworthiness. We read with much detail how she clothed herself as if in mourning "and took all her gods that were in her chamber, the gods of gold and silver whereof there was no number, and brake them up into fragments and cast them through the window to poor men and beggars. And again, Asenath took her royal dinner and the fatlings and the fish, and the heifer's flesh, and all the sacrifices of her gods and the vessels of the wine of libation, and cast them all through the window that looked north as food for the dogs... and she took sackcloth and girded her loins... and sprinkled ashes on her head... This Asenath did for seven days, not tasting aught whatever."

Meanwhile her father and her mother were saying, 'Asenath is not our daughter,' and all her kin had come to hate her because she had destroyed their gods, so she gave herself over to prayer, in which she cast herself unreservedly upon the God of the Hebrews, whom she knew to be "a true God, and a living God, and a merciful God, and pitiful and longsuffering." Her prayer is too long to be quoted here, but it displays and lays bare the fullest depths of a contrite soul, the spirit of one who is "an orphan and desolate," and who in her remorse finds that she loves Joseph more than her soul.' 'Keep him safe in the wisdom of Thy grace, and commit me to him for an handmaid and a bondwoman, that I may wash his feet and make his bed, and minister to him and serve him, and I will be a bondwoman to him for the times of my life.'

THE ARCHANGEL VISITS ASENATH

Then a wonderful thing happens! Asenath receives a visit from Michael, whose appearance is heralded by the morning star shining in the East. The door is shut, but to her amazement her angelic visitor enters, and calling her, said, "Asenath, stand up. I am the chief captain of the Lord God, and commander of all the host of the Most High: stand up, and stand upon thy feet that I may speak to thee my words." In all things he was "like unto Joseph, in robe and wreath and royal staff, save that his face was as lightning, and his eyes as the light of the sun, and the hair of his head as the flame of fire of a burning torch, and his hands and his feet like iron shining from fire, for as it were sparks proceeded from his hands and from his feet." Then in the midst of the brilliance of this psychic revelation, Michael gives his directions to Asenath and says, "Be of good cheer, Asenath, the virgin and pure: lo, the Lord God hath given

thee today to Joseph for a bride, and he himself shall be thy bridegroom for ever. And no more henceforth shalt thou be called 'Asenath,' but thy name shall be 'City of Refuge,' for that in thee many nations shall seek refuge (Israelites, "Anglo-Saxon-Celtic" -please note!) and they shall lodge under thy wings, and many nations shall find shelter by thy means, and upon thy walls they who cleave unto God Most High shall be kept secure..." Michael then promises to go to Joseph and to give him a similar message, but first commands Asenath "to put on a wedding robe... and adorn thyself as a good bride, and make thyself ready to meet him, for lo! he himself cometh to thee today, and will see thee and rejoice."

THE MIRACULOUS SIGN

Asenath in ecstatic delight prepares a meal for Michael ere he leaves her, but when he asks for an honeycomb, she grieves to say that there is no such thing in the storehouse. But he says, "Enter thy storehouse and thou wilt find a bee's comb lying upon the table: take it and bring it up hither." Sure enough Michael is correct, for the comb was there! He then uses it as a sign, showing her that he has in partaking of the honeycomb eaten the bread of life and drunk the cup of immortality, and been anointed with the chrism of immortality. (N.B.—The Christian element again.)

JOSEPH COMES TO ASENATH

After the departure of Michael, Asenath's face became transformed to the amazement of the overseer of the household, and she "washed not her face, for she said, 'Lest I wash off this great and comely beauty.'" Suddenly a boy came to Asenath, saying, "Joseph standeth before the doors of the court." Then "Joseph stretched out his hands and embraced Asenath, and Asenath Joseph, and they kissed one another for a long time and both lived again in their spirit. And Joseph kissed Asenath and gave her the spirit of life; then the second time he gave her the spirit of wisdom, and the third time he kissed her tenderly, and gave her the spirit of truth. Thus they became affianced bride and bridegroom.

PHARAOH, NOT PENTEPHRES BETROTHS ASENATH TO JOSEPH

And Joseph said, "Let one of the virgins come and wash my feet." But Asenath replied, "Nay, my lord, for that henceforth thou art my lord, and I am thy handmaid; ...thy feet are my feet, and thine hands mine hands, and thy soul my soul, and another shall not wash thy feet." Immediately her parents and her kindred came in, and Pentephres sought to betroth Asenath to Joseph, but the latter said, "I go tomorrow to Pharaoh the king, for that he himself is my father, and appointed me ruler over all this land, and I will speak to him concerning Asenath, and he will give her to me to wife" (see Gen. 41:45). So Pentephres said, "Go in peace."

THE WEDDING

Amid much splendour and oriental magnificence Pharaoh arranged the wedding, and said, "The Lord God Most High shall bless you both, and shall multiply and magnify

and glorify you unto time eternal."

ASENATH AND JACOB

Later on we are informed of the birth of Manasseh and Ephraim, and after the seven years of plenty had passed, we read in delightful and dutiful language of the meeting that took place between Asenath and Jacob, the appearance of the aged Patriarch being particularly grand, so that Asenath when she saw him "marvelled and fell down, and made obeisance on her face on the earth."

THE FINALE

The final scenes are intended to bring out the security of Asenath, and the fulfillment to her of Michael's angelic blessings. To this end certain plots are made by both Pharaoh's son and Dan and Gilead to kill Joseph and seize Asenath. But owing to the skilful counter-plots, the conspirators fail, while Benjamin is introduced as the hero and saviour. The latter was "a strong lad of about 19 years, and upon him was ineffable beauty and might as of lion's whelp, and he also was one who feared God exceedingly." His timely help saved Asenath, for Benjamin injured Pharaoh's son by casting a stone at him, and this brought about the death of the conspirators, and henceforth "all's well that ends well." So Joseph "reigned alone in Egypt 48 years," and he and Asenath lived happily together "glorifying and praising God."