

Becoming Acceptable before the God of Israel: Patterns of Transformation in Paul's Letters and *Joseph and Aseneth*

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INTRODUCTION

The scholarly approach that aims to situate Paul within his native Judaism has noted how the apostle fits into the Jewish world of the first century CE by comparing his letters with other Jewish texts written roughly during his time.¹ This article contributes to this reading and understanding of Paul by arguing that he and the author of the Jewish text *Joseph and Aseneth* (*Jos. Asen.*) had a similar view of the gentile world and how gentiles could become acceptable before Israel's god. By reading Paul's letters alongside *Jos. Asen.*, I believe we can gain further insight into the apostle's thinking and structuring of the world as he incorporated gentiles into a Jewish messianic movement and how this fits into the wider web of ancient Judaism.

According to Paul, the gentile world was in a dire way and the apostle criticizes it and those who belonged to it in several of his letters (cf. Rom 1:18–32; Gal 2:15; 1 Thess 4:4–5). However, it was also to this part of humanity that Paul had turned with his message about a cruci-

¹ For a number of collected essays on this topic, see Mark D. Nanos and Magnus Zetterholm, eds., *Paul within Judaism: Restoring the First-Century Context to the Apostle* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2015); Gabriele Boccaccini and Carlos A. Segovia, eds., *Paul the Jew: Rereading the Apostle as a Figure of Second Temple Judaism* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2016).

fied messiah; and it was the very people whose way of life he disapproved of that he wanted to incorporate into the Jesus movement.² In many ways, the apostle to the gentiles grappled with the question of how the gentiles he recruited to the nascent Jesus movement should turn their lives around in order to become acceptable before their new god, the god of Israel. In a similar fashion, the author of *Jos. Asen.* also dealt with this problem.³ Aseneth, a woman from Egypt who does not worship Israel's god or live by Jewish customs, is the archetypical gentile who lives in a way that forbids the Israelite Joseph to come too close to her. For her to become acceptable both in the eyes of Joseph and the god of Israel, she has to go through a transformation from idol-worshipping gentile to a pious woman who only worships Israel's god.

In this study, I argue that there are several similarities between how Paul sought to make his gentiles acceptable before his god and how the author of *Jos. Asen.* did the same with Aseneth's character. A topic that is given significant space in this article is how eating (for example, what and with whom one ate) could have a direct impact on one's relationship to the god of Israel. The reason for this is that both Paul and the author of *Jos. Asen.* spend considerable time and effort to discuss how eating practices played an important role in one's relationship with the god of Israel.

THE PROBLEMATIC LIVES OF GENTILES ACCORDING TO PAUL

Perhaps the most problematic activity gentiles devoted themselves to in Paul's eyes was the worship of numerous spiritual beings and their idols. The apostle highlights this in several of his letters. In 1 Thess 4:5, Paul exhorts the Christ followers to live a pious life, and "not in emotions of lust like the gentiles (ἔθνη) who do not know God."⁴ Accusing the gen-

² Paul explicitly refers to himself as sent to the gentiles in Rom 1:5, 13; Gal 2:7.

³ On the provenance of *Jos. Asen.*, see below.

⁴ All translations of NT texts are my own unless otherwise stated.

tile world of its sin in Rom 1:18–32, Paul tells his audience in Rome that gentiles “changed the glory of the eternal god for images of perishable humans, birds, four-footed animals, and reptiles.”⁵

Throughout his writings, Paul reminds his gentile Christ followers of their idolatrous past. In 1 Thess 1:9, Paul tells the Thessalonians how their faithfulness to his and his companions’ message is spreading far beyond their own geographical area. Paul mentions two things in particular about the Thessalonians’ faithfulness: 1) that they have turned to God from idols (*ἐπεστρέψατε πρὸς τὸν θεὸν ἀπὸ τῶν εἰδώλων*); and 2) that they are waiting for Jesus’s return.⁶ Likewise, in 1 Cor 12:2 Paul reminds the Corinthian Christ followers, “you know that when you were gentiles (*ὅτε ἔθνη ἦτε*) you were led to speechless idols.”⁷ Additionally, in Gal 4:8 Paul reminds the Galatians of how they were enslaved to beings which are not gods by nature (*τοῖς φύσει μὴ οὖσιν θεοῖς*) before they knew the god of Israel and he warns his gentile Christ followers of turning back to their past and yet again become enslaved to these beings.⁸ Perhaps the most striking example of Paul’s god of Israel vs idols

⁵ There is some debate whether Paul accuses only gentiles in Rom 1:18–32 or if he accuses both Jews and gentiles. A strong case can be made for the reading that Paul only accuses gentiles in this passage, cf. Magnus Zetterholm, “The Non-Jewish Interlocutor in Romans 2:17 and the Salvation of the Nations: Contextualizing Romans 1:18–32,” in *The So-Called Jew in Paul’s Letter to the Romans*, ed. Rafael Rodríguez and Matthew Thiessen (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2016), 39–58.

⁶ The fact that Paul mentions the Thessalonians’ turning away from idols as one of the key tenets of their faithfulness demonstrates that one of the core features of Paul’s message is that gentiles must turn away from idols and the worship of other spiritual beings than the god of Israel.

⁷ Even though Paul holds that an idol is nothing (1 Cor 8:4; 10:19), what they represent is something: *δαιμόνια* (1 Cor 10:20–21). Like Paul, the author of Revelation also connects idols and *δαιμόνια*: “And the remainder of humankind, who were not killed by these plagues, did not repent from the works of their hands, and they did not stop worshiping the demons and the idols (*προσκυνήσουσιν τὰ δαιμόνια καὶ τὰ εἰδωλα*) of gold, silver, bronze, stone, and wood, which cannot see, nor are they able to hear or to walk” (Rev 9:20).

⁸ It is not exactly clear what the beings who are not “gods by nature” are in Paul’s

language comes from 2 Cor 6:16 where he asks “what agreement does the temple of God have with idols?” and goes on to claim that “*we* are the temple of the living god” (cf. 1 Thess 1:9). Hence, there is no doubt in Paul’s mind that if someone worships Israel’s god, they cannot worship any other god.

These examples from the Pauline corpus demonstrate two things: first, Paul’s view of the gentile world is that gentiles (without fail it seems) worship idols and a plethora of spiritual beings; second, a requirement—plausibly *the* requirement—for joining the Jesus movement as a gentile was to give up this old way of life. As Paula Fredriksen puts it:

We should see clearly what Paul is asking of his pagans, and what (so far as we know) absolutely all of the apostles in the early years of this messianic movement were demanding of their gentile followers: no *λατρεία* to native gods. This was not an ethical demand so much as a *ritual* demand. More than this—as Paul surely knew—it was specifically a *Judaizing* demand.⁹

To no longer worship one’s old gods extended well beyond personal piety; it had serious effects on one’s personal life and relationships.¹⁰ Moreover, if gentile Christ followers were no longer allowed to worship their previous gods, they could not participate in the cults that they once were active in. David Horrell aptly formulates the connections between worship, cult, and identity:

“Turning to God from idols” is more than a matter of purely religious realignment, as if such commitments could be neatly separated from other aspects of

mind. One thing, however, is clear: they are real and have the power to act in the world. In Gal 4:9, Paul tells us that the beings the Galatians have been enslaved by are *τὰ ἀσθενῆ καὶ πτωχὰ στοιχεῖα*. On the meaning of *τὰ στοιχεῖα τοῦ κόσμου* in Gal 4, see Neil Martin, “Returning to the *stoicheia tou kosmou*: Enslavement to the Physical Elements in Galatians 4.3 and 9?” *JSNT* 40 (2018): 434–452.

⁹ Paula Fredriksen, “Judaizing the Nations: The Ritual Demands of Paul’s Gospel,” *NTS* 56 (2010): 232–252 (251, emphasis original).

¹⁰ Larry Hurtado, *Destroyer of the Gods: Early Christian Distinctiveness in the Roman World* (Texas: Baylor University Press, 2016), 78, makes the following observation: “For at least most people of the Roman era, their ethnic identity was basically given at birth, and gods linked to that ethnic group came as part of the package.”

identity and practice ... Rather, the “turn” involves a more socially consequential withdrawal from a set of practices that were part of everyday life and constitutive of a sense of identity.¹¹

HOW GENTILES BECOME PLEASING TO THE GOD OF ISRAEL

Paul’s demand that his Christ followers must not worship any other deity than Israel’s god comes to a climax in 1 Cor 8 and 10 where he is forced to navigate the social impacts of this ritual demand and the consequences this had on his Corinthian Christ followers’ everyday lives. In 1 Cor 8, Paul instructs the Christ followers on how they should relate to “food offered to idols” (περὶ δὲ τῶν εἰδωλοθύτων, 1 Cor 8:1).¹² The core issue appears to be that some Christ followers are reclining in temples dedicated to idols (ἐν εἰδωλείῳ κατακείμενον, 8:10) and that this has a negative effect on some other members of the Corinthian ἐκκλησία. These members plausibly consists of *gentile* Christ followers, since Paul says that they were used to idols in their cultic life and that because of this they eat food offered to idols as though it really was tainted by the idols (ὡς εἰδωλόθυτον ἐσθίουσιν, 8:7).¹³ However, eating food offered to

¹¹ David Horrell, “Religion, Ethnicity, and Way of Life: Exploring Categories of Identity,” *CBQ* 83 (2021): 38–55, 52.

¹² There are numerous interpretations of a) 1 Cor 8 and whether Paul allows Christ followers to eat food offered to idols (and why he does or does not do so), and b) the connection between 1 Cor 8 and 10. One of the most influential attempts to solve these issues comes from Gordon Fee’s commentary on 1 Cor from 1987. His interpretation, with subsequent adoptions, rejections, and modifications, can be found in Gordon Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, rev. ed., NICNT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2014), 394–433, 486–541 (see especially the addendum on 400–401, which lists several of the most important books and articles on 1 Cor 8 and 10 published between 1985 and 2010). For my own contribution to the questions surrounding 1 Cor 8 and 10, see the forthcoming *Paul and Sacrifice in Corinth: Rethinking Paul’s Views on Gentile Cults in 1 Corinthians 8 and 10*, WUNT II (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck).

¹³ For the argument that this group consisted of gentile Christ followers, see Kathy Ehrensperger, “To Eat or Not to Eat – Is this the Question? Table Disputes in Corinth,”

idols only seem to be a problem in Paul's mind if one eats it if one thinks it is tantamount to idolatry; if one eats it, thinking that the food is no different from any other food, then εἰδωλόθυτος will not have a defiling effect (at least not on one's own faithfulness to Jesus Christ).¹⁴

This is supported by Paul's discussion in 1 Cor 10:25–29 concerning what food Christ followers can buy at the local market and what they can eat if someone who is not a member of the ἐκκλησία invites them to a dinner.¹⁵ With regards to food sold at the market, Paul tells them to buy anything they want and not to worry about the origins of the food.¹⁶ In a similar fashion, he tells the Corinthian Christ followers that they can eat everything that their host puts before them without asking questions (πᾶν τὸ παρατιθέμενον ὑμῖν ἐσθίετε, 1 Cor 10:27).¹⁷ Further-

in *Decisive Meals: Table Politics in Biblical Literature*, ed. Nathan MacDonald, Luzia Sutter Rehman, and Kathy Ehrensperger, LNTS 449 (London: T&T Clark, 2012), 114–133.

¹⁴ In 1 Cor 8:7, Paul states that those who lack the knowledge that food offered to idols is not different from any other food will be defiled from such food: “But this knowledge is not in everyone and some, because they have been accustomed to idols until now, eat the food as food offered to idols, and their weak consciousness is defiled (μολύνω).” Even though many have rightly argued that 1 Cor is concerned with creating harmony within the Corinthian ἐκκλησία (which we see in 1 Cor 8), matters of purity is also a significant concern in the letter. Paul's concern for purity within the Corinthian ἐκκλησία closely relates to his temple imagery in the letter: for as the temple of God the ἐκκλησία is a dwelling place for God and if this temple becomes impure through sexual immorality and idolatry, God can no longer dwell there.

¹⁵ Although some ancient historians paint a picture of the early Christ followers as living “outside” society and not following the social norms of ancient society, Paul's comments in 1 Cor 10:25–29 clearly demonstrate that Christ followers were very much a part of their societies, with ties to non-Christ followers. Cf. Peter Arzt-Grabner, “Why Did Early Christ Groups Still Attend Idol Meals? Answers from Papyrus Invitations,” *EC* 7 (2016): 508–529.

¹⁶ It was common that meat from animal sacrifices would be carried away to the local market and sold. There were no clear signs, as far as we can tell, whether it was possible to distinguish between non-sacrificial food and food that had been sacrificed to a deity.

¹⁷ The only reason they should abstain from the food if is someone tells them that

more, Arnold Erhardt suggests that Paul himself ate food offered to idols when he was in Corinth for the first time;¹⁸ and Jan Bremmer thinks it reasonable that the Corinthian Christ followers brought meat sacrificed in the city's cults and temples to the communal dinner described in 1 Cor 11.¹⁹ Initially, Erhardt's and Bremmer's suggestions may seem peculiar, but given the prevalence of sacrificed meat in the first century CE and the difficulties in distinguishing between meat that came from sacrifices and meat that did not, it is likely that many Christ followers ate sacrificial meat without being aware of it.²⁰

Hence, eating food offered to idols in gentile cults does not seem to have been a problem for Paul, at least not in principle, perhaps because avoiding this type of food completely would have constituted too high of a signalling cost in a world permeated by sacrificed meat. However, as he goes on to discuss in 1 Cor 10:14–22, participation in the rituals surrounding the sacrifices was going one step too far.

In 1 Cor 10:14–22, Paul turns his attention to the issue of participation in the sacrificial rituals in gentile cults by telling his Christ followers to “flee from idolatry!” (1 Cor 10:14: *Διόπερ, ἀγαπητοί μου, φεύγετε ἀπὸ τῆς εἰδωλολατρίας*). The relationship between 1 Cor 8 and 10:14–22 has puzzled many scholars. The primary issue resides in Paul's seemingly lax tone about food offered to idols in 1 Cor 8 and his strict prohibition against drinking from the cup of *δαιμόνια* and partaking in

the food comes from a sacrifice. But this is not because the food is defiling; rather it is done for the consciousness of the one who instructed the Christ follower about the origins of the meat (1 Cor 10:28–29).

¹⁸ Arnold Ehrhardt, “Soziale Fragen in der alten Kirche,” in *Existenz und Ordnung: Festschrift für Erik Wolf zum 60. Geburtstag*, ed. Thomas Würtenberger, Werner Maihoffer, and Alexander Hollerbach (Frankfurt: Vittorio Klostermann, 1962), 155–182 (157).

¹⁹ Jan Bremmer, “Early Christians in Corinth (A.D. 50–200): Religious Insiders or Outsiders?” *ASE* 37 (2020): 181–202 (193).

²⁰ On the *macellum* in Corinth, see Henry J. Cadbury, “The Macellum of Corinth,” *JBL* 53 (1934): 134–141.

the table of δαιμόνια in 1 Cor 10:14–22. Most scholars argue that 1 Cor 10:14–22, like 1 Cor 8, is concerned with the questions surrounding the eating of εἰδωλόθυτος.²¹ This is certainly one possibility, but given the context of 1 Cor 10:14–22 (in 10:1–13, Paul cautions his audience to not become idolaters like the Israelites who worshiped the Golden Calf in Deut 32:17), Paul’s use of sacrificial language (e.g., θύω in 10:20), and the fact that he does not mention εἰδωλόθυτος but refers to the “cup” (ποτήριον) and “table” (τράπεζα) of δαιμόνια, I believe that the situation Paul envisions in 1 Cor 10:14–22 is different from 1 Cor 8. Unlike 1 Cor 8, 1 Cor 10:14–22 has in mind Christ followers who are *active* participants at the sacrificial altar in gentile cults. This is supported by the fact that several ancient Greek texts use the word ποτήριον in connection with the libations that were poured out during animal sacrifices and τράπεζα could be used interchangeably with θυσιαστήριον (“altar”), but also signify the table that stood beside the main altar during an animal sacrifice.²²

When it comes to actively participating in the worship of gentile cults, Paul’s prohibition is unambiguous: “You cannot drink from the cup of the Lord and from the cup of δαιμόνια; you cannot take part of the table of the Lord and the table of δαιμόνια” (1 Cor 10:21). Thus, even if Paul allows his Christ followers to eat food that originated from

²¹ Cf. Ben Witherington, *Conflict and Community in Corinth: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary on 1 and 2 Corinthians* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 226; Fee, *Corinthians*, 521; David E. Garland, “The Dispute over Food Sacrificed to Idols (1 Cor 8:1–11:1),” *Perspectives in Religious Studies* 30 (2003): 173–197 (193); Roy E. Ciampa and Brian S. Rosner, *The First Letter to the Corinthians*, PNTC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010) 481–482.

²² For Greek texts (Jewish and non-Jewish) that connect ποτήριον and τράπεζα with cultic rituals, see Aristophanes, *Peace*, 1045–1095; Lucian, *Toxaris, or Friendship*, 25, 28; Homer, *Odyssey*, 18.151–152; Euripides, *Ion*, 1030–1034; Diodorus Siculus, *Library of History*, 2.9.7; 5.46.6–7; Pausanias, *Description of Greece*, 9.40.11–12; Aelian, *On the Characteristics of Animals*, 11.17; Isa 65:11 LXX; Ps 74:9 LXX; Ezek 41:22; 44:15–16 LXX; Mal 1:17, 12 LXX; *Jos. Asen.* 8:5; 11:9; 12:5; 21:14; Philo, *Who Is the Heir of Divine Things?* 46; Luke 22:20b.

sacrifices in gentile cults and permits his Christ followers to associate with those outside the ἐκκλησία regardless of their morality or idolatry (1 Cor 5:9–12), he forbids Christ followers to take an active part in the worship and sacrificial rituals that took place in gentile cults. Whoever does so will not, Paul asserts in 1 Cor 6:9–11, “inherit the kingdom of God.”²³

With regards to worship, the instruction to Christ followers is that they only have one θεός and one κύριος. In 1 Cor 8:5–6, Paul expands on his view of the spiritual world and how followers of Christ should relate to it: “For even if there are so-called gods (θεοί), either in heaven or on earth—just as there are many gods (θεοί πολλοί) and many lords (κύριοι πολλοί)—but for us there is one god (θεός), the father, from whom everything is and in whom we exist, and one lord (κύριος), Jesus Christ, through whom everything exists and through whom we exist.”²⁴

²³ The reason Paul allows Christ followers to associate and dine in cultic settings with those outside the ἐκκλησία, I argue, is that if he did not allow this, his Christ followers would lose most, if not all, their social relationships and connections with those who were not part of the Jesus movement and it would have jeopardized the ἐκκλησία’s place in the city as they would have attracted unwanted attention from the authorities (cf. Pliny the Younger’s letter to Trajan 10.96, where Pliny seeks to suppress Christianity because the Christians in his province were not living according to the social and cultural/cultic norms that were in place there).

²⁴ Paul’s insistence of God’s oneness (cf. Rom 3:30; Gal 3:20) should not be confused with a notion that Paul thought there was *only one god*. Rather, the god of Israel is one and this god is god over all (Rom 3:29) and thus the only god worthy of worship. On the topic of gentile gods in biblical and Jewish sources, Matthew Novenson, “The Universal Polytheism and the Case of the Jews,” in *Monotheism and Christology in Greco-Roman Antiquity*, ed. Matthew V. Novenson, NovTSup 180 (Leiden: Brill, 2020), 32–60 (59), comments: “There are, strictly speaking no ‘false gods’ at all in the Bible. The *idols* of the nations—that is the cult statues themselves—are considered futile and empty by many (but not all) of our biblical and Jewish sources, but that is an expression of contempt for iconism, *not a denial of gentile gods*. What we meet in our Jewish sources are not false gods but gentile gods (foolishly represented by statues)” (my emphasis).

Consequently, Christ followers are to consider only one god and lord as *their* god and lord, and it is them, and them alone, they should praise and glorify.²⁵ The exclusive worship of and recognition of the one god of Israel also has an effect on the cultic practices of Christ followers. Rather than participating in their old cults, Christ followers now only take an active part in the cultic meetings of their own.²⁶ Most notably, instead of drinking from the “cup of δαίμονια” and partaking in the “table of δαίμονια” Christ followers now have their own ritual meal (κυριακὸν δεῖπνον, 1 Cor 11:20) in which they drink from the “cup of the Lord” and partake in the “table of the Lord” (1 Cor 10:21).²⁷ Throughout this ritual dinner, Christ followers become “one body” (1 Cor 10:17) and have partnership with the blood and body of Christ. Commenting on the significance of dining in the Corinthian ἐκκλησία, John Kloppenborg writes: “The Christ assembly in Corinth used ritual eating as a way to mark belonging and compliance with the group’s ethical codes.”²⁸ By participating in the Christ groups own cultic meal, members demonstrated their adherence to the group’s norms. This meant that those who partook in the meal (ideally) would no longer worship any god beside the god of Israel nor would they be active participants in any other cult than the Christ cult.²⁹

To conclude, Paul tells his Christ followers to reject the worship of their old deities and their participation in gentile cults, where they can

²⁵ On the Jewish roots and context of early Christology, see Matthew V. Novenson, *Christ among the Messiahs: Christ Language in Paul and Messiah Language in Ancient Judaism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012).

²⁶ This is true for gentile Christ follower; but Paul says nothing about Jewish Christ followers and if they should continue being active participants in the Jewish temple in Jerusalem.

²⁷ Scholars generally think that the meals Paul describe in 1 Cor 10:16–17 and 11:17–34 are the same meal.

²⁸ John Kloppenborg, *Christ’s Associations: Connecting and Belonging in the Ancient City* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2019), 156.

²⁹ Cf. Jonathan Klawans, *Purity, Sacrifice, and the Temple: Symbolism and Supersessionism in the Study of Ancient Judaism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 221.

no longer be active participants in the worship and sacrifices. In lieu of this, Paul instructs his Christ followers to only worship the one god of Israel and to only participate in the cultic rituals of the Christ group. I now turn my focus to *Jos. Asen.* to examine how this story about the transformation of Aseneth resembles the way in which Paul transformed his gentile Christ followers from idolaters to be “holy and pleasing to God” (Rom 12:1).³⁰

ASENETH’S TRANSFORMATION IN *JOSEPH AND ASENETH*

The work *Jos. Asen.* is a romantic novel set in Pharaonic Egypt and it expands on Gen 41:45 and 50, which tells how Pharaoh gave Joseph Aseneth, the daughter of the priest of On, to be his wife and how they had two children together.³¹ Even though scholars have debated the literary genre of *Jos. Asen.*, several scholars today classify *Jos. Asen.* as an ancient novel.³² The origins of the work are not completely known, but

³⁰ On Rom 12:1, see Patrick McMurray, *Sacrifice, Brotherhood, and the Body: Abraham and the Nations in Romans* (Lanham: Lexington Books/Fortress Academic, 2021).

³¹ The text of *Jos. Asen.* exists in two different versions, one longer and one shorter. The longer text can be found in Christoph Burchard, *Untersuchungen zu Joseph und Aseneth: Überlieferung – Ortsbestimmung*, WUNT 8 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1965), the shorter in Marc Philonenko, *Joseph et Aséneth: Introduction, texte critique, traduction et notes*, SPB 13 (Leiden: Brill, 1968). Even though scholars have argued in favour of both the “long” and the “short” text, most now prioritize the longer text. For an argument in favour of the long text, see Christoph Burchard, “The Text of Joseph and Aseneth Reconsidered,” *JSP* 14 (2005): 83–96. See also the critical edition by Christoph Burchard, assisted by C. Burfeind and U. B. Fink, *Joseph und Aseneth kritisch herausgegeben*, PVTG 5 (Leiden: Brill, 2003). For a discussion surrounding the texts of *Jos. Asen.* and their reconstructions, see Patricia D. Ahearne-Kroll, *Aseneth of Egypt: The Composition of a Jewish Narrative*, EJL 53 (Atlanta: SBL, 2020). Translation of *Jos. Asen.* comes from Christoph Burchard’ translation of the long text in *OTP*, vol. 2, 202–247.

³² On the purpose and literary genre of *Jos. Asen.*, see Angela Standhartinger, “Recent Scholarship on Joseph and Aseneth (1988–2013),” *CBR* 12 (2014): 353–406.

most argue that the text is a product of Hellenistic Judaism, written in Greek approximately 100 BCE to 100 CE in Egypt.³³ *Jos. Asen.* deals with a multitude of topics and the themes I focus on in this article are 1) how the author of *Jos. Asen.* describes why Aseneth (an Egyptian) is utterly inappropriate as Joseph's wife in the beginning of the story, and 2) how she is transformed into someone that is acceptable both before the god of Israel (and thereby also Joseph).³⁴

ASENETH'S GENTILE VICES

The first mention of Aseneth in *Jos. Asen.* is positive. Commenting on Aseneth's appearance, the text describes her in highly positive terms, likening her to the female heroes of the Hebrews: "[Aseneth] had noth-

³³ Scholars have debated whether *Jos. Asen.* is a Jewish or Christian text for some time. The work is first mentioned toward the end of the fourth century CE and there is no textual witness prior to a Syriac translation from the sixth century CE. While *Jos. Asen.* does display affinities with other Christian writings, the story lacks any explicit Christian references. On this topic, John Collins, "Joseph and Aseneth: Jewish or Christian?" *JSP* 14 (2005): 97–112 (112), notes: "The lack of clear Christian elements seems to me to argue against any claim of extensive Christian redaction, let alone Christian authorship of Joseph and Aseneth." Cf. Ronald Charles, "A Postcolonial Reading of Joseph and Aseneth," *JSP* 18 (2009): 265–283; Noah Hacham, "Joseph and Aseneth: Loyalty, Traitors, Antiquity and Diasporan Identity," *JSP* 22 (2012): 53–67; Randall Chesnutt, "The Social Setting and Purpose of Joseph and Aseneth," *JSP* 2 (1988): 21–48; Rees Conrad Douglas, "Liminality and Conversion in Joseph and Aseneth," *JSP* 3 (1988): 31–42. For alternative views, see Michael Penn, "Identity Transformation and Authorial Identification in Joseph and Aseneth," *JSP* 13 (2002): 171–183; Ross Shepard Kraemer, *When Aseneth Met Joseph: A Late Antique Tale of the Biblical Patriarch and His Egyptian Wife, Reconsidered* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998); Rivka Nir, *Joseph and Aseneth: A Christian Book*, HBM 42 (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2012).

³⁴ As Nicholas Elder, "Joseph and Aseneth: An Entertaining Tale," *JSJ* 51 (2020): 19–42 (37), notes, these two questions are of primary concern to *Jos. Asen.* 1–21: "With respect to cultural and ethnic identity, the romance story in *Jos. Asen.* 1–21 is concerned with who 'the Other' is and how one might become a God-worshiper."

ing similar to the virgins of the Egyptians, but she was in every respect similar to the daughters of the Hebrews; and she was tall as Sarah and handsome as Rebecca and beautiful as Rachel” (1.5). At the start of the second chapter, though, the text focuses on her inner qualities and instead depicts her in a negative light.³⁵ Aseneth is described as “despising and scorning every man, and she was boastful and arrogant with everyone” (2.1).³⁶ This statement indicates the contrast between Aseneth and Joseph, whom the author presents in highly positive terms (see 4.9–10).³⁷ Being an Egyptian, Aseneth was devoted to Egyptian cultic life and worshiped Egypt’s gods and idols. In one of her ten chambers in the tower where she lives, Aseneth kept idols and performed sacrifices:

Within that [first] chamber gods of the Egyptians who were without number were fixed to the walls, (even gods) of gold and silver. And Aseneth worshiped them all and feared them and performed sacrifices to them every day. (2.3; cf. 3.6)

The text of *Jos. Asen.* describes the fact that Aseneth had idols and worshiped them with great reverence in a rather neutral tone, especially compared to the description about her inner qualities in 2.1. This, however, does not mean that the author does not put a negative value on idolatry, as becomes apparent later in the text when Aseneth undergoes her transformation.³⁸

³⁵ Charles, “Postcolonial Reading,” 272, points out that even though Aseneth is viewed as the Other, she is also made to be the same as the Hebrews. Thus, Aseneth inhabits a liminal space from the very beginning of the narrative.

³⁶ Paul, too, describes gentiles as “boastful” (ἀλαζών) and “arrogant” (ὕπερήφανος) in Rom 1:30.

³⁷ This positive description of Joseph, Chesnutt, “Social Setting,” 23, argues, “reinforces the reader’s initial impression that the author wishes to set Joseph and his people qualitatively apart from all others.” This is similar to Paul’s view of Jews and gentiles, where the former are inheritors of an array of positive things from their god (Rom 9:4–5) and the latter are sinful (Gal 2:15) and full of vices (Rom 1:29–31).

³⁸ Cf. Chesnutt, “Social Setting,” 25.

The fact that Aseneth worships idols and take part in cultic sacrifices becomes the stumbling block for Joseph when Aseneth tries to greet Joseph with a kiss.³⁹ Joseph tells Aseneth:

It is not fitting for a man who worships God, who will bless with his mouth the living God and eat blessed bread of life and drink a blessed cup of immortality and anoint himself with blessed ointment of incorruptibility to kiss a strange woman who will bless with her mouth dead and dumb idols and eat from their table bread of strangulation and drink from their libation a cup of insidiousness and anoint herself with ointment of destruction. (8.5)

Ronald Charles makes the following remark with regards to Joseph's statement: "Aseneth is constructed as Other, impure, and unworthy of the man of God ... The Other is despicable, idolatrous, and in need of being saved from the worship of idols."⁴⁰ In short, the core of Aseneth's problematic (gentile) behaviour, according to the author of the text, lays in her worship of idols and the gods they represent and the fact that she takes part in Egyptian cultic life.⁴¹

One of the key facets of Aseneth's cultic life which the author points out as particularly problematic (in addition to worshipping idols) is the fact that Aseneth eats and drinks the food that has been sacrificed in the Egyptian cults.⁴² As Randall Chesnutt remarks, the eating and drinking of food that was connected to non-Jewish cults made Aseneth an agent

³⁹ On the importance of kissing in *Jos. Asen.*, see Christoph Burchard, "Küssen in Joseph und Aseneth," *JSJ* 36 (2005): 316–323.

⁴⁰ Charles, "Postcolonial Reading," 273. According to Chesnutt, "Social Setting," 23, this passage reveals "the fundamental dichotomy between those who worship God and those who worship idols."

⁴¹ Gideon Bohak, *Joseph and Aseneth and the Jewish Temple in Heliopolis*, SBLEJL 10 (Atlanta: Scholars, 1996), 42, notes that the issues the author of *Jos. Asen.* displays vis-à-vis Aseneth's cultic life shows his "disdain for Egyptians."

⁴² Hence, table fellowship serves as one way to distinguish between Jew and gentile in *Jos. Asen.* Cf. Sunhee Jun, "Negotiation in the Contact Zone: Reading Joseph and Aseneth from a Postcolonial Perspective," *JSJ* 52 (2021): 1–19 (4).

“of corruption and death.”⁴³ The text of *Jos. Asen.* refers to the issue of Aseneth’s partaking in sacrificial food on several occasions. In 11.9, Aseneth, who by now have turned away from the Egyptian gods, regrets eating from the food sacrificed to idols and bemoans the fact that her “mouth is defiled from the sacrifices of the idols” (cf. 11.16). She utters a similar lament in 12.5: “My mouth is defiled from the sacrifices of the idols and from the tables of the gods of the Egyptians.” It is clear from these statements, and others like them, that partaking in the food from the Egyptian sacrifices is tantamount to worshiping idols and the gods they represent.

Thus, Aseneth’s eating and drinking of cultic food causes her to be defiled in the same way as does worshiping idols. Because of this, Joseph cannot kiss nor eat with her. Andrea Lieber comments:

To kiss the mouth of a woman who blesses “dead and dumb idols” and who eats “bread of strangulation” and drinks the “cup of insidiousness” would be an abomination to him, because in kissing her, he would assimilate her defilement into himself.⁴⁴

Consequently, like Paul, the aspects the author of *Jos. Asen.* finds most problematic about the gentile world are idolatry and participation in non-Jewish cultic life.⁴⁵

⁴³ Randall Chesnutt, “Perceptions of Oil in Early Judaism and the Meal Formula in Joseph and Aseneth,” *JSP* 14 (2005): 113–132 (116).

⁴⁴ Andrea Lieber, “I Set a Table before You: The Jewish Eschatological Character of Aseneth’s Conversion Meal,” *JSP* 14 (2004): 63–77 (67).

⁴⁵ It should be noted that Paul does not go to the same lengths as does *Jos. Asen.* in terms of regulating the eating of sacrificed meat. I suggest that one possible reason for this is that Paul is writing to a mainly gentile group in Corinth that exists in real-life and to tell them to no longer eat this type of meat would have made their lives in the ancient city quite difficult due to the ubiquitous nature of sacrificial meat. In contrast, *Jos. Asen.* is a novel and the author does not need to take into account the same social considerations as does Paul. It could also be possible that the author of *Jos. Asen.* has a strict attitude towards food offered to idols since it was written in Egypt and due to the fact that there was a considerable Jewish diaspora there the issue of sacrificial meat might have been much smaller than in Corinth.

THE TRANSFORMATION OF ASENETH

The scenes that depict Aseneth's turn from idolater to a pious woman are extensive and full of details. Two aspects of Aseneth's life are the focus of her transformation: the giving up of her old idols and Egyptian gods and her withdrawal from Egyptian cultic life.⁴⁶ After Joseph's strong disapproval of Aseneth in 8.5, Aseneth lays down on her bed and "wept with great and bitter weeping and repented (*μετανοέω*) of her (infatuation with the) gods whom she used to worship, and spurned all the idols" (9.2). After this, Aseneth dresses in sackcloth and puts ashes on her head; her transformation becomes the centre of attention in the narrative. As part of her repentance, Aseneth takes the many gods that were in her chamber and ground them to pieces and throws her idols out from the window (10.12; cf. 11.4; 12.12); she admits that her mouth is defiled (*μιαίνω*) from blessing the Egyptian gods (11.16) and comes to realise that the idols she once worshiped are dumb (*κωφός*) and dead (*νεκρός*) (13.11). In addition to her renouncing of the Egyptian gods and idols, Aseneth also takes an active stance against the cultic rituals connected with the gods and idols.

Indeed, many of these references are connected to the participation at sacrifices and the eating of food that has been sacrificed in the Egyptian cults. Immediately after Aseneth rids herself of the Egyptian gods and idols, she proceeds to throw out her dinner and "all the sacrifices of her gods (*θυσίας τῶν θεῶν*) and the vessels of their wine of libation (*σπονδή*)" (10.13). It is clear that Aseneth's dinner consisted of food that had been used in sacrifices and therefore, according to the author of *Jos. Asen.*, was tainted by the Egyptian gods and idols.⁴⁷ Furthermore, in

⁴⁶ As Judith Lieu, "Circumcision, Women and Salvation," *NTS* 40 (1994): 358–370, (365), comments: "For Aseneth in *Joseph and Aseneth* it is abandoning idolatry which marks the crucial step: she is not said either to be taught the other laws or to observe them."

⁴⁷ Aseneth even makes sure that she gives her food to the strange dogs, not her own dogs.

11.9 and 16, Aseneth laments how her mouth has been defiled from eating from the sacrifices made to idols (cf. 12.5).⁴⁸ Thus, Aseneth's disposal of the Egyptian gods and idols go hand in hand with her disposal of the sacrifices that were made to them. Hence, just like Paul requires his gentile Christ followers to stop worshiping other gods than the god of Israel and not to partake in the cultic rituals of their previous cults, the author of *Jos. Asen.* presents Aseneth as abandoning her old gods and idols and as abstaining from participating in the sacrifices made to them.⁴⁹ Having recognised Aseneth's gentile vices and what she leaves behind in her transformation, I now focus on her new, post-transformed life.

After her eight days of repentance and confessions of her previous sinful life, the god of Israel shows his acceptance of Aseneth's prayers by letting the morning star rise in the east and an angelic being comes to her from the heaven (14.1–4). On the topic as to why Aseneth is accepted by God on the eighth day, Matthew Thiessen notes:

Aseneth's transformation is brought about not merely by turning from idolatry to worship of the true God, but also by divine intervention akin to God's original seven-day creation of the world.⁵⁰

Aseneth's transformation is down both to her own doing and the divine help from Israel's god. After having conversed with the angelic being, he tells Aseneth that from this day "you will eat blessed bread of life, and drink a blessed cup of immortality, and anoint yourself with blessed ointment of incorruptibility (φαγεῖς ἄρτον εὐλογημένον ζωῆς καὶ πιεῖς ποτήριον εὐλογημένον ἀθανασίας καὶ χρισθήσῃ χρίσματι εὐλογημένω

⁴⁸ 11.9: τὸ στόμα μου μεμιάται ἐκ τῆς τραπέζης αὐτῶν; 11.16: τὸ στόμα μου μεμιάται ἀπὸ τῶν θυσιῶν τῶν εἰδώλων.

⁴⁹ One difference between Paul and *Jos. Asen.* is that Paul does not view "food offered to idols" as inherently impure or that it has a defiling character for all in 1 Cor 8. The author of *Jos. Asen.*, however, strongly connects the mere eating of food offered to idols with defilement.

⁵⁰ Matthew Thiessen, "Aseneth's Eight-Day Transformation as Scriptural Justification for Conversion," *JSJ* 45 (2014): 229–249 (235).

τῆς ἀφθαρσίας)” (15.5–6). The angel offers Aseneth to eat from a honeycomb, which is only eaten by angels, God’s chosen, and God’s sons (16.14). After she has eaten of it, he tells Aseneth that she now has “eaten bread of life, and drunk a cup of immortality, and been anointed with ointment of incorruptibility” (16.15).⁵¹

Thus, just like Aseneth crushed her idols and stopped worshiping the gods of Egypt for an exclusive relationship with Israel’s god, the food from the Egyptian sacrifices that “gentile” Aseneth ate has been exchanged for the blessed bread and cup that belongs to God’s chosen ones.⁵² Chesnutt aptly formulates the use of meals in *Jos. Asen.*:

Meal language—whether or not it echoes some special ritual—is used representatively to set Aseneth’s newfound status as a suitable mate for Joseph apart from her polluted and polluting former state when Joseph, as a man of God, would have nothing to do with her.⁵³

In addition to the cultic transformation of Aseneth by which she abandons all traces of Egyptian cultic life to adopt Jewish cultic practices, Ari Mermelstein notes that Aseneth goes from being an angry misanthrope (see 2.1) to being a “philanthropic, courageous, and merciful devotee of God.”⁵⁴ In other words, Aseneth’s transformation is a complete transformation of her person, even though focus is on the cultic life in the narrative.

⁵¹ Randall Chesnutt, *From Death to Life: Conversion in Joseph and Aseneth*, JSPSup 16 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1995), 131, argues that by eating of the honeycomb, Aseneth is on par with native Jews and the angels of God.

⁵² The language of a blessed cup and bread (even if the latter is not said explicitly to be blessed) also appears in Paul (1 Cor 10:16) and was a common motif in ancient Judaism. Cf. Stephen Richard Turley, *The Ritualized Revelation of the Messianic Age: Washings and Meals in Galatians and 1 Corinthians*, LNTS 544 (London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2015), 157–158.

⁵³ Chesnutt, “Perceptions of Oil,” 118–119.

⁵⁴ Ari Mermelstein, “Emotion, Gender, and Greco-Roman Virtue in Joseph and Aseneth,” *JSJ* 48 (2017): 331–362 (335). In a similar fashion, McMurray, *Sacrifice*, argues that gentile Christ followers have received the ability to live a moral life, which gentiles outside of the Jesus movement could not.

CONCLUSION

By reading Paul's letters in tandem with *Jos. Asen.*, and highlighting the similarities in their respective views of the gentile world and what these gentiles have to do in order to become acceptable before Israel's god, I hope to have added further nuance and credibility to the scholarly tradition that seeks to read Paul's letters as expressions of first century CE Judaism. The aim of this study has been to examine how Paul's gentile Christ followers and Aseneth in *Jos. Asen.* go from living a life that does not accord with the will of the god of Israel to leading a life that makes them acceptable before God. I demonstrated that there is significant overlap between how Paul instructed his gentile Christ followers to alter their life and how the author of *Jos. Asen.* presents Aseneth's transformation. At the core of their thinking, both Paul and the author of *Jos. Asen.* envision their respective gentiles to leave behind their previous cultic activities in exchange for a cultic life that is centred around the worship of Israel's god. One important aspect of their previous lives that gentile Christ followers and Aseneth alike had to leave behind was their participation in the sacrifices that took part in the cults to which they previously belonged to. Both Paul and the author of *Jos. Asen.* insist that those who want to be faithful to the god of Israel cannot eat and drink from the altars of other deities, as that would constitute idolatry. Instead, the gentile Christ followers and Aseneth will now take part of a bread and a cup that signify their new, exclusive relationship to Israel's god (1 Cor 10:16; *Jos. Asen.* 16.15).

This change is grounded in the Jewish law, but neither Paul nor the author of *Jos. Asen.* give any detailed guidance on how to relate to the many other instructions of this law. With regards to *Jos. Asen.*, Judith Lieu notes that Aseneth neither is taught or follows any other part of the Jewish law than the prohibition against worshiping gods beside the god of Israel and their idols.⁵⁵ In a similar fashion, even though Paul

⁵⁵ Lieu, "Circumcision," 365, quoted from n. 49.

thinks his gentile Christ followers should follow certain aspects of the Jewish law, he never gives them a full, detailed account of exactly what parts of the Jewish law they should adopt in his letters.

Paul and the author of *Jos. Asen.* not only picture a cultic transformation but a moral one as well. Both authors view the gentile world with deep suspicion (cf. Rom 1:18–32; *Jos. Asen.* 2.1) and both tell of how their gentiles have undergone a moral shift and become virtuous persons who have left their gentile vices behind. This moral shift is deeply intertwined with their cultic shift. Interestingly, both authors tell their gentiles that through their transformation they have gone from “death to life” (Rom 6:13; *Jos. Asen.* 8.9) and they present their respective gentiles as a “pure virgin” (2 Cor 11:2; *Jos. Asen.* 15.2). After their respective transformations, Paul and the author of *Jos. Asen.* present their gentiles to the god of Israel as cultically and morally transformed and the gentile Christ follower and Aseneth have now become acceptable before Israel’s god.⁵⁶

⁵⁶ While Paul’s circumcision discourse has garnered much scholarly attention since he argues that circumcision is not a necessary part of the gentile follower’s pathway to acceptability, *Jos. Asen.* offers an interesting parallel since the implied subject of the transformation process in the scholarly imagination is often generically male—and we tend to forget that ancient Judaism already had an established method for incorporating individuals without circumcision, as the case of Aseneth and other women exemplifies.