

The Story of Asenath

translated by

Eugene Mason

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In the first of the seven years of great plenty Pharaoh sent forth Joseph to lay up corn, and gather food within the cities. So Joseph went out over all the land of Egypt, and came in the country of Heliopolis, where lived Poti-pherah, the priest, and chief counsellor of the great King. His daughter, Asenath, was the fairest of all the virgins of the earth; and seemed rather to be a daughter of Israel than an Egyptian. But Asenath was scornful and proud, and a despiser of men. No man of all the sons of men had seen her with his eyes, for she lodged within a strong tower, tall and wide, near by the habitation of Poti-pherah, the priest. Now high upon this tower were ten chambers. The first chamber was fair and great, and was builded of marble blocks of divers colours; the walls were of precious stones set in a chasing of gold, and the ceiling thereof was golden. There stood the gods of the Egyptians in metal of silver and gold, and Asenath bowed before them and offered sacrifice, every day of all the days. The second chamber was the habitation of Asenath, and was adorned cunningly with ornaments of gold and silver, with costly gems, and with arras and stuffs most precious. In the third chamber was brought together the wealth of all the world, and in that place also were set the aumbries of Asenath. Seven virgins, her fellows, lodged in the seven other chambers. They were very fair, and no man had spoken with them, nor any male child.

The chamber of Asenath was pierced with three windows; the first, which was very wide, looked towards the east, the second looked towards the south, and the third was set towards the north. Here was spread a couch of gold, covered with a purple coverlet, embroidered with golden thread, and hemmed with jacinths. There slept Asenath, with no bed-fellow, neither had man sat ever upon her bed. About this house was a goodly garden, closed round with a very strong wall, and entered by four iron gates. Each door had for warders eighteen men,

very mighty and young, well armed and full of valour. At the right side of the garden sprang a fountain of living water, and near by the fountain a cistern which gave of this water to all the trees of the garden, and these trees bore much fruit. And Asenath was queenly as Sarah, gracious as Rebecca, and fair as Rachel.

How Joseph rebuked Asenath because she worshipped idols.

Joseph sent a message to Poti-pherah that he would come to his house. So Poti-pherah rejoiced greatly, saying to his daughter, "Joseph, the friend of God, enters herein. I would give thee to him as his wife."

But Asenath was sore vexed when she heard these words, and said – "No captive shall ever be my husband, but only the son of a king."

Whilst they spake thus together, a messenger came before them and cried, "Joseph is here"; so Asenath fled to her chamber high within the tower. Now Joseph was seated in Pharaoh's own chariot of beaten gold, and it was drawn by four horses, white as snow, with bridles and harness of gold. Joseph was clad in a vesture of fine linen, white and glistening, and his mantle was of purple, spun with gold. He wore a golden circlet upon his head, and in this crown were set twelve stones, most precious, each stone having for ornament a golden star. Moreover, he held in his hand the royal sceptre, and an olive branch charged with fruit. Poti pherah and his wife hastened to meet him, and bowed before him to the ground. They led him within the garden, and caused the doors to be shut. But when Asenath regarded Joseph from on high the tower, she repented her of the words she spoke concerning him, and said –

"Behold the sun and the chariot of the sun! Certainly this Joseph is the child of God; for what father could beget so fair an offspring, and what womb of woman could carry such light."

Joseph entered in the house of Poti-pherah, and whilst they washed his feet he asked what woman had looked forth from the window of the tower.

"Let her go forth from the house," he commanded.

This he said because he feared lest she should desire him, and should send him messages and divers gifts, even as other women of her nation, whom he had refused with holy indignation. But Poti-pherah replied –

“Sire, this is my daughter, who is a virgin, and hateth men; neither hath she seen any man save me, her father, and thyself this very day. If thou wilt, she shall come before thee and salute thee.”

Then Joseph thought within himself, “Since she hateth man, she will not cast her eyes upon me.” So he answered to her father –

“Since your daughter is a virgin, I will cherish her even as my sister.”

Then her mother went out to seek Asenath, and brought her before Joseph.

“Salute thy brother,” said Poti-pherah, “who hateth the strange woman, even as thou hatest man.”

“God keep thee,” replied Asenath, “for thou art blessed of God most high.”

And Joseph answered, “May the God of life bless thee evermore.”

Then commanded Poti-pherah that she should kiss Joseph; but as she drew near Joseph set his hand against her breast and said –

“It is not meet that a man who worships the living God, and eateth the bread of life and drinketh from the chalice without corruption, should embrace the strange woman, who bows down before deaf and dumb idols; who serves them with the kisses of her mouth; is anointed with their reprobate oil, and eats an accursed bread, and drinks unsanctified wine from their table.”

Of the penitence of Asenath, and of the consolation of an angel; how he came from Heaven to the chamber of Asenath, and spake with her and sweetly comforted her.

When Asenath heard Joseph speak these words she was sore vexed, even unto tears; wherefore Joseph took pity upon her and blessed her, laying his hand upon her head. Asenath rejoiced greatly at the benediction. She sought her bed, sick with fear and joy, and renounced the gods before whom she bowed, and humbled herself to the ground. So Joseph ate and drank, and when he rose to go Poti-pherah prayed him

to tarry till the morrow; but he might not, and parted, having promised to return within eight days.

Then Asenath put on sad raiment, such as she wore at the death of her brother, and went clothed in a garment of heaviness. She closed the doors of her chamber upon her and wept. Moreover, she flung forth all her idols by the window set towards the north; all the royal meat she gave to the dogs; she put dust upon her head, lay upon the ground, and lamented bitterly for seven days.

But the eighth morning, at the hour when the cock grows and the dogs howl at the breaking of the day, Asenath looked forth from the window giving to the east, and saw a star shining clear, and the heavens open and there appeared a great light. She fell to earth with her face in the dust, and a man descended from the heavens and stood by her head, calling on her by her name. But Asenath answered nothing, because of the greatness of her fear. Then the man called her a second time, saying, "Asenath! Asenath!" and she replied—

"Lord, here am I. Tell me whom thou art."

And he said—

"I am Prince of the House of God and Captain of His Host. Rise, stand upon thy feet, for I have to speak with thee."

Then Asenath raised her head, and saw a man by her side who in all points was, as it were, Joseph. He was clad in a white stole, and bore the royal sceptre in his hand, and a crown was upon his brow. His face was as the lightning, his eyes as rays of the sun, and the hair of his head like a flame of fire. At the sight of him Asenath was sore afraid, and hid her face upon the ground. But the Angel raised her to her feet, and comforted her, saying—

"Put off this black raiment with which thou art clothed, and this girdle of sadness. Remove the sack-cloth from thy body, and the dust from thine head; cleanse thy face and thy hands with living water, and adorn thee with fair apparel, for I have somewhat to say to thee."

So she adorned herself with speed, and when she came to him again he said—

"Asenath, take off this ornament from thine head, for thou art virgin. Rejoice, and be of good cheer, for thy name is written in the Book of Life, and shall never be taken away. Thou art born again this very day

and quickened anew. For thou shalt receive the Bread of Blessing, and drink of the Wine without corruption; and be anointed with the Holy Chrism. Yea, I have given thee for wife to Joseph, and thou no more shall be called Asenath, but a name shall be given thee of fair refuge, for thy Penitence hath come before the High King, of whom she is the daughter, and thou shalt ever live before Him in mirth and gladness."

Then inquired she of the Angel his name, but he answered—

"My name is written by the finger of God in the Book of the most high King, but all that is written therein may not be told, neither is it proper for the hearing of mortal man."

Of the table and of the honey that Asenath set before the Angel, and how the Angel blessed Asenath.

But Asenath caught the Angel by his mantle, and said—

"If I have found favour in thine eyes, sit for a little space upon this bed, where never man has sat, and I will spread the table before my lord."

And the Angel replied, "Do quickly."

So Asenath set a fair linen cloth upon the table, and put thereon new bread of a sweet savour. Then said the Angel—

"Give me also a little honey in the honeycomb."

So Asenath was grievously troubled because she had no honey to set before her guest. But the Angel comforted her, saying

"Look within thine aumbrey, and thou shalt find withal to furnish thy table."

Then she hastened thereto, and found a store of virgin honey, white as snow, of sweetest savour. So she spake to the Angel—

"Sire, I had no honey, but thou spakest the word, and it is there, and the perfume thereof is as the breath of thy mouth."

The Angel smiled at the understanding of Asenath, and placed his hand upon her head, and said—

"Blessed be thou, O Asenath, because thou hast forsaken thy idols, and believed in our living Lord. Yea, blessed are they whom Penitence bringeth before Him, for they shall eat of this honey gathered by the bees of Paradise from the dew of the roses of Heaven; and those who eat thereof shall never see death, but shall live for evermore."

Then the Angel stretched forth his hand and took of the honeycomb and break it; and he ate a little, and gave the rest to the mouth of Asenath, saying—

“This day hast thou eaten of the Bread of Life, and art anointed with the Holy Chrism. Beauty is given thee for ashes; for virtue shall never go from thee, neither shall thy youth wither, nor thy fairness fail; but thou shalt be as the strong city builded as a refuge for the children of our Lord, Who is King for ever more.”

Then the Angel touched the honeycomb, and it became unbroken as before. Again he stretched forth his hand, and with his finger signed the cross thereon, and there where his finger touched came forth blood. So he spake to Asenath, and said—

“Behold this honey!”

Whilst she gazed thereon, she saw bees come forth from that honey, some white as snow, others vermeil as jacinths, and they gathered about her, and set virgin honey in the palm of her hand; and she ate thereof, and the Angel with her.

“Bees,” said the Angel, “return now to your own place.”

So they passed through that window which gave upon the east, and took their way to Paradise.

“Faithful as these bees are the words which I have spoken.”

Then the Angel put forth his hand three times, and touched the honey, and fire came forth and consumed the honey without singeing the table, and the perfume which came from the honey and the fire was very sweet.

Of the blessing of the seven maidens, and of the marriage of Asenath, as set forth in the story.

Asenath said to the Angel—

“Lord, I have with me seven virgins, born in one night, and nourished with me from my childhood until now. I will seek them, and thou shalt bless them, even as thou hast blessed me.”

So she brought them before him, and he blessed them, saying—

“May the most high God bless you, and make you to be seven strong columns of the City of Refuge.”

Afterwards he bade Asenath to carry forth the table, and whilst she went about her task, the Angel vanished from her eyes. But looking

towards the east she saw, as it were, a chariot drawn by four horses ascending towards Heaven. So Asenath prayed to God right humbly that He would pardon the boldness with which she had spoken to the Captain of His Host.

Whilst she prayed thus a messenger came to Poti-pherah saying that Joseph, the friend of God, sought his house, and was even then at his door. Asenath hastened to meet him, and awaited his coming before the offices of the house. When Joseph entered the garden she bowed herself before him, and washed the dust from his feet, telling him the words which the Angel had spoken concerning her. The next day Joseph prayed Pharaoh that he might have Asenath to wife, and Pharaoh gave him the woman. He set also garlands of gold upon their heads, the fairest that cunning smiths could fashion, and caused them to embrace in the sight of men. So for seven days was kept high feast and festival, nor might any man labour for those days. He also gave them new names, calling Joseph, the Son of God, and Asenath, Daughter of the Most High King.

Before the time of the seven lean years Asenath bore two sons. And Joseph called the name of the first-born Manasseh, which is to say Forgetfulness; "For," said he, "God hath made me to forget all my toil, and all my father's house." And the name of the second was called Ephraim, which is to say Fruitfulness; "For," said he, "God hath caused me to be fruitful in the land of my affliction."