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**Crossing boundaries throughout the ages: the value of imagery in the  
novel of *Joseph and Aseneth***

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**Abstract**

The biblical narrative known as novel of Joseph and Aseneth (*J & A*) can be considered as a literary testimony of Greek-speaking Judaism during Hellenism and the high Roman Empire. The Greek which characterizes *J & A* is related to the Septuagint, the Hellenistic translation of the Hebrew Bible into Greek, which was accomplished in Alexandria around the third-second century BC. The textual evidence shows that *J & A* was preserved by Christian scribes centuries later than its hypothetical origins as a Jewish-Hellenistic text, that is, from the sixth century AD to the Renaissance. The versatility of the novel enhanced its rich reception in various cultural-religious backgrounds; as an ancient Greek-Jewish novel, *J & A* testifies to a fluid literary genre, open to different themes and interpretations. In this connection, Aseneth's destiny is an emblem that subsumes the significance of the story throughout cultural environments. Indeed, Aseneth crosses the boundaries of ethnicity and religion, passing from being a pious idolater, the daughter of the Egyptian priest of Heliopolis, to a paradigmatic worshiper of the God of Israel, embodiment of virtues and intermediary between the divine and human spheres. This sense of the story may be best understood in the Jewish-Hellenistic background of Egypt under Ptolemaic/early Roman rule. However, the setting of the novel in the invented past of the biblical Patriarchs allows for further interpretations of the story, which transcend its literal-historical meaning; thus, the exegetical devices in *J & A* offered a fruitful terrain for further significant readings of the scenes and imagery of the novel in later Jewish, Christian, and possibly pagan environments.

## Article

An enthralling tale of love and adventure, the anonymous romance of Joseph and Aseneth (*J & A*) transforms the biblical Joseph-story of Genesis with innovative elements, privileging the mystical encounter between the Hebrew Patriarch and his Egyptian wife, Aseneth, the daughter of the priest of Heliopolis.<sup>1</sup> The main reference text for the story appears to be the Septuagint or Hellenistic Bible, the version of the Hebrew Law and historical books (Torah) in Greek which was accomplished around the third/mid-second century BC.<sup>2</sup> The novelistic plot of *J & A* presents variations and several additional elements to the concise biblical episodes. Aseneth is introduced as a beautiful heroine of a fairy-tale who lives sheltered in a tower. Only the renown of her beauty has spread all over the land, causing contests and wars between young noble men; even the first-born son of Pharaoh asks for her in marriage, but unsuccessfully. On her part, Aseneth is a proud maiden, a devoted daughter and a pious worshipper of idols, until Joseph's visit to Heliopolis triggers her change of heart. When she can see the hero in his glory, Aseneth suddenly believes in Joseph's superior nature and falls in love

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<sup>1</sup> Joseph-story: *Genesis*, 37-50. Two biblical episodes are quoted in *J & A*, which structure its twofold plot, according to this schema: *Genesis* (LXX), 41. 45-47: first reference to Aseneth, daughter of Petephres - *incipit* of the novel, *J & A*, 1. 1-2; cf. 3. 1. *Genesis* (LXX), 41. 50: second reference to Aseneth, and birth of Ephraim and Manasseh in *Genesis - J & A*, 21. 9: end of the first part of the novel. The term *romance* to indicate ancient long prose works which retell stories of love and adventure is especially useful to describe the so-called 'ideal novels' written in the period of the Roman Empire, i.e. *Chaereas and Callirhoe*, *Anthia and Abrocomes*, *Daphnis and Chloe*, *Leucippe and Cleitophon* and the *Aithiopika* or *Theagenes and Chariclea*. The term *novel* is used instead in analogy with its modern sense, for instance the eighteenth century English novel. See e.g. Swain 1999: 3.

<sup>2</sup> A hypothetical original form of the novel in this early-Jewish cultural background can only be inferred from a restored text which contains vocabulary common in the New Testament writings as well as in later Jewish versions of the LXX, namely those of Aquila and Theodotion. See Simon 1986: 59-60: Aquila's version of the Greek Bible in the first century AD is seen as a project of Jewish-Palestinian initiative which found the rabbis' approval; and 299-301: Greek language was linked to Jewish proselytising in the Hellenistic Diaspora and during the first centuries of the Jewish/Christian dispute.

with him. Joseph declares that he intends to love and respect Aseneth as if she were his sister, because his cultural-religious status forbids him from having any physical contact with a foreign woman; however, he recites for her a prayer of blessing. Aseneth's ritual of repentance and confession to God lasts for one week. On the eighth day, a divine messenger comes from heaven to announce her new status as Joseph's wife and her mystical transformation into a 'City of Refuge' for all those who repent in the name of God the Most High.<sup>3</sup> Joseph returns to Heliopolis and the Pharaoh celebrates the protagonists' marriage.

After the birth of Ephraim and Manasseh in the seven years of plenty of biblical memory, the time of dearth begins and the old patriarch Jacob, having heard that Joseph is in Egypt, leads the other sons to the land of Pharaoh.<sup>4</sup> The family reunion is at first peaceful; Jacob rejoices to see Aseneth and recognizes her as his rightful daughter-in-law. But the first-born son of

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<sup>3</sup> The diction of 'God the Most High', ὁ ὑψιστος θεός, is related to the Hebrew expression 'El Elyon'; interestingly, this way to designate the divinity is attested in inscriptions from Jewish colonies in Ptolemaic Egypt; but subsequently the expression was used to indicate the highest deity in late-antique pagan environments, thus testifying to forms of a 'pagan monotheism'. *J & A* might be witness to a semantic variation, denoting the religious-cultural passage of the notion of 'God the Most High' from an early Hellenistic-Jewish context to later Jewish/Christian environments which were in communication with pagan educated groups. Obviously the subject would deserve an extensive study in itself; see e.g. Mitchell 1999.

<sup>4</sup> This is an important variation on the biblical story, in which Jacob the first time only sent his sons except young Benjamin to Egypt in order to buy grain. In the *Genesis* account Joseph's family is ignorant of the fact that the hero is alive and ruling in Egypt; when his elder brothers do not recognize him, Joseph tests their loyalty by sending Simeon to prison and asking the other brothers to return home and fetch Benjamin as proof that they are telling the truth about their identity; when Benjamin arrives in Egypt, Joseph plays the famous trick of the divination cup which is hidden in Benjamin's sack so that the youth is charged with theft in order to test the elder brothers' reaction. In the biblical source therefore several novelistic features lead to the eventual recognition of Joseph's identity and the happy reunion with Jacob and his descendants. *J & A* reserves the novelistic features of trick and mendacious tale to the 'bad characters'.

Pharaoh, after seeing Aseneth from the ramparts of his palace, is seized by his old passion and attempts to plot Aseneth's kidnapping and the murder of Joseph, his sons and the Pharaoh. The prince manages to gain the help of some of Joseph's brothers, but the ambush is foiled thanks to the upright brothers' foreknowledge and exceptional strength. The end of the story teaches the superior value of forgiveness and love for one's enemies: the wise brothers of Joseph try to help the fallen prince, wounded by Benjamin's stone, while Aseneth is saved by divine intervention from the 'wicked' brothers' swords, and shows superior wisdom by protecting them from revenge. After the death of the prince and of the old Pharaoh, Joseph undertakes the rule of Egypt until the Pharaoh's younger heir is ready to ascend the throne.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> This basic plot of *J & A* is consistent in the whole textual tradition of the novel; an exception may be seen in the variation/omission of the miracle-scene of the honeycomb and bees which is performed by the divine envoy, but the text which has been reconstructed in critical editions integrates it. The story of textual criticism of *J & A* has been characterized by the scholarly distinction between a so called short and a long text of *J & A*. The short text has been considered by Philonenko 1968; 1974, as the version which is closer to the original novel; throughout more than forty years of manuscripts (MSS)-collation and research, however, Burchard has supported the thesis that the short text is the result of subsequent abridgements. The latest critical editions of *J & A* have been published by Burchard and his research group in Heidelberg; the text which has been reconstructed is the long one. Fink 2008 is the revised edition of the Greek text and the second Latin version of *J & A*; on the basis of philological investigation on the MSS, Fink argues that the short text of the Greek *J & A* is secondary in comparison to its long(er) versions. I should rely on this competent philological study, which is the product of several years of research. Although when reading the long text of *J & A* one may infer that some passages are repeated/even reduplicated, while other parts seem to be Christian additions/interpolations, I have chosen to follow this text for a few reasons. It is not only the most accurate and updated scientific study of *J & A*, so that this restored text may indeed represent the version which is closest to the original novel, but it is also a form of the tradition which was transmitted and circulated as a popular story. Therefore, I suggest that the long text, even though it has to be considered as the product of subsequent re-elaborations by later scribes, is still the best testimony of the allegorical senses and the purposes of *J & A*, which is reflected in its rich transmission and reception.

This paper aims to highlight the presence of emblematic boundaries in the novel of *J & A*, that is significant expressions and images which illustrate the theme of cultural-religious barriers. I suggest that specific narrative devices in *J & A* convey important cultural-religious senses, indicating that communication among different ethnic groups is possible, that boundaries can be crossed. This leading motif is both spelled out in the characters' speeches, dialogues and prayers, and embedded in the symbolic imagery of *J & A*. Significantly, Joseph the Hebrew patriarch is introduced as a sage and a man of God by the Egyptian priest Pentephres; the focus on this Egyptian point of view expresses in narrative fiction an important cultural concept, the contemplative-philosophical life which Hellenistic pagan intellectuals attributed to the Jews.<sup>6</sup> Joseph's qualities are also depicted by means of symbolic imagery in the scene of the hero's entrance in Heliopolis; objects, materials and colours all contribute to create a triumphant and hallowed atmosphere. This visual description of Joseph's glory after Pentephres' 'theoretical' portrayal anticipates Aseneth's perception of the hero as a sacred figure of light. After presenting a negative, distorted image of Joseph as a foreigner of debased customs, Aseneth elevates him to the role of a 'son of God', a semi-divine hero or a prophet endowed with the power of absolute discernment. As

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<sup>6</sup> After Alexander the Great's imperialistic-cultural expansion, in early Hellenism, the philosophers Theophrastus and Clearchus of Soli and the historian Megasthenes associated the Jews with other sages of the East, such as Indian priests and philosophers. Theophrastus is significantly the most celebrated successor of Aristotle in the Lyceum; among the interests of the peripatetic school there were indeed constitutions (*politeiai*) and lawgivers, themes which were well received in Hellenistic scholarly studies of laws and customs; the figure of Moses, the lawgiver of the Jews, assumes particular relevance in both Jewish and pagan works. Cf. e.g. the testimony by the Hellenistic historian Eupolemus about the Jewish linguistic-cultural heritage; the fragment was preserved in Eusebius *Preparatio Evangelica*, 9.26.1: Εὐπόλεμος δὲ φησι τὸν Μωσῆν πρῶτον σοφὸν γενέσθαι, καὶ γράμματα παραδοῦναι τοῖς Ἰουδαίοις πρῶτον, παρὰ δὲ Ἰουδαίων Φοίνικας παραλαβεῖν, Ἕλληνας δὲ παρὰ Φοινίκων. νόμους τε πρῶτον Μωσῆν γράψαι τοῖς Ἰουδαίοις: 'Eupolemus says that Moses was the first sage, and the first to pass down the alphabet to the Jews, then the Phoenicians inherited it from the Jews, and the Hellenes from the Phoenicians. Moses was the first to write laws for the Jews'. See Boys-Stones 2001: 77, n. 1; Rajak 2009: 72-78.

the novel illustrates in its pleasant literary fiction, different cultures encounter each other on the plane of wisdom and philosophical knowledge, but ultimately the monotheistic belief in the God of Israel subsumes all other cultural-religious achievements.

In order to explain the complex system of underlying senses in *J & A*, it is fruitful to read the novel through the exegetical paradigm of Philo of Alexandria, Jewish philosopher and interpreter of Scripture and possibly a contemporary of hypothetical early stages in the tradition of the novel in the first century AD.<sup>7</sup> In the following passage Philo attributes deeper significance to words and expressions which are contained in the biblical verses. The language of the novel is characterized by similar words/turns of phrase typical of the Septuagint, the Greek-Hellenistic version of the Bible. These expressions recur in *J & A* and become formulaic without being explicitly commented upon, as if repetition had to stress their significance. Indeed, analogies of lexicon and concepts between Philo's commentary on the theme of 'flight and finding' and Aseneth's first soliloquy in the novel suggest that *J & A* was conceived as a Jewish-Hellenistic commentary which expanded on the biblical text as a learned religious-philosophical treatise. Throughout the following centuries part of the tradition of *J & A* was transmitted and well received as a popular edifying story. This reading of *J & A* through different lenses, that is as an apparently plain fairy-tale-like narrative which is actually dense with further significance and inter-textual references, is supported by the other excerpts from the novel. For instance, the language of symbolic creation/transformation recurs in Joseph's prayer of blessing for Aseneth and in the announcement of the man from heaven. The process of religious

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<sup>7</sup>All the textual evidence of the novel is in fact much later: the Greek manuscripts belong to the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, but an original Greek archetype of *J & A* has been conjectured as a Jewish text which was composed in the Hellenistic age or in Late Antiquity, i.e. from the second century BC to the third-fourth century AD. The most ancient extant text of *J & A* is the Syriac version, which has been dated to the late sixth century AD thanks to the epistolary testimony between an anonymous writer and Moses of Inghila, which is contained in Zachariah Rhetor's *History of the Church*.

conversion and change of heart is rendered through the vivid metaphor of the passage from a terrible condition of obscurity in ignorance, corruption and death to the eternal light of truth. Therefore, language creates a mystical atmosphere which reflects the multi-cultural value of *J & A* both in the hypothetical time of its composition and throughout the phases of its reception in various Christian environments. By way of a preliminary conclusion, *J & A* conveyed significant content in its early Jewish-Hellenistic context, but its versatility made possible the rich reception, re-interpretation and re-appropriation of the tradition on the part of later Jewish, Christian and possibly pagan readers.

### 1) Jewish Wisdom in Egypt: Joseph's symbolic role

In the following quotation, Pentephres is proposing that his daughter Aseneth take Joseph for her husband:

Joseph the powerful-one of God is coming to us today (σήμερον). And he is ruler of all the land of Egypt and Pharaoh the king appointed him ruler of the whole land; and he is (our) saviour and will furnish corn to all the land and will rescue it from the imminent famine. And Joseph is a pious man, and wise and a virgin like you today; and Joseph is a man powerful in wisdom and knowledge and the spirit of God is upon him and the benevolence of the Lord is with him (άνηρ δυνατός έν σοφία και έπιστήμη και πνεύμα θεού έστιν έπ' αύτῳ και χάρις κυρίου μετ' αύτου). Come here then, my child, and I shall give you to him for wife and you will be his bride and he will be your bridegroom forever and ever (εις τόν αίώνα χρόνον).<sup>8</sup>

Joseph's portrayal as a man of God denotes the biblical hero's intermediary

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<sup>8</sup> *J & A*, 4.7-8: "Ιωσήφ ο δυνατός του θεού έρχεται προς ήμās σήμερα. και αυτός έστιν άρχων πάσης της γής Αιγύπτου και ο βασιλεύς Φαραώ κατέστησεν αυτόν άρχοντα πάσης της γής < και > αυτός <έστι σωτήρ> και σιτοδοτήσει πāsαν την γήν και σώσει αυτήν εκ του έπερχομένου λιμού. και έστιν Ιωσήφ άνηρ θεοσεβής και σώφρων και παρθένος ως συ σήμερα και έστιν Ιωσήφ άνηρ δυνατός έν σοφία και έπιστήμη και πνεύμα θεού έστιν έπ' αύτῳ και χάρις κυρίου μετ' αύτου. δεύρο δή, τέκνον μου, και παραδώσω σε αύτῳ εις γυναίκα και έση αύτῳ νύμφη και αυτός έσται σοι νυμφίος εις τόν αίώνα χρόνον.'

role between the Hebrew culture and the sacred paganism which is enclosed within the walls of Heliopolis. This portrayal goes further than the biblical account, making the hero a messenger of mutual respect among cultures. Joseph guarantees religious ritual on earth as well as communication with the transcendent realm of being, as will be clarified in the announcement-scene of the man from heaven to Aseneth. The hero is first introduced by Pentephres in the novel, as if the Egyptian priest had to acknowledge that Jewish rule is right and justified by the higher ethical value of a man of God like Joseph. In his speech to Aseneth, Pentephres highlights Joseph's moral qualities as a wise representative of his God and of Pharaoh from an Egyptian, pagan point of view. He does this by means of a narrative device which is intriguing in the plot, by suggesting to his daughter that she may become Joseph's wife forever (εἰς τὸν αἰῶνα χρόνον).<sup>9</sup> Pentephres' persona may hint at the acceptance of the Jewish legacy in Egypt and at long-lasting cultural relations among Jewish and pagan ethnic groups.<sup>10</sup> Interestingly, as a pagan priest Aseneth's father is bound to rely on practical evidence of Joseph's worthiness; the hero rules over the entire land of Egypt, and he is their saviour because he is collecting food for the imminent time of famine. This is to say, Pentephres' wisdom is limited to his Egyptian polytheistic world, although by

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<sup>9</sup> Cf. *Esther*, 4.1, in which the concept of eternity is applied to divine possession of the elected nation: God has chosen Israel as his 'possession forever' (εἰς κληρονομίαν αἰώνιον), quoted in Ramelli-Konstan 2007: 38. The apocryphal book of Esther, which has been defined as a Jewish novella like *J & A*, was composed in a Jewish-Hellenistic environment but subsequently accepted in the Christian canon of Scripture. A similar pattern may be applied to *J & A*, although the novel was well received and transmitted as a hagiographical, edifying narrative, but not included in a codified canon of Scripture.

<sup>10</sup> Jews became traditional allies of the Ptolemaic dynasty in Egypt; they served as soldiers in the royal army. Gideon Bohak in Bohak 1996 argued that the author of *J & A* was probably a Jewish soldier active during the reign of the king Ptolemy VI Philometor (180-145 BC), benefactor of the Jewish people in Egypt. During his reign in fact Onias IV, exponent of a priestly family defeated by the rival Hasmonians, fled from Jerusalem with his supporters and an army to find refuge in the Hellenistic reign of Egypt. A new Jewish Temple was built in the city of Leontopolis, which was in the nome of Heliopolis. Josephus describes the Temple of Onias in *Jewish Antiquities*, 13. 1-3 and *Jewish War*, 7. 2-4.

recognizing Joseph's virtues he demonstrates that he can catch glimpses of a higher truth, the belief in the God of Joseph and Israel.

Nevertheless, other clues in the portrayal of Joseph which is presented in Pentephres' direct speech indicate a further interpretation of virtue, adding a religious-spiritual sense to descriptive elements: Joseph is pious (θεοσεβής), moderate (σώφρων) and a virgin (παρθένος) like Aseneth.<sup>11</sup> The notion of God's spirit (πνεῦμα) which is always with Joseph is a biblical reminiscence, which is joined in the novel with Joseph's strength in wisdom and knowledge.<sup>12</sup> The biblical concept of πνεῦμα is thus reinterpreted on the epistemological level, becoming the rational faculty/intellect. Indeed, this might be a marker of the Jewish-Hellenistic origins of *J & A*. The novel might testify to an educated notion of Judaism, because the content of the holy books is explained through additional philosophical knowledge. If according to the biblical narrative Joseph is a man of God, interpreter of dreams and upright ruler, the novel of *J & A* re-writes the traditional portrayal, making Joseph a divine interpreter of the word of God as well as a mediator between his elected nation and other cultures, such as the Hellenistic-Egyptian civilization.

Moreover, time-indicators in the above passage (σήμερον- εἰς τὸν αἰῶνα χρόνον) hint at an indefinite, suspended time characterized by sacred and

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<sup>11</sup>The protagonists' virginity is emphasized through the time-indicator of 'today' (σήμερον) as an ethical quality that points out their exceptional role. See Burrus 2005 for an original analysis of the theme of virginity in *J & A*, the Acts of Paul and Thecla, and the Greek novels of Achilles Tatius and Heliodorus. Virginia Burrus chooses to read these texts as testimonies of the ancient cultural pluralism which may have questioned both the hegemony of Greek *paideia* and the authority of the Roman Empire; virginity represents instability in the context of the ancient city, as it creates a tension between individual desires and the social institution.

<sup>12</sup>*Genesis* (LXX), 41.38-39: 'And Pharaoh said to all his servants: "Shall we find such a man as this, who has the spirit of God (πνεῦμα Θεοῦ) in him?" And Pharaoh said to Joseph: "Since God has shown you all these things, there is not a wiser or more prudent man than you (οὐκ ἔστιν ἄνθρωπος φρονιμώτερος καὶ συνετώτερός σου)".

extraordinary events. The time of eternity after material life on earth is foreseen as the ultimate salvation or as the prophecy of a glorious future for the nation of Israel. These temporal markers indicate the value of the remote biblical past, a historical dimension which is ever living throughout the ages, representing ancient Hebrew lore enshrined in the sacred Scripture.

## 2) Emblematic Descriptions and Mystical Imagery

(...) and were opened the doors of the courtyard which looked towards the East. And Joseph entered, standing upon the Pharaoh's second chariot, and (to it) were harnessed four horses white as snow with golden bits and the whole chariot was made of gold. And Joseph was wearing a dazzling white tunic and the raiment of his garment was made of purple and of fine linen interwoven with gold; and (there was) a golden crown on his head and around the crown there were twelve chosen stones and upon the stones there were twelve golden rays; and he had a royal staff in his right hand, which had stretched out an olive branch with plenty of fruits on it and in the fruits there was plenty of oil. And Joseph entered the courtyard and the doors of the courtyard were closed and every strange man and woman stayed outside the courtyard, because the guardians of the gates drew and closed the doors and locked outside all strangers.<sup>13</sup> Joseph's entrance in the city of Heliopolis is described by means of symbolic elements, which stand for religious concepts. As in the biblical account, Joseph is standing on Pharaoh's second chariot, an

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<sup>13</sup> *J & A*, 5. 4-6: (...) και ήνοιχθησαν αί πύλαι τής αύλης αί βλέπουσαι κατά άνατολάς. Καί είσήλθεν Ίωσήφ έστώς έπί τῷ άρματι τῷ δευτέρῳ τοῦ Φαραώ και ήσαν έζευγμένοι ίπποι τέσσαρες λευκοί ώσει χιών χρυσοχάλινοι και τὸ άρμα κατεσκεύαστο ὄλον εκ χρυσίου. και ήν Ίωσήφ ένδεδυμένος χιτώνα λευκόν και έξαλλον και ή στολή τής περιβολής αύτου ήν πορφυρά εκ βύσσου χρυσοϋφής και στέφανος χρυσοῦς έπί τής κεφαλής αύτου και κύκλω του στεφάνου ήσαν δώδεκα λίθοι εκλεκτοί και επάνω τῶν λίθων ήσαν δώδεκα άκτίνες χρυσαί και ράβδος βασιλική έν τή χειρι αύτου τή δεξιᾷ είχεν εκτεταμένον κλάδον έλαιας και ήν πλήθος καρποῦ έν αύτῷ και έν τῷ καρπῷ ήν πίότης έλαιου πολλοῦ. Καί είσήλθεν Ίωσήφ είς τήν αύλην και εκλείσθησαν αί πύλαι τής αύλης και πᾶς άνήρ και γυνή άλλότριον έμειναν έξω τής αύλης, οί φύλακες τῶν πυλῶν επεσπάσαντο και εκκλεισαν τὰς θύρας και έξεκλείσθησαν πάντες άλλότριον.

attribute which makes him symbolically inferior to the king of Egypt in royal power.<sup>14</sup> The hero's dress and garments are an original invention of the novel: the white robe and purple mantle interwoven with gold represent emblematic colours which evoke descriptions of the Jewish Temple and of the High Priest's dress.<sup>15</sup> Joseph is thus bearing royal and priestly attributes, the pillars upon which the nation of Israel is founded. Joseph's royal staff is also modelled on the biblical source, while the olive branch full of ripe fruits signifies that the hero is also invested with the role of a messenger of peace and prosperity.<sup>16</sup> This portrayal, dense with profound allusions, anticipates the mystical atmosphere which surrounds the event of Joseph's arrival, as if sacred rituals were to be performed in honour of the highest God.

The courtyard of Heliopolis becomes a sacred space when the doors of the city are closed and all strangers are excluded from the exceptional visit. The imagery suggests that something extraordinary is due to happen, such as mysteries which are reserved exclusively for the initiates. At this point, boundaries between the hallowed landscape inside Heliopolis and the land of Egypt outside the walls are emphasised. In addition, Joseph has to cross

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<sup>14</sup> *Genesis*, 41.40-43: (Pharaoh speaking) 'You shall be over my house, and all my people will be obedient to your word; only in the throne I shall be superior to you. (...) And he (Pharaoh) mounted him on the second of his chariots...' However, it is noteworthy that in *J & A* as well as in other post-biblical stories about Joseph, the hero ultimately becomes king in Egypt. See *J & A*, 29.10-11: 'And Pharaoh mourned exceedingly for his firstborn son, and from the mourning he fell ill; and Pharaoh died at a hundred and nine years, and left his diadem to Joseph. And Joseph reigned as king of Egypt for forty-eight years, and after this he gave the diadem to Pharaoh's younger offspring, who was at the breast when Pharaoh died. And Joseph was like a father to Pharaoh's younger son in the land of Egypt all the days of his life', translation in Burchard 1985.

<sup>15</sup> For descriptions of the Temple, in particular its holy enclosures and gates, made of bronze, silver and gold, see Josephus, *Jewish War*, V.5; the Ephod, or High Priest's ceremonial dress, was made of threads 'of blue and purple, of scarlet, and twined fine linen', and embroidered in gold thread, according to *Exodus*, 28.4-ff.; and cf. *Leviticus*, 8.

<sup>16</sup> In *Genesis*, 41.42, the Pharaoh gives Joseph his ring, a robe of fine linen and a necklace of gold as tokens of his trust and the authority which is given to him.

subsequent enclosures before meeting his host: first the liminal territory of Heliopolis, then the walls of the city, the courtyard, and finally the doors of Pentephres' palace. Although descriptive details in *J & A* are rather vague, they may hint at parts of the Jerusalem Temple and the stronghold which surrounded the building; a description of the Temple which underlines the presence of walls, courtyards and enclosures is contained in another Jewish-Hellenistic pseudepigraphon, the *Letter of Aristeas to Philocrates*.<sup>17</sup> If read symbolically, these spatial features indicate the 'graded holiness' in various zones of the Jewish Temple, according to a sacred, mystical progression towards increasing closeness to divinity.

### 3a) Joseph's portrayal as a figure of light in Aseneth's monologue

'And now – behold - the sun has come from heaven to us in his chariot and entered our house and shines on it like the light upon the earth (...) Who indeed among humans could create such a beauty and which woman's womb could give birth to such light? (...) And where shall I flee and hide, because every hiding place he can see and nothing concealed escapes him, because of the great light which is in him?'<sup>18</sup>

As soon as she can see Joseph from a window of her tower, Aseneth suddenly understands the truth as in front of a divine epiphany: Joseph is a

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<sup>17</sup>About the *Letter of Aristeas*, see the discussion of its importance for understanding representations of Jewish identity in Ptolemaic Alexandria by Rajak 2009: 76-78; 24-63; I follow text, translation and commentary in Calabi 1995. See the account of the narrator's visit to the Jerusalem citadel especially in *Letter of Aristeas* 84-104. The relevant description corresponds to the second Temple, which stood from 516 BC until AD 70; historical-realistic elements are blended with symbolic features, such as the threefold wall and the orientation of the Temple towards the East.

<sup>18</sup> *J & A*, 6.2-6. καὶ νῦν ἰδοὺ ὁ ἥλιος ἐκ τοῦ οὐρανοῦ ἦκε πρὸς ἡμᾶς ἐν τῷ ἄρματι αὐτοῦ καὶ εἰσῆλθεν εἰς τὴν οἰκίαν ἡμῶν καὶ λάμπει εἰς αὐτὴν ὡς φῶς ἐπὶ τῆς γῆς (...) τίς γὰρ ἀνθρώπων ἐπὶ γῆς γεννήσει τοιοῦτον κάλλος καὶ τίς κοιλία γυναικὸς τέξεται τοσοῦτον φῶς; (...) καὶ ποῦ φεύξομαι καὶ κρυβήσομαι, ὅτι πᾶσαν ἀποκρυβὴν αὐτὸς ὄρᾳ καὶ οὐδὲν κρυπτὸν λέληθεν αὐτὸν διὰ τὸ φῶς τὸ μέγα τὸ ὄν ἐν αὐτῷ;

'son of God', and now she must be ashamed of her previous harsh words about him. As in a Greek erotic novel, Aseneth falls in love with Joseph at first sight, and she wishes that her father may give her to the hero as his slave forever. Aseneth states her previous condition of ignorance, and pleads for a place of refuge where she could hide, although Joseph is like a prophet and a seer, able to detect everything which is concealed. If this portrayal is read according to its metaphor, Joseph is presented as the embodiment of the living exegete able to interpret the hidden truth in the sacred Scripture. It is noteworthy that the novel does not explicitly state the presence and function of its figurative discourse, which is embedded in the narrative features. This passage qualifies *J & A* as an allegorical novel, in which characters represent significant concepts and roles with their attributes and deeds. In this interpretation, Joseph becomes the emblem of allegorical senses which are detected in the word of God.

### **3b) The exegetical paradigm: Philo's commentary on the biblical text**

'You that did cleave unto the Lord your God are alive all of you at this day', οἱ προσκείμενοι κυρίῳ τῷ θεῷ, ζῆτε πάντες ἐν τῇ σήμερον (Deut. iv.4). For only those who have taken refuge in God and become His supplicants does Moses recognize as living, accounting the rest to be dead men. Indeed he evidently ascribes immortality to the former by adding 'you are alive today' ἐκείνοις δ', ὡς ἔοικε, καὶ ἀφθαρσίαν μαρτυρεῖ διὰ τοῦ προσθεῖναι 'ζῆτε ἐν τῇ σήμερον'. Now 'today' is the limitless age that never comes to an end. σήμερον δ' ἐστὶν ὁ ἀπέρατος καὶ ἀδιεξίτητος αἰῶν (...) the absolutely correct name for 'endless age' is 'today'. For the sun never changes, but is always the same, going now above, now below, the earth; and through it day and night, the measures of endless age, are distinguished.<sup>19</sup>

If *J & A* contains allegorical language and imagery while leaving its ethical, religious and spiritual senses implicit, 'between the lines' of the text, Philo of Alexandria reserves an authorial space for comments on biblical episodes. In the quote a few important analogies with *J & A* seem to attest to a similar cultural background for the novel, at least in the early phases of its

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<sup>19</sup> Philo, *On flight and finding*, (*de fuga et inventione*), 56-57; LCL translation.

composition and transmission. Philo reads the action of taking refuge in God as the touchstone to distinguish between opposite human conditions of life and death; only those relying on God, according to the cited precept of Deuteronomy, will share immortality. The same term for 'immortality' (ἀφθαρσία) is part of the threefold symbolic reality which in *J & A* connotes the believers' positive dimension.<sup>20</sup> In this interpretative comment on the biblical verses, Philo acknowledges the distinction between the historical and allegorical senses of Scripture. This means that the holy books retell the deeds of the Hebrew ancestors as historical events for the people of Israel while hinting at underlying ethical, religious and spiritual senses. The metaphor of the sun illustrates the concept of 'today' (σήμερον) as a never-ending age; the contrast between day and night, light and darkness as alternate parameters to measure time indicates figuratively consistent virtue in eternity. If read through Philo's exegesis, the association of the hero with the sun in Aseneth's monologue might indicate a consistency in the interpretation of the biblical text; in addition Joseph, a stable and apparently stereotyped character in the novel, may emblematically embody the figure of the sun which never changes. The mention of flight and seeking refuge in Aseneth's words recalls the core theme of Philo's exegetical commentary on flight and finding. Likewise, as Bohak remarked, the condition of being close to God (προσκειμαι τῷ θεῷ) is attributed to Levi in *J & A* as well as in other post-biblical narratives; the same expression is used in the relevant passage from Philo which comments on the biblical verses.<sup>21</sup> Therefore, the scene of

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<sup>20</sup> Cf. Joseph's speech to Aseneth, in which bread, cup and ointment also become emblematic elements: And Joseph said: '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 (ἄρτον εὐλογημένον ζωῆς) and drink a blessed cup of immortality (ποτήριον εὐλογημένον ἀθανασίας) and anoint himself with blessed ointment of incorruptibility (χρίσματι εὐλογημένῳ ἀφθαρσίας) to kiss a strange woman who will bless with her mouth dead and dumb idols and eat from their table bread of strangulation (ἄρτον ἀγχόνης) and drink from their libation a cup of insidiousness (ποτήριον ἐνέδρας) and anoint herself with ointment of destruction (χρίσματι ἀπωλείας)' *J & A*, 8.5, in Burchard 1985.

<sup>21</sup> *J & A*, 22.11-3: And Aseneth loved Levi much more than all of Joseph's brothers, because

Joseph's passage through the fortified gates of Heliopolis develops the symbols of the sun and the light in order to create another significant conception. In Aseneth's eyes, Joseph appears as a wonderful figure of light not only because on the literal plane of the story he represents the beloved, but also because the hero bears symbolically the value of the Jewish exegetical tradition.

#### 4) Communication between the human and divine spheres

And as soon as Aseneth had ceased her confession to the Lord the morning star arose from the sky towards the East, and Aseneth saw it and rejoiced and said: 'Then God my lord has heard me, because this star is a messenger and herald of the light of the great day'. And behold, besides the morning star the sky was torn apart and an ineffable light appeared. And Aseneth fell on her face to the ground and came to her a man from heaven and stayed upon Aseneth's head. (...) And she said: 'Who is calling me, because the door of my room is closed and the tower is high, so how could he enter my room?'<sup>22</sup>

Joseph is introduced as a man of God and a messenger of peace in Heliopolis. A divine envoy visits Aseneth on the eighth day after the week of her ritual mourning and confession to the God of Joseph. Aseneth recognizes God's favour as soon as she can see the morning star in the sky; this suspended time in between night and daylight sanctions by means of

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he was attached to the Lord (ἦν προσκείμενος πρὸς τὸν κύριον), and he was a wise man (άνηρ συνίων) and a prophet of the Most High (προφήτης ὑψίστου)... in Bohak 1996: 49; a Hebrew etymology of Levi's name signifies in fact 'to accompany, be attached to', and its primary source is the Hebrew Bible, for instance in Numbers, 18.2-4 in which Levi's descendants metaphorically assist their progenitor Aaron in his priestly duties.

<sup>22</sup> J & A, 14.1-4: Καὶ ὡς ἐπαύσατο Ἀσενέθ ἐξομολογουμένη τῷ κυρίῳ ἀνέτειλεν ὁ ἑωσφόρος ἀστὴρ ἐκ τοῦ οὐρανοῦ κατὰ ἀνατολάς, καὶ εἶδεν αὐτὸν Ἀσενέθ καὶ ἐχάρε καὶ εἶπεν· ἄρα ἐπήκουσέ μου κύριος ὁ θεός, διότι ὁ ἀστὴρ οὗτος ἄγγελος καὶ κήρυξ ἐστὶ φωτὸς τῆς μεγάλης ἡμέρας. Καὶ ἰδοὺ πλησίον τοῦ ἑωσφόρου ἐσχίσθη ὁ οὐρανὸς καὶ ἐφάνη φῶς ἀνεκλάλητον. Καὶ ἔπεσεν Ἀσενέθ ἐπὶ πρόσωπον ἐπὶ τὴν τέφραν καὶ ἦλθε πρὸς αὐτὴν ἄνθρωπος ἐκ τοῦ οὐρανοῦ καὶ ἔστη ὑπὲρ κεφαλῆς Ἀσενέθ. (...) καὶ εἶπεν· »τίς ἐστὶν ὁ καλῶν με, διότι ἡ θύρα τοῦ θαλάμου μου κέκλεισται καὶ ὁ πύργος ὑψηλὸς ἐστίν, καὶ πῶς ἄρα τίς εἰσῆλθεν εἰς τὸν θάλαμόν μου;

emblematic imagery Aseneth's change of heart and identity. The image of the sky suddenly torn apart with a strong light, which cannot be described, precedes the apparition of the heavenly messenger. This scene may plainly render the exceptional event on the literal level of narrative, while signifying on a deeper plane that the superior divine sphere and the earthly realm are in communication. Boundaries between the spiritual dimension of being and the inferior plane of matter have been crossed. The motif is remarked in the narrative-dialogical context of the apparition scene. Before the divine envoy's mystical revelation, Aseneth is frightened and asks the angel naively how he managed to enter the room, because the tower is high, and the door was firmly shut. This is another example of the symbolic value of the landscape in *J & A*: material boundaries such as the walls of Heliopolis signify graphically a religious-cultural barrier on the path towards wisdom and virtue. Similarly, the doors of Aseneth's tower stand for the point of communication between the earthly plane of human knowledge and wisdom and the spiritual dimension of the belief in God the Most High, as the speech of the man from heaven will point out.

## 5a. Aseneth's new creation

Lord, God of my father Israel  
The Most High, the powerful-one of Jacob  
You who have given life to all things  
And called (them) from darkness to light  
And from error to truth  
And from death to life  
You Lord bless this virgin  
And make her anew with your spirit (τῷ πνεύματί σου)  
And re-create her with your hand And revivify her with your life... <sup>23</sup>

The metaphor of creation/of being transformed is one of the recurrent motifs of *J & A*.<sup>24</sup> In Joseph's prayer of blessing for Aseneth the God of Jacob-Israel is addressed, so that Aseneth may be brought from darkness to light, like the primordial matter in the account of Genesis.<sup>25</sup> Through a conceptual passage from the physical plane to the ethical sense and the spiritual realm of being, the condition of light is associated with truth and life, while darkness becomes the emblem of error and death. The threefold plea to the Lord, which is emphasized by the use of the preposition ἀνα- in the verbs that express Aseneth's passage to a transformed existence, explicitly evokes God's intervention by means of His spirit, hand/creative action and life. The dualistic

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<sup>23</sup> *J & A*, 8.10-11: 'Κύριε ὁ θεὸς τοῦ πατρὸς μου Ἰσραὴλ

ὁ ὕψιστος ὁ δυνατὸς τοῦ Ἰακώβ

ὁ ζωοποιήσας τὰ πάντα

καὶ καλέσας ἀπὸ τοῦ σκότους εἰς τὸ φῶς

καὶ ἀπὸ τῆς πλάνης εἰς τὴν ἀλήθειαν

καὶ ἀπὸ τοῦ θανάτου εἰς τὴν ζωὴν

σύ κύριε εὐλόγησον τὴν παρθένον ταύτην

καὶ ἀνακαίνισον αὐτὴν τῷ πνεύματί σου

καὶ ἀνάπλασον αὐτὴν τῇ χειρί σου (...)

καὶ ἀναζωοποιήσον αὐτὴν τῇ ζωῇ σου...'

Note the formulaic repetition and the use of anaphora in this lyric passage.

<sup>24</sup> Cf. *J & A*, 9.5, (Joseph to Pentephres): No, I shall leave today (σήμερον), because this is the day in which God started to make His work, and in the eighth day I shall return again (πάλιν) to your house and I shall spend the night here.

<sup>25</sup> Genesis 1.3.

imagery recalls Philo's allegorical reading of the passage from Deuteronomy and its opposite conditions of life forever and spiritual death for human beings while still alive.

## 5.b The revelation of divine mysteries

Moreover, the language in the heavenly man's speech is evocative of divine mysteries. The snow-white honeycomb has come into being because it has been created by the messenger's words. In the following passage, the heavenly envoy addresses Aseneth with the significant appellative of μακαρία, which means 'happy' or 'blessed', designating her privileged communication with God the Most High. Divine mysteries are qualified as ineffable (ἀπόρρητα), a connotation which attempts to express the extraordinary nature of the divine itself. An implicit link is established between human speech, divine Word (Logos) and silence, or the word which cannot be spoken. These themes recur in *J & A* and are incorporated into the metaphorical image of unutterable holy mysteries. As Aseneth understands, the honeycomb itself is a figure of the Logos, the divine word, reason and spirit which permeates the superior realm of being. In the novel, as in the biblical account, the spirit (πνεῦμα) of God accompanies Joseph, whereas the spirit of life (πνεῦμα ζωῆς) indicates an innovative concept of *J & A*; this spiritual creative force is evoked by the hero in his prayer of blessing for Aseneth as the means to enact her mystical transformation. This last quotation confirms the extraordinary events in which Aseneth has taken part during the epiphany and miracle of the man from heaven:

Happy are you, Aseneth, because to you have been revealed the ineffable mysteries of the Most High (τὰ ἀπόρρητα μυστήρια τοῦ ὑψίστου), and happy are those who turn to the Lord in repentance, because they will eat from this comb, as this comb is spirit of life (πνεῦμα ζωῆς)...<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>26</sup>*J & A*, 15.14: μακαρία εἶ σύ, Ἀσενέθ, διότι ἀπεκαλύφθη σοι τὰ ἀπόρρητα μυστήρια τοῦ ὑψίστου, καὶ μακάριοι πάντες οἱ προσκείμενοι κυρίῳ τῷ θεῷ ἐν μετανοίᾳ, ὅτι ἐκ τούτου τοῦ κηρίου φάγονται, διότι τοῦτο τὸ κηρίον ἐστὶ πνεῦμα ζωῆς. καὶ τοῦτο πεποιήκασιν αἱ

This paper has aimed to support my reading of the novel of *J & A* as an originally Jewish-Hellenistic text which testifies to cultural pluralism and the thrust to convey philosophical knowledge and religious precepts to a multicultural audience of Jews and potentially non-Jews. The purpose of communicating biblical wisdom according to contemporary Jewish ethics and outlook, while being open to Hellenised cultural groups, found a fruitful instrument in the literary form of a novelistic love-story. The passages of the novel which have been analysed illustrate the significant theme of crossing ethnic, cultural and religious boundaries in the name of the Most High God. This theme is both spelled out in the characters' speeches and dialogues and embedded in the symbolic descriptions of the setting of *J & A*. Emblematic imagery and rhetorical figures in the hypothetical Jewish-Hellenistic original of *J & A* encouraged further significant readings of the novel in later Jewish/Christian environments. Philo of Alexandria, Jewish philosopher and interpreter of the Bible in its Greek-Hellenistic version, the Septuagint, offers an educated paradigm to evaluate the cultural milieu, genre and expected audience of *J & A*. Despite its apparently plain style and popular textual transmission, the novel represents a learned philosophical-religious commentary on the biblical text, dense with profound senses. The presence of various semantic levels and the ambivalence of figurative language maintained the fluid and multicultural character of *J & A* both at the time of its early composition and throughout the ages.

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μέλισσαι τοῦ παραδείσου τῆς τρυφῆς ἐκ τῆς ὁρόσου τῶν ῥόδων τῆς ζωῆς καὶ πάντων τῶν ἀνθέων τῶν ὄντων ἐν τῷ παραδείσῳ τοῦ θεοῦ. Διότι πάντες οἱ ἄγγελοι τοῦ θεοῦ ἐξ αὐτοῦ ἐσθίουσι καὶ πάντες οἱ ἐκλεκτοὶ τοῦ θεοῦ καὶ πάντες οἱ υἱοὶ τοῦ ὑψίστου, ὅτι κηρίον ζωῆς ἐστι τοῦτο καὶ πᾶς, ὃς ἂν φάγη ἐξ αὐτοῦ, οὐκ ἀποθανεῖται εἰς τὸν αἰῶνα χρόνον.

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