

When James Tabor graciously made two guest posts a couple of weeks ago, he raised a lot of intriguing questions for our blog readers. I was asked by one of them to address James's view that Jesus may well have been married. I was pretty sure I had dealt with this at one point on the blog, and just now I've checked, and it was almost exactly five years ago, well before most of you were on the blog, and probably before some of you were born. A series of posts. On a lively and interesting topic. Was in fact Jesus married?

The series started with a news report that a Gospel had been newly discovered that provided evidence that in fact he probably was. I'll start by reposting that one, and then get into the issue of how we can weigh the evidence one way or the other. It's an issue that continues to intrigue! But rarely does anyone actually discuss the actual *evidence*. It's much easier to make bold claims. I'm not talking about James here, who knows the evidence inside out, but the popularizers who want their names in papers or to sell millions of novels. Not to mention names here, but his initials are Dan Brown.....

Anyway, here is the post that started it off.

I have been repeatedly asked about the brand new news story, that a new Gospel has been discovered that shows that Jesus was married to Mary Magdalene and that they had children. If this sounds like (bad) fiction to you (think Da Vinci Code) (or for movies: think "Last Temptation of Christ"), it is. The claim is completely bogus. This "new" Gospel is not a Gospel, but a text that scholars have known for roughly forever. It's not a Christian text (ostensibly). It's about Joseph (as in the Old Testament) and his wife Asenath. Rather than explaining why the new claims about this text are not worth taking seriously (no scholar will), instead of explaining the whole situation myself, I give you a post made by Bob Cargill, assistant professor of classics and religious studies at the University of Iowa (UPDATE: Bob is now an Associate Professor at Iowa, and the Editor of the [Biblical Archaeology Review](#)). I reproduce his post here with Bob's permission. It's a bit long for this blog, but I thought you should get the whole shooting match before you.

[Review of "The Lost Gospel" by Jacobovici and Wilson](#)

Posted on November 10, 2014 by bobcargill (@xkv8r)

Except it's NOT lost, and it's NOT a gospel.

Since I've already been bombarded with questions from students and readers about the latest claims made by Simcha Jacobovici and Dr. Barrie Wilson in their new book, *The Lost Gospel*, I thought I'd post a quick response to this latest round of absurdity by repeating and re-posting some of the [comments I made over a year ago in a post announcing my spring 2014 University of Iowa course in Syriac](#) - a post that dealt (almost prophetically) with many of the claims made in this new book.

You can read most of Mr. Jacobovici and Dr. Wilson's book online (and search for the parts that interest you) at Google Books [here](#).

Mr. Jacobovici's new book essentially claims that the 6th century CE Syriac language

version of a Greek pseudepigraphical story entitled *Joseph and Aseneth* (which I discuss in my class "[Banned from the Bible: Intro to Pseudepigrapha and Apocrypha](#)" course at Iowa) is a "gospel", and should be read allegorically, but only after replacing every mention of Joseph with the name "Jesus", and every mention of Aseneth with "Mary Magdalene".

Now, if your first thought is, "WTF? This is just as problematic as the *Bible Code* dude, who attempts to read every passage in the Bible as an allegory for every modern event, from the Invasion of Iraq, to the Wall Street Crash, to President Obama's election, etc.", then you're right on the money. It is *precisely* that silly - same interpretative technique, same lack of evidence, same wishful speculation. The same guy who claims to have discovered the route of the Exodus, Atlantis, the nails of the cross, the tomb of Jesus (with Jesus still in it!), and another tomb of people celebrating Jesus' resurrection (with Jesus *still* in the other tomb), has now written a book claiming "evidence" that Jesus was married to Mary Magdalene, by swapping out the names of Joseph and Aseneth and replacing them with the names of Jesus and Mary Magdalene.

By that same allegorical logic, you could swap out the names of Samson and Delilah and claim that Mary Magdalene cut Jesus' hair. Or swap out Adam and Eve and conclude that Jesus and Mary Magdalene were the primordial couple. Or read David and Bathsheba allegorically and end up with Jesus having a son named Solomon, who is guarded by the Priory of Sion, and...well, you get the picture.

There is a reason that the scholars of the world are not paying any attention to this latest so-called "discovery": there's nothing there.

First things first: Mr. Jacobovici's *The Lost Gospel* is neither "lost" nor a "gospel". Scholars have known about and have studied the Syriac version of *Joseph and Aseneth*, located in the British Museum, for a very long time. Written by an unknown West Syriac writer dating to the late 6th century CE, the author composed an *Ecclesiastical History* that included a translation of part of a lost *Ecclesiastical History* by the Greek writer Zacharias Rhetor. The work is commonly referred to as [Pseudo-Zacharias Rhetor](#). This Syriac text is of interest because books 1-2 of Pseudo-Zacharias Rhetor contain a Syriac translation of the *History of Joseph and Aseneth*, which was often skipped in English translations because it is already known in the Greek. Keep in mind that the story of [Joseph and Aseneth](#) has been well documented over the years, both by my adviser at Pepperdine, Dr. Randy Chesnutt, who [wrote his dissertation](#) on *Joseph and Aseneth*, and by my Duke colleague Dr. Mark Goodacre, who has edited an [Aseneth Home Page](#) now for years.

Second: We already know why the story of Joseph and Aseneth was written. The story of *Joseph and Aseneth* is a well-known, ancient apocryphal expansion of the biblical account of the patriarch Joseph's marriage to [Aseneth](#), the daughter of the Egyptian Priest of On (Heliopolis). The story of *Joseph and Aseneth* was composed to solve the later theological problem of Joseph, a Hebrew patriarch, marrying a non-Israelite woman (Aseneth), in direct violation of biblical commands (albeit *later* commands) that prohibit Hebrews/Jews/Israelites from intermarrying with other peoples, for instance, those found in Deut. 7:3; Josh. 23:12; Ezra 9; and Neh. 13:25. As prohibiting intermarriage became a bigger and bigger deal in the Second Temple period, many Jews began to see the problem with Joseph's marriage to Aseneth, as Joseph was said to have not only married an Egyptian, but the daughter of an Egyptian priest!

In Gen. 41:45, the Bible says that Pharaoh gave Joseph one of his daughters as a wife:

“Pharaoh gave Joseph the name Zaphenath-paneah; and he gave him **Aseneth** daughter of Potiphera, priest of On, as his wife.”

Gen. 41:50-52 further says that Joseph’s wife Aseneth bore him two sons: Manasseh and Ephraim, whence we get the tribal names:

“Before the years of famine came, Joseph had two sons, whom **Aseneth** daughter of Potiphera, priest of On, bore to him. Joseph named the firstborn Manasseh, ‘For,’ he said, ‘God has made me forget all my hardship and all my father’s house.’ The second he named Ephraim, ‘For God has made me fruitful in the land of my misfortunes.’”

As one might imagine, this became a problem for Jews in the Second Temple period. Perhaps many asked, “How can God prohibit us from marrying women of another race when our patriarch Joseph did so?”

Enter *Joseph and Aseneth*, which was composed like so many pseudepigraphical stories of the Second Temple period and early Christian centuries to “explain away” the problem. We find these same apologetic techniques used in early Rabbinic writings as well as the Aramaic Targums, which clean up the stories of the Jewish Patriarchs by explaining away anything that might be perceived as a misdeed.

The popular ancient love story of Joseph and Aseneth serves an apology explaining why a righteous Israelite patriarch like Joseph would marry the daughter of a pagan priest. And the solution is a simple one: *Joseph and Aseneth* explains that Joseph’s wife, Aseneth, first converted to monotheism and belief in the Hebrew God *before* she married Joseph (a detail the Bible obviously “left out”). See? All better.

And that’s basically it. The biblical account says Joseph married an Egyptian woman, so *Joseph and Aseneth* explains that Aseneth first converted, and therefore was eligible to be married to Joseph.

Third: The Syriac account of *Joseph and Aseneth* in Pseudo-Zacharias Rhetor does not talk about Jesus and Mary Magdalene, and simply substituting names does not make it so. However, the Syriac account is still noteworthy because just prior to his retelling of the story, the author writes a letter to a certain Moses of Ingila, asking for a translation and whether there is a deeper allegorical (θεωρία) interpretation of the story beyond the literal narrative. Some have argued that Moses of Ingila’s response attempts to interpret the story of *Joseph and Aseneth* allegorically, as a gnostic union of the soul (represented by Aseneth) with the divine *Logos*/Word of God (represented by Joseph). Likewise, there have been many who have argued (largely unsuccessfully) that the text is an allegory, with Joseph symbolizing anything from Jesus to the nation of Israel.

For her part, some scholars have understood Aseneth’s description as the “Bride of God” in 4:2 as representative of a redeemed Israel, or of the matriarchs of the Bible, or perhaps even the practice of voluntary virginity, which was increasingly popular in Christian circles in the late first and early second centuries. The simplest answer is that one who is now a “bride of God” is one who is a “daughter of God”, i.e., “a Hebrew” (and no longer an Egyptian, at least for religious purposes), in much the same way that a “son of God” represents any “child of God” in the Hebrew text. Keep in mind that there are many “sons of God” mentioned in the Hebrew Bible/Old Testament that appear to be referring to heavenly

beings, from Job 1:6: -[וַיָּבֹאוּ כָּל בְּנֵי אֱלֹהִים לִפְנֵי יְהוָה](#) ([“Now it fell upon a day, that the **sons of God** came to present themselves before the LORD”](#)), to Job 38:7: [וְכָל בְּנֵי אֱלֹהִים שָׁאוּ](#) ([“and all the **sons of God** shouted”](#)), to Gen 6:2: [וַיַּרְאוּ בְנֵי אֱלֹהִים אֶת בָּנוֹת אָדָם כִּי יָפִין הֵיוּ](#) ([“and the **sons of God** saw the daughters of men, because they were fair”](#)), as well as in the New Testament, when human peacemakers come to be called “sons of God”: [μακάριοι οἱ εἰρηνοποιοὶ ὅτι αὐτοὶ υἱοὶ θεοῦ κληθήσονται](#) ([“Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called **sons of God**”](#)).

The use of the phrase “son(s) of God” in the Old and New Testaments does not automatically mean “INSERT JESUS’ NAME HERE”.

Fourth: Simply employing symbolism does not an allegory make. So

while *some* scholars have argued that the text is a distinctly Christian text, most scholars conclude that the text is distinctly Jewish, while allowing that the text *may* possess some evidence of later Christian tampering and reworking, especially those parts of the text involving Eucharistic interpretations of the meal of bread and wine found within the story. However, the attempts by multiple scholars (cf. [Chap 1 of Chesnutt](#)) to interpret the story allegorically ultimately fall short, as any allegorical interpretation must be highly selective of particular details, and therefore necessarily ignores many other details within the story that simply do not fit the supposed allegory, relegating claims of allegory to the realm of wishful thinking. The story must ultimately be read as what it is: a Jewish narrative apology for the patriarch Joseph’s mixed marriage, with possible, occasional Christian reworking.

Keep in mind that there are [all kinds of allegorical interpretations of biblical texts](#) in the first centuries BCE and CE. Chapter 15 of the pseudepigraphical [Epistle of Barnabas](#) offers an allegorical interpretation of the Creation account from Gen. 1. The first century Jewish scholar [Philo of Alexandria](#) also offered allegorical interpretations of biblical events and figures (including Joseph). The difference here is that Mr. Jacobovici and Dr. Wilson are claiming an allegorical interpretation of a pseudepigraphical text, as if the text of *Joseph and Aseneth* were itself canonical.

When all is said and done, Mr. Jacobovici and Dr. Wilson offer an allegorical interpretation of a Syriac translation of a (likely originally Greek) pseudepigraphical text, written to “clean up” the fact that the Hebrew patriarch Joseph married a non-Hebrew.

Fifth: The text used as “proof” of Jesus’ marriage dates to the 6th century CE, and only hopeful speculation pushes the *Syriac version* of this text back to earlier centuries. The fact that the Syriac version is composed long after an established minority tradition that depicts Jesus as Mary Magdalene’s [κουῶνος](#), or “companion” in the [Gospel of Philip](#), or the [Gospel of Mary](#), which states that Jesus “loved [Mary] more than the rest of woman” – a tradition that some modern interpreters and fiction writers have argued is evidence that the Mary mentioned is Mary Magdalene, and that the two were married – does not provide “evidence” that Jesus and Mary were married. It simply means that some later author was making a contribution to this tradition. BUT, because it is written *after* the others, it CANNOT be used as “evidence” of ANYTHING but a continuation of the already late tradition that Jesus was married.

It would be like citing a favorable book review written by followers of Simcha Jacobovici three centuries *after* the publication of *The Lost Gospel*, and citing it as evidence that Simcha knows what he’s talking about. Such a review would contribute nothing to Simcha’s

credibility, but would only serve as evidence that someone much later liked the book. Similarly, the Syriac version is a translation of a pseudepigraphical apology, upon which is forced Mr. Jacobovici's allegorical translation. This is evidence of nothing.

Sixth: (And please remember [I originally wrote the following over a year ago.](#)) **Anyone attempting an allegorical interpretation of *Joseph and Aseneth*, and arguing for anything *other* than an apology for why Joseph married a non-Israelite (and the daughter of a pagan priest at that), is grasping at speculative straws, and attempting (like the author of the Syriac text) to stretch the text into something it was never designed to do.** Whether it be a gnostic interpretation of the text, or an attempt to argue something truly ridiculous and sensational, for example, that the story somehow represents Jesus and Mary Magdalene (as "Bride of God", requiring an appeal to separate Gnostic texts like *Pistis Sophia*, the *Gospel of Mary*, and the *Gospel of Philip*), and that this allegorical representation from *six centuries after* the life of Jesus, relying on the weaving together of multiple Gnostic texts composed a full *century* after the life of Jesus, somehow provides "evidence" of aspects of Jesus' actual, historical life - such allegorical interpretations are the height of unsubstantiated speculation.

My teacher, Randall Chesnutt, said it best in his conclusion:

"While no one doubts the presence of symbolic and allegorical elements, the trend now is toward a method which recognizes those elements of symbolism and allegory which are straightforward and explicit in the narrative of Aseneth's conversion rather than those supposed to be encoded deep within it." (Chesnutt, *From Death to Life*, p. 45).

Finally: The book's methodology is highly problematic. Scholars won't reject Mr. Jacobovici's findings because of some "theological trauma" or a confessional, apologetic desire to preserve the Jesus described in the Bible. I'm an agnostic. I have no dog in the fight of whether Jesus was married or not. He could be married and have 4 kids like me and I wouldn't care. The problem is not a theological one, it is one of scholarship, methodology, and the (mis)use of evidence. Scholars won't reject Mr. Jacobovici's claims because they want to defend Christianity, scholars will reject Mr. Jacobovici's speculations because he engages in circular reasoning, lacks evidence, breaks any number of rules of textual criticism, and engages in what [I've described in the past](#) as "speculation wrapped in hearsay couched in conspiracy masquerading as science ensconced in sensationalism slathered with misinformation" - all of which is designed to sell books and get viewers to watch the accompanying documentary in the weeks leading up to Christmas.

So in my professional opinion as an archaeologist and a tenure-track professor at a major research university (GO HAWKS!), I must recommend against this book. Just don't bother. Were it a Dan Brown-esque novel, positing a speculative interpretation about the relationship between Jesus and Mary Magdalene utilizing a fanciful allegorical interpretation of a document written six centuries after Jesus came and went, I'd say buy it and have fun. Fiction can be so much fun! But the problem with this book is that Mr. Jacobovici *believes* what he's writing. He believes his interpretation is true. He *wants* it to be true. And that hovers somewhere between comical and scary.

[I HAVE read the book](#) and it really is worse than you might imagine. The text in question is neither "lost" nor a "gospel", and the allegorical reading of the Syriac version of *Joseph and Aseneth* is little more than a wishful hope that it would be so, employing little more

than name substitution and a desire to prove *The DaVinci Code* true. Absolutely no scholar will take this book seriously. It will not change Christianity. It will not change biblical scholarship. It's just Simcha doing what he does best: direct-to-the-public pseudoscholarship just in time for Christmas.



[So... WAS Jesus Married?](#)

[A Raffle!! Would You Like a Pre-publication Copy of My Book on Heaven and Hell?](#)