

DANIELA SCIALABBA

Creation and Salvation

*Forschungen
zum Alten Testament 2. Reihe*

Mohr Siebeck

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106



Daniela Scialabba

Creation and Salvation

Models of Relationship

Between the God of Israel and the Nations
in the Book of Jonah, in Psalm 33 (MT and LXX)
and in the Novel “Joseph and Aseneth”

Mohr Siebeck

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Alla mia famiglia,
Giuseppe e Graziella,
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Preface

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Table of Contents

Preface	VII
Introduction	1
1. The starting point of this study	1
2. The broader scientific context	1
3. The scope of the present study	4
4. Methodological approach	6
a) The book of Jonah	6
b) Psalm 33 (MT and LXX)	8
c) The novel “Joseph and Aseneth”	9
d) The final conclusions of this study	10
Chapter 1: The Book of Jonah	11
1. Introduction: preliminary observations and starting point for our exegesis	11
a) The importance of the book of Jonah for our study	11
b) A brief summary of the book of Jonah and the consequences for our study	13
c) Date of composition	15
d) The problem of the literary genre	18
2. Exegetical analysis	19
a) Background: Jonah’s call and his flight to Tarshish (Jonah 1:1–3)	20
α) Introductory remarks	20
β) Text and working translation	21
γ) Exegetical observations	21
δ) Concluding remarks	26
b) Jonah and the sailors (Jonah 1:4–16)	27
α) Introductory remarks	27
β) Text and working translation	28
γ) Exegetical observations	32
δ) Concluding remarks	59
c) Jonah and the Ninevites (Jonah 3:1–10)	60

α)	Introductory remarks	60
β)	Text and working translation	62
γ)	Exegetical observations	64
δ)	Concluding remarks	102
d)	Jonah's Dialogue with God (Jonah 4:1–11)	105
α)	Introductory remarks	105
β)	Text and working translation	106
γ)	Exegetical observations	108
δ)	Concluding remarks	130
3.	Conclusions	131
a)	The initial theological problem and the aim of the book	131
b)	Was the destruction of Nineveh only postponed?	132
c)	The links of content between the two parts of the book	133
d)	The attitude of the sailors and the reaction of YHWH	133
e)	The attitude of the Ninevites and the reaction of YHWH	134
f)	Two accounts that are complementary	135
g)	The function of the theology of creation	139
h)	A didactic narrative	140
	Chapter 2: Psalm 33 (MT and LXX)	143
1.	Introduction: Observations on the <i>status quaestionis</i> and conclusions relating to the starting point of our exegesis of the Psalm	143
a)	Preliminary observations	143
b)	The question of the literary genre and the "Sitz im Leben"	143
c)	The question of the sapiential nature of the psalm	145
d)	The question of dating	147
e)	Preliminary conclusions: the starting point for our study of Psalm 33	148
2.	Exegetical analysis	150
a)	The Masoretic Text of the psalm	150
α)	Introductory remarks	150
β)	Text and working translation	151
γ)	Exegetical observations	152
b)	The text of the psalm according to the LXX	204
α)	Introductory remarks	204
β)	The LXX Psalter	205
γ)	Exegetical observations	206

3. Conclusions	217
a) Traditional exegesis of Psalm 33 and its points of departure	217
b) The universal dimension of YHWH's influence on creation and history	218
c) The absence of the concept of covenant and the importance of the divine לִפְנֵי	219
d) The central messages of Psalm 33	220
e) Psalm 33 as a "new song"	220
f) The LXX strengthens the motifs of creation and mercy	221
Chapter 3: Joseph and Aseneth	223
1. Introduction: Observations on the <i>status quaestionis</i> and conclusions on the starting point for the exegesis of <i>Joseph and Aseneth</i>	223
a) Preliminary observations	223
b) The content of the work: a brief summary	224
c) Starting point and aims of our investigation	227
d) The novel Joseph and Aseneth in recent research	228
a) The text of <i>Joseph and Aseneth</i> and its textual versions	228
β) The original language	230
γ) Place of origin	230
δ) Date of composition	231
ε) <i>Joseph and Aseneth</i> : a Jewish writing?	233
ζ) The literary genre of <i>Joseph and Aseneth</i>	235
η) Conclusions	237
2. Exegetical analysis	237
a) The initial situation: Aseneth's idolatry	238
b) Second phase: The encounter with Joseph and its consequences	240
c) Third phase: Soliloquy and prayer to God	251
a) Chapter 11	251
β) Chapter 12	255
γ) Chapter 13	274
d) The divine recognition of Aseneth's actions	279
a) A brief summary of the apparition of God's messenger	279
β) The purpose of the apparition and the nature of salvation	281

γ) Aseneth called “City of Refuge”: analysis of <i>Jos.</i> <i>Asen.</i> 15:7.	283
3. Conclusions	287
a) The problem of idolatry and ignorance	287
b) The process of Aseneth’s μετάνοια	288
c) The divine recognition of Aseneth’s μετάνοια and the message of the angel	290
d) The literary fiction of the novel and its purpose	291
General Conclusions	293
1. Creation, mercy and salvation in Jonah, Psalm 33 and <i>Joseph and Aseneth</i>	294
a) Creation, mercy and non-Israelites in the book of Jonah	294
b) Creation, mercy and non-Israelites in Psalm 33	300
c) Creation, mercy and non-Israelites in <i>Joseph and</i> <i>Aseneth</i>	305
d) Creation and Salvation: texts compared	309
2. Conversion: in what sense?	318
3. Creation, mercy and salvation: further developments	322
a) Pseudo-Philo, “On Jonah”	322
b) Josephus, <i>Jewish Antiquities</i> , XX, §§ 34–48	324
c) Wisdom of Solomon 11:23–26	327
Bibliography	331
Abbreviations	331
1. Sources	332
a) Bible: Masoretic Text and Septuagint	332
b) <i>Joseph and Aseneth</i>	332
c) Jerome	333
2. Translations	333
a) Septuagint	333
b) <i>Joseph and Aseneth</i>	333
c) Pseudo-Philo, <i>De Iona</i>	333
3. Research tools (dictionaries, lexicons, grammars)	334
4. Commentaries, monographs, articles	335
Index	349

Introduction

1. The starting point of this study

The starting point of this study is the current debate on monotheism and religious pluralism. In recent decades, this debate has been strongly influenced by some authors such as Jan Assmann for whom the monotheism originating in the Old Testament is the root of the intolerance and violence of the three monotheistic religions.¹ This theory has provoked a multitude of debates among biblical scholars too. In this study, we do not wish to be concerned with Assmann's theory by justifying or challenging its basic premises, namely those which are to do with the theory that Israel developed a clear distinction between the true and the false in the sphere of religion. What seems more interesting for our study is, rather, another question: beyond the phenomena of intolerance and violence which can be attributed to biblical monotheism², one can ask: did it not also produce inclusive tendencies, ones that allow the conceiving of a positive relationship between YHWH, Israel and the non-Israelites? Following from this, what could be the theological assumptions permitting the elaboration of ideas able to justify such a relationship? What role does the idea of creation play in this process?

2. The broader scientific context

The questions we have cited have been treated, at least in part, in the studies of the development of Israel's theology in the Persian, Hellenistic and Roman periods, above all in relation to the real contacts between Israelites and non-Israelites, and the gradual evolution of this relationship which was nourished by the attraction which over time Israel's faith exercised on the so-called "others".³ In this connection, the theological reflection of

¹See e. g. J. ASSMANN, *The Price of Monotheism*, chapter 1.

²We cite here Assmann's theory and his language without going into detail into all its problematic nature.

³For a brief study of the problem, see e. g. J. MAIER, *Zwischen den Testamenten*, 297–299; J.J. COLLINS, *Between Athens and Jerusalem*, chapter 7; see also the still worthwhile book by

recent decades has been influenced by some categories which have taken hold in the exegetical debates but which, at the same time, have given rise to reservations about their sufficiency and legitimacy. Among these, it is necessary to mention the categories which have their roots in the biblical texts, such as those of election and conversion, and others, of more recent origin, such as those of particularism and universalism. In the face of this, we ask in a general way: to what degree do all these categories, ancient and modern, allow for the better understanding of biblical and non-biblical texts of Jewish origin? What are the debates from which these themselves originated? To what degree are these categories the bearers of concepts and prejudices which belong to more recent developments of philosophical and theological thought without their doing justice to the ideas present in the texts themselves and the circumstances in which they arose? In what way do these categories risk locking up the ancient texts in notions which are foreign to them and which, in the final analysis, reflect elements which Christian theology developed in more recent times?

In fact, the debate of recent decades has shown some scruples about employing these categories without a critical spirit. In this regard, for example, we cite the two categories of “particularism” and “universalism” which both go back to the period of the Enlightenment.⁴ These categories turn out to be inadequate by virtue of the fact that they are part of more general theories about the history of the development of the Jewish and/or Christian religions. In particular, the latter was conceived of as universal right from its beginnings, while Judaism was supposed to have known strong particularist tendencies which Christianity overcame. Thus, one understands how the two categories, “particularism” and “universalism”, imply a valuation: a universalistic religion would transcend the limits of a certain ethnocentrism, that is, of the specific traditions and particular religious history of a people. Religious particularism, on the other hand, would be associated with exclusivist tendencies and phenomena of intolerance. Because of the problematic nature of these categories, we ask, therefore, if they bear misleading preconceptions and if they are really suitable for an adequate enquiry into the biblical texts and/or the texts

A.D. NOCK, *Conversion*, 61–64, and the recent monograph by M.Z. SIMKOWICH, *The Making of Jewish Universalism*, chapters 3–4.

⁴For a more detailed study of the problems dealt with in this paragraph, see e. g. the following articles: U. RÜTERSWORDEN, art. “Universalismus/Partikularismus. II. AT”, 774–775; J. BLENKINSOPP, “Yahweh and Other Deities. Conflict and Accommodation in the Religion of Israel”, 360–361; J.S. KAMINSKY, “Election Theology and the Problem of Universalism”, 35–39.

developed in the Jewish *milieu* of the Hellenistic-Roman period. Finally, it is not to be taken for granted that these generic categories are the *passé-partout* for texts which often present facets and realities that are a good deal more complex.

Mutatis mutandis, although the categories of election and conversion have biblical roots,⁵ they cannot be applied *tout court* as pre-set concepts to texts in which they do not appear explicitly. There is a particular risk in speaking of the election of Israel as a category opposed *a priori* to those tendencies which allow us to conceive of a reciprocal relationship between the God of Israel and the non-Israelites.⁶ Doing this would create a real opposition between election and those tendencies of openness to the “others”.⁷ Such an opposition, however, is not in harmony with the biblical texts in which the theme of election is mentioned; on the contrary, it does not seem impossible for the biblical authors to reconcile the election of Israel with the approach of others to the faith of Israel (e. g. Isa 14:1).

With regard to the category of conversion, it should be noted first of all that the use of this word has no equivalent in the texts of the Hebrew Bible. Hence, there is actually no technical term to designate the conversion of non-Israelites to the God of Israel.⁸ In fact, where the verb *שׁוּב*, for example, has a religious connotation, it refers mainly to those Israelites who “return” to their God after being separated from him (e. g. Hos 6:1; Amos 4:6, 8–11). Or else, it is employed in relation to God who changes his decision about a punishment to inflict on those who have made themselves guilty before him (e. g. Jonah 3:10; Joel 2:14). However, it is unquestionable that, in some texts of the Hebrew Bible and the so-called intertestamental literature, there is mention of the cases of non-Israelites entering into a close relationship with the God of Israel. In this connection, one asks if the concept of conversion is an adequate common denominator with which to encompass all these examples of

⁵See e. g. F.A. SPINA, *The Faith of the Outsider*; V. HAARMANN, *JHWH-Verehrer der Völker*.

⁶See F.A. SPINA, *The Faith of the Outsider*, 6: “God did not choose Israel in order to preserve Israelites while condemning all others. That is not the way either election or exclusion works in the Old Testament. Israel was not chosen to keep everyone else out of God’s fold; Israel was chosen to make it possible for everyone else eventually to be included. Remember that YHWH selected Abraham and Sarah in the first place for the express purpose of blessing all the families of the earth (Gen. 12:3).”

⁷For a more thorough study of the implications of election, especially the relationship between election and behaviour towards non-Israelites, see e. g. J.S. KAMINSKY, “Did Election Imply the Mistreatment of Non-Israelites?” 398–399.

⁸For a brief survey of the Hebrew and Greek vocabulary concerning this topic, see D. SCIALABBA, “The Vocabulary of Conversion in Joseph and Aseneth and in the Acts of the Apostles”, 502–504.

a positive relationship between non-Israelites and the God of Israel to which scholars refer. Thus, we ask, for example, if a so-called “conversion” necessarily implies inclusion within the people of Israel? If the answer is positive, would this also involve the observance of the Law for those who are not Israelites by birth? Finally, would conversion to the God of Israel be translated into the exclusion of every other cult? To give a concrete example, could one speak of a case of conversion when the Aramaean official Naaman recognises that there is no God in all the earth except the God of Israel (2 Kgs 5:15) since he asks the prophet Elisha’s permission to be able to prostrate himself at the same time in the temple of Rimmon (2 Kgs 5:18)?⁹ Clearly, the answer to this question depends on the idea one has of “conversion”. It is for this reason that, in recent decades, scholars have sought to differentiate more neatly among the various categories of those non-Israelites who seem to display “sympathy” toward the people of Israel, its way of life and its God.¹⁰ These studies have led to employing the category of conversion *tout court* only with great caution.

The situation of research at the beginning of the third millennium allows us to examine in depth and in various ways the themes we have mentioned. For example, we could ask about the legitimacy of the traditional categories and seek to differentiate them better or to fine-tune them according to the historical and literary data.¹¹ Another approach would consist in investigating the historical evolution of these phenomena by tracing their various stages and influences. Yet another approach could even be occupied with the reciprocal relations between the Hellenistic-Roman historico-cultural sphere and the society in which some non-Israelites “sympathised” in some ways with the Jewish world and its religion.

3. The scope of the present study

Far from going in the direction of one of the approaches just mentioned or examining the historical research into the relationships between the non-Israelites and the Jewish communities in the Hellenistic and Roman

⁹For this text, see e. g. F.A. SPINA, *The Faith of the Outsider*, 86.

¹⁰For seven different categories and a large number of examples quoted in the Hebrew Bible, in the intertestamental literature and in non-Jewish texts, see S. J. D. COHEN, “Crossing the Boundary and Becoming a Jew”, *passim*.

¹¹See the approach of S. J. D. COHEN, *ibid.*; D.L. SMITH-CHRISTOPHER, “Between Esdra and Isaiah: Exclusion, Transformation, and Inclusion of the ‘Foreigner’ in Post-Exilic Biblical Theology”, *passim*.

periods, our work is aimed at looking into the *theological principles motivating and supporting the possibility of an approach by individuals and peoples to the God of Israel*. With this aim, our objective is to analyse some texts where the relationship between YHWH, Israel and the non-Israelites is examined. In particular, our analysis will deal with two Old Testament texts, the book of Jonah and Psalm 33, and an intertestamental text belonging to the Hellenistic-Jewish literature, the novel *Joseph and Aseneth*. Through the analysis of and exegetical comment on these texts, our study aims at understanding their position towards those who, although not Israelites by birth, come to know and/or find a relationship with the God professed by the people of Israel. The present study looks at three texts of different genres, periods and provenance in order to observe what ideas and theological themes they adopt in order to speak of the relationship between YHWH, Israel and the non-Israelites. In this way, we shall seek to identify the common ideas in the texts and to study how each text intended to present them in order to provide possible theological concepts for the argument.

For a first step, then, we shall investigate how the book of Jonah, with its didactic message, places both the sailors and the Ninevites before the message which God sends to each of them through his prophet and how all the characters in the story react in their relations to one another. In this connection, it will be our aim to identify and analyse the key theological *motifs* implied by the text and to investigate how coherent they are and how warranted by the narrative frame in which they are presented. Even if some questions remain open on account of the enigmatic character of certain passages, it seems interesting to point out and scrutinise two aspects: the *motifs* of creation and the mercy of God which, on close examination, constitute the threads with which the whole narrative is woven.

In a second stage, we shall look at Psalm 33 (MT and LXX). It is a hymn and so presents its arguments not through a narrative or a more or less clear allusion to historical facts or precise biblical episodes; rather, in it, the theme of the relationship between God and the nations is established according to more general ideas and principles which refer explicitly to the theme of YHWH as creator and Lord of history and as one who is merciful to those who trust in him. In this connection, we shall indicate particularly the implications of these themes in relation to all those who dwell on the earth and who are called on to fear and trust in YHWH.

In the third step of this study, we shall examine some passages we think important in *Joseph and Aseneth*. In its account of the story of the transfor-

mation of Aseneth who from being a pagan, repents in order to embrace the Jewish faith in full, it constitutes an example of a narrative in which there emerge on several occasions some fundamental *theologumena* of Israel's creed which the author uses to give theological legitimacy to the fact that a foreigner not only can have access to the salvation prepared by God for his people in the beginning but that, by becoming the wife of Joseph, Aseneth will have a not unimportant role for the descent of this people in the future. The aim of our enquiry in this case will once again be that of investigating exegetically those concepts and principles which the text adopts so that the prayer of a foreign woman who wishes to embrace the Jewish faith and her repentance can be accepted by the God of the patriarchs and by those who have been called to follow him right from the beginning.

It is our view that the combined analysis of these three texts will offer new perspectives for understanding how the relationship between God and the non-Israelites matured in the development of Israel's theology and with regard to its relationship with its God. In this way, the present study is an example of research which, by bringing together three different texts, aims to identify some central theological considerations which, although formulated differently in the respective texts, lie at the basis of a theology which seeks to conceive of a positive relationship between God and the non-Israelites. In this respect, we shall pay particular attention to the possible models of relationship which each text offers.

4. Methodological approach

a) The book of Jonah

The starting point of the present study will be the analysis and exegesis of chapters 1, 3 and 4 of the book of Jonah. As has been said, this analysis aims to investigate the text starting from the question as to the way in which it delineates the dynamic of the relationships between Israel, God and the nations. In this connection, we must clarify immediately that, even if our analysis is carried out carefully on the basis of a reading as close as possible to the text, it is not our business here to provide a systematic commentary on the book of Jonah as a whole. Thus, we shall not be considering chapter 2, and in particular, the so-called "Psalm of Jonah" (Jonah 2:3–10) since it is our belief that, in the overall scheme of the book, it is not an important passage for answering our basic question. The anal-

ysis of the chapters examined will be carried out on the basis of a “close-reading” of the Hebrew text which will make use of all the important grammatical and philological observations on the Hebrew text and take into consideration the narrative characteristics of the account. We do not aim to provide a criticism of the sources or to investigate the literary strata which such research could hypothesise; rather, we intend to take the text just as it is, in its final Masoretic redaction, in order to understand how it established the basic ideas concerning the theological concept of Israel regarding its relationship with the nations. It is clear that the text of Jonah is distinguished from others by its parabolic character; it has no interest in transmitting historical facts. Rather, the genre of the book is close to what could be described as a didactic narrative. In this way, as will be indicated in the introduction to the book in question, which will mention the main matters belonging to the composition of the text, the book of Jonah is not a linear account which presents events in a definite chronology and furnishes precise and exhaustive information on the change of places or scenes or characters. Therefore, working precisely from its didactic character, we shall seek to understand better the fundamental message which the text intends to transmit by focusing our attention on some questions which are often neglected by exegetical studies on the book of Jonah, even by recent commentaries, or which have been interpreted according to concepts which seem problematic today, as we have seen above, for example, “conversion” or “universalism”. In particular, we shall consider some aspects which in our opinion are of decisive importance for a better understanding of the status of the non-Israelites within this account in relation to Israel and its God. In this way, this study will be especially concerned to investigate the implications of the vows and sacrifices which the sailors offer to YHWH at the end of chapter 1; the “believing” of the Ninevites in chapter 3; the difference between the sailors’ “fearing” and the Ninevites’ “believing”; “God’s seeing”, as well as the vocabulary of mercy in chapter 4 and the interweaving of discourses and actions in it. Investigation into these elements will allow us to reconsider the book of Jonah by throwing new light on those aspects which have sometimes entangled its interpretation in conventional schemes such as that which offers a vision of the person of Jonah as a negative type of the Judaism of his time.¹²

¹²See e. g. W.H. VAN WIJK-BOS, “No Small Thing: The ‘Overturning’ of Nineveh in the Third Chapter of Jonah”, 218–219, who argues against such an understanding of the book of Jonah and the prophet.

b) Psalm 33 (MT and LXX)

The second text examined is Psalm 33. This psalm will help us to understand better how a poetic-hymnological composition intended to establish some theological ideas which gravitate around the question of God's action on the cosmos and his relation with all humanity of which Israel is a part. In a first stage, our exposition will focus on providing some guidelines which locate the psalm within the panorama of existing studies on the psalter. In this connection, we shall not fail to highlight that the interpretation of Psalm 33, above all, that developed in the course of the twentieth century, was largely influenced by *Formgeschichte* and its ramifications. We shall thus seek to throw new light on some characteristics proper to the psalm which, rather than having been read in a more universal interpretative key, which the text provides on several occasions, have been pigeon-holed, sometimes in a highly arguable way, for example, in a liturgical *Sitz im Leben* proper to Israel. This has prevented the studies from taking account of some important characteristics of the psalm which, instead, does not, for example, give any clear and explicit reference to Israel and its history. In this connection, it will be our business to try to understand what human qualities this composition is addressing and if it is treating solely of Israel. After presenting Psalm 33 within the framework of existing exegetical studies, we shall look first at the Masoretic Text followed by an interpretative reading of each verse taking account of the theological development of the psalm which we think to be unitary. In this connection, in fact, it will seem appropriate to consider the elements which figure in it within the overall frame of the theological ideas which structure the composition as a whole, giving it a harmonious hymnological shape, despite its "alphabetising" structure. For this reason it will be necessary to study in detail some distinctive elements of Psalm 33, above all those of mercy and creation which play a role of fundamental importance for understanding to what degree and why all the people on earth are being called on to fear YHWH and trust in his יְהוָה . In relation to the latter, we shall not neglect to try to understand the significance which the macarism in verse 12 assumes in the entire structure of the psalm. In addition, we shall compare the Masoretic Text of the whole psalm with that of the LXX which is characterised by some considerable differences precisely in relation to the main themes just mentioned. In the last step of our analysis, we shall look at all the important variants in the LXX so as to highlight how the universal stamp of the psalm is further confirmed by the oldest translation of the Hebrew Psalm text.

c) The novel “Joseph and Aseneth”

Joseph and Aseneth is an intertestamental novel belonging to Hellenistic-Jewish literature. Taking its cue from the hints in Gen 41:45, it develops the story of how the patriarch Joseph ends up marrying Aseneth, an Egyptian young woman, daughter of Pentephres, priest of On. The present study will consider especially the first part of the text, namely, chapters 1 to 21, which tell of the story of the meeting of Joseph and the pagan Aseneth. This is the starting point for a process of profound transformation in the woman which will lead her to abandon her idolatrous behaviour and embrace the faith in the God of Israel alone. It is clear that by developing the story of the change in Aseneth, the novel is concerned with the Israelites as cultic and ethnic community. Thus, it seems that the example of Aseneth, taken as a model by the narrator, could constitute a paradigmatic example of a pagan who has become a believer in the God of Joseph. This is because, on the one hand, she will have a certain importance in the story of the future Israel on account of her marriage with Joseph; on the other hand, the story of the two spouses is ascribed to the patriarchal period in which the prescriptions concerning new converts to the God of Israel play no role since the Sinai covenant and all the regulations required by the gift of the Torah are actually still non-existent. The novel, therefore, allows the placing of the story of the transformation of a pagan to the worship of the God of Joseph, outside every legal restriction in order to go still further and thus to present some theological ideas which would give not only legitimacy but also desirability to a foreigner's adhering to the Jewish faith.

After all the preliminary questions which will allow us briefly to situate the text of *Joseph and Aseneth* in a basic historico-literary framework, our analysis will investigate the text, interpreting some passages chosen in order to observe how this writing tackles the question of the relationship between God, the foreigners and the Jewish community of which Aseneth and Joseph are the respective representative models. In relation to this, therefore, there will be a careful reading of some passages of the novel which, taking account of the vocabulary employed, will examine all the important stages of the process of the maiden's transformation: starting off as pagan, she ends up in rejecting the gods of Egypt to which she had been devoted exclusively in order to worship the God of Joseph alone. To this end, we shall examine especially those elements which determine Aseneth's “religious” status both before and after her radical change, paying attention, first, to those conditions which constitute an obstacle to

getting close to Joseph and so to his God; then, the conditions which allow these obstacles to be overcome for the girl to address the God of Joseph as that creator God who gives pardon to all who call upon him.

The text will be analysed using a “close-reading” approach which will permit us, moreover, to identify those biblical *topoi* which occur on several occasions in the novel and which characterise Aseneth’s language, above all when she addresses the God of Joseph in her long prayer. As we shall see, Aseneth is presented as a non-Israelite who is calling on this God as creator God and merciful God. In this connection, it seems important to stress that our research is a sort of *novum* in the panorama of existing studies on *Joseph and Aseneth*. In fact, even if, since the nineteen fifties until the present day, this novel has increasingly recalled the attention of specialists, who have been occupied with it in various ways, there still exist few works which are concerned to comment in detail on some central passages of the text. Above all, an exegesis of the novel must take into consideration those passages which record the principal steps in the transformation of Aseneth, the theological concepts alluded to, and also what is not said in the text.

d) The final conclusions of this study

The final conclusions will contain a summary of the main results obtained from the analysis of each text. We shall also highlight the common ideas which the texts present in order to show how, in these texts, Israel conceived the models of relation between God, Israel and the nations. Finally, we shall seek to note how the important ideas and theological concepts in Jonah, Psalm 33 and *Joseph and Aseneth* return to a certain degree in contemporaneous or later texts in which similar questions arise the responses to which are open to new horizons. In this connection, there will be a brief presentation of some passages in which the question of the relationship between God, Israel and the other peoples is taken up again: Pseudo-Philo, *On Jonah*; Josephus, *Jewish Antiquities* (XX, §§ 34–48), and Wisdom of Solomon 11:23–26.

Index

Index of Ancient Sources¹

1. Old Testament (MT and LXX)

Genesis

1:3, 6	212–212
1:3, 7	169
1:9–10	169, 171
2:1	169
15:5	75
15:6	71, 138
21:11	110–111
37:27	238
37:34	250
39:7–10	242
41:45	224, 226, 238
41:49	238
41:45, 50	238
41:50–52	226
46:20	238
48:17–20	110–111

Exodus

14:31	75, 137
15:8	169–172, 211–212, 303
32:11–14	101
32:12	102
32:14	101
33:17	100
33:19–23	114
34:5–7	114–116
34:6	114, 252–253, 255, 273, 289

Numbers

20:12	72
-------	----

Deuteronomy

1:32–35	73
6:25	207–208
13:18	94
24:13	207
26:17–19	181–183, 187
30:10	83

Joshua

13:13, 16	211–212, 303
-----------	--------------

1 Samuel

8:6	110–111
12:18	50

2 Samuel

1:11	250
------	-----

1 Kings

13:33–34	84
17:19	18
21:29	78

2 Kings

5:15	4
5:18	4
5:23	270
14:24	16
14:25	22, 23, 26
17:7, 13	84

¹For the book of Jonah, Psalm 33, and *Joseph and Aseneth*, see the Table of Contents.

1 Chronicles

12:18 87

2 Chronicles

20:12 73

20:20 72

2 Esdras

19:6 258

Tobit

14:4, 8 18

3 Maccbees

2:3 257

Psalms

1:1 179
 2:12 181
 20:6-7 156
 19:9 160
 23:5^{LXX} 207-208
 25:8 160
 29:9^{LXX} 261
 31:2^{LXX} 253
 31:5^{LXX} 261
 31:7^{LXX} 273
 32:8, 10 195
 32:11 157
 33:15 98
 34:16 195
 40:3, 6, 11 158
 42:2 179
 50:19^{LXX} 253
 59:17 156
 61:9 56
 63:8 156
 65:9 156
 67:5 156
 67:6-8 156
 67:5-6^{LXX} 267
 78:13 169-172, 211
 78:21-22 73
 78:22 202, 297
 81: 1, 6 156

85:5^{LXX} 252
 88:13^{LXX} 213
 89:16 180
 90:14 156
 92:16 160
 94:7 97, 99-100
 94:9 98
 94:11 98
 96:1, 10 158
 97:11 157
 98:2 158
 98:4 156
 98:9 156
 101:1^{LXX} 261
 103:6 207
 103:30^{LXX} 213
 104:24 164
 109:12, 16 166
 112:1 179
 115:3-8 48
 119:64 164
 119:137 160
 132:2 54
 132:9 156
 135:5-6 48
 141:3^{LXX} 261
 144:9 158
 144:10-11 158-159
 144:15b 180, 183
 147:11 196-197
 149:1 158
 149:7, 9 159

Job

11:11 97-100
 16:17 87
 34:21 241

Wisdom of Solomon

11:23-26 327-329

Sirach

4:10 267
 24:8 258
 36:17 257
 48:15 248
 49:10^{LXX} 18

Isaiah

1:27	207–208
7:9	73
11:9	163–164
19:21	57
19:22 ^{LXX}	254
28:17	207–208
29:15–16	97, 99
37:19 ^{LXX}	278
42:10	158
43:10	71
55:11	48
58:1b–9	81
58.5	250
59:2	88
59:6	87–89
59:16	207
59:17	208

Jeremiah

3:19	84
8:5	84
8:6	248
15:7	84
22:3	87
23:10	163
23:23	241
26:3	85, 101
26:13	101–102
26:15	47, 48
26:19	102
38[31]:19	248

Lamentations

2:10	250
5:3	266–267

Ezekiel

5:11	126
7:23	87
20:17	126
45:9	87

Daniel

9:20 ^{LXX}	253
---------------------	-----

Hosea

6:1 ^{LXX}	254
14:3	84, 99
14:4	266

Amos

4:6	84
4:8–11	84
5:15	103
7:3	248
7:3, 6	103

Joel

2:12–14	79
2:13	84, 95, 99, 115–116
2:13–14	85, 95–96, 103
2:14	248, 253
2:17–18	261
3:5	37, 38
4:19	87

Nahum

3	91
---	----

Habakuk

3:3	164
-----	-----

Micah

6:9 ^{LXX}	37, 38
--------------------	--------

Zephaniah

2:3	37
2:13	86

2. Dead Sea Scrolls

4QXII ^g	35	4QPs ^q (= 4Q98)	148
4QPs ^a (= 4Q83)	148	MurXII	35

3. Old Testament Pseudepigrapha

Pseudo-Philo, On Jonah	321–324
------------------------	---------

4. Philo of Alexandria

<i>Somn.</i>	1.76	258
--------------	------	-----

5. Flavius Josephus

<i>Ant.</i>	20.34–48	324–327
-------------	----------	---------

6. Jerome

<i>Commentarii in prophetas minores</i>	(CCL76, 392–393	52–53 note 154
---	-----------------	----------------

Index of Hebrew Words

אולי	34–37, 91, 103	הָסֵד	8, 114, 118, 156, 162–168, 173, 175, 186, 194–198, 200–204, 209, 217–221
אמן <i>hiph.</i>	61, 70–78, 202	חשב	28 note 63, 101
אֲמוֹנָה	160–162	חתר	31 note 74
אָרַץ	163–164, 172–173	טול	49
אֲשֶׁרִי	178–181	ידע	38, 75, 125, 129
בדל	88	יחל <i>pi.</i>	196, 198, 202–203, 216
בחר	182	ירא	30, 32, 41–42, 44, 49–51, 74–77, 168, 193–195
בטח	201–202, 216	יִשְׁרָיִם	144, 153–155, 157, 159
ברא	213	כִּי	152, 153, 159, 160, 168, 201
גדל	108, 125, 127	כֹּל	185–186
גְּדוֹל	65–66	כנס	169, 171
גוי	174–175, 179–180, 182, 185, 188	לבש	80
דָּם נָקִיא	47–48	מִי־יֹדֵעַ	91–92, 103, 253
דִּרְדָּר רָעָה	99	מלא	163–164
הפך	68–69	נאד	169–172, 212
וַיְהִי	21–22	נָד	169–172, 211–212
זבח	51–53	נְחֻלָּה	182
זעק	32–33	נחם <i>niph.</i>	93–97, 100–101, 105, 115
חוס	125–129,	נָפֵשׁ	199–200, 220
חָמָס	82, 87–91, 163		

- נצב 172
 נצל 193, 198–199, 215
 עבר 40–41
 עם 174–175, 180, 182
 עמד 175, 212–213
 עמל 108, 125, 127
 עשה 43–45
 תשע 17, 35–36
 תתשע 28–29, 34
 תדקח 206–208, 210,
 ומשפט תדקח 161–162
 צדיקים 153–155, 157, 159
 פלל 112
 ראה 61, 97–100, 104, 189, 191
 דם 33–34
 רעה 29, 63–64, 84–86, 90, 99, 100–102,
 111, 113, 115–118, 120.
 רעה גדולה 106, 110, 120.
 רעע 110–112
 שוב 3, 31 note 75, 46, 48, 64, 79, 82–86,
 91, 93–95, 100.

Index of Greek Words

- ἀγνοέω/ἄγνοια 241, 262–263, 277, 278,
 288
 ἀθανασία 230, 243
 ἁμαρτάνω 261
 ἁμαρτία 252–254, 260–262, 272, 277
 ἀνομέω 261
 ἀρπάζω 268–270
 ἀσεβέω 261–262, 278
 ἀφθαρσία 230, 243
 ἄσκός 169, 211–212, 304
 γιγνώσκω 277–278
 διασώζω 35–38
 δικαιοσύνη 206, 208–209, 304
 εἶδωλον 238–239, 243, 248, 251, 255,
 262, 277–278
 ἐλεημοσύνη 206–210, 304
 ἔλεος 209–210, 216, 304–305, 329,
 ἐλπίζω 216, 305, 328
 ἐλπίς 271, 273, 276, 289
 ἐπεικής 252, 271
 καταφεύγω 260–261, 264, 273, 275–276,
 280
 καταφυγή 271, 273, 276, 280, 284–286,
 289
 κράζω 260–264,
 κτίζω 213, 257
 μετανοέω 248, 284–285
 μετάνοια 226, 280, 282, 284–288,
 290–292, 328,
 ὅπως 35–38
 ὄρφανία 274–275
 ὄρφανός 266–267, 272, 276
 πατήρ 241, 255, 265–269, 271–272, 276,
 280
 ποιέω 207, 210, 240, 257, 260, 304, 328
 πόλις καταφυγῆς 280, 284–286
 πολυέλεος 252
 σέβομαι 42, 328, 278
 στερεόω 210–211, 304
 στερέωμα 210, 257–258
 σώζω 215–216
 σωτηρία 215
 φείδομαι 260–261, 329
 φιλόπρωπος 274, 276

Subject Index

- Adhesion to the God of Israel 9, 14, 46,
 59–60, 130, 135–138, 203, 219, 223, 227,
 231, 247–249, 279, 289–290, 297–298,
 308, 310, 326.
 Conversion 2–4, 7, 12, 37, 58–60,
 137–138, 233, 236–237, 253, 255, 285,
 289, 291–292, 294, 305, 308–309,
 318–322, 324–325.
 Covenant 9, 24, 33, 83, 97, 114, 130, 138,
 140, 144–146, 166, 179, 181–184,
 187–189, 199, 209, 219, 222, 287, 293,
 299–300, 302, 304, 311–212, 319.
 Creation 1, 5, 8, 49, 121, 130, 132–133,
 135, 138–140, 144, 146, 148–149, 164,
 168–175, 177, 186, 191, 196–197, 210,
 212 – 213, 218–219, 221–223, 247,

- 304–305, 307, 309–311, 314–316,
319–320, 322–324, 327, 329.
- Election 2–3, 97, 178–179, 182, 184,
185, 188–189.
- Exodus 43, 69, 101, 114–115, 170–171,
182, 184, 188, 198, 212–213, 217, 219,
221, 259, 290, 292, 312.
- Formula of grace 113–118, 124, 127,
130, 307, 316–317, 328.
- Idolatry 52, 84, 94, 225, 237–238, 245,
247–249, 253, 255–256, 259–260,
262–263, 266, 270, 276–277, 283,
286–292, 305–308, 321.
- Ignorance 125, 241–242, 255, 262–263,
274, 277–278, 287–288, 290, 305.
- “New song” 144–145, 150–151, 157–159,
204, 217, 220–221, 300.
- Refuge 181, 216, 226, 249, 252, 260–261,
263–264, 267–268, 270–277, 279–281,
283–290, 292, 295, 307–308, 321, 323.
- Repentance 6, 79, 83, 85, 91, 95–97, 100,
102, 111, 113–114, 117, 124, 130,
138–139, 216, 225, 241, 249, 256,
276–278, 282, 284–285, 297, 299, 306,
308, 310, 315, 319–320, 322, 324.
- Sacrifice 7, 14, 27, 32, 45–46, 49, 51–60,
75, 134–137, 237–238, 249, 251, 262,
288, 296, 299, 310, 315, 318, 325.
- Salvation 6, 11–12, 33, 36–39, 46, 57, 61,
73, 75, 77–78, 81, 89, 90–92, 103,
120–122, 124, 132–140, 156, 158, 160,
192–193, 195–200, 203–204, 207–208,
215–223, 258–259, 265, 270, 276,
281–282, 283, 285, 287, 290, 294,
297–298, 302–303, 305, 307–312,
315–320, 322–324.
- Self-abasement 61, 73, 78–82, 96–97,
104, 137–138, 241, 250, 255, 289, 316.
- Sitz im Leben 8, 143–148, 154, 179, 217.
- Vows 7, 14, 27, 32, 49, 51–60, 75,
134–137, 237, 296, 299, 310, 315, 318.