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Asenat

Why Have the Tribes of Ephraim and Manasseh an Egyptian Ancestress?

Edgar Kellenberger

1 Introduction

When we find passages in the Old Testament whose informations do not conform to the other texts, the fundamental question arises: Can we find here a particularly old information which differs from later ideas? Or, on the contrary, are they very young formulations that only became possible towards the end of the canon formation? This problem can also be seen in the rare information about the Egyptian Asenat, who is mentioned as Joseph's wife and as the mother of Ephraim and Manasseh. Asenat is mentioned three times:

1. "Pharaoh called Joseph's name Zaphenath-paneah; and he gave him Asenat, the daughter of Potiphera priest of On as a wife." (Gen 41:45a)
2. A few verses later we read: "To Joseph were born two sons before the year of famine came, whom Asenat, the daughter of Potiphera priest of On, bore to him." (41:50) – This is followed by the naming of Manasseh and Ephraim by Joseph.
3. A few chapters later we read within a genealogical list of the descendants of Jacob: "To Joseph in the land of Egypt were born Manasseh and Ephraim, whom Asenat, the daughter of Potiphera, priest of On, bore to him." (46:20)

I wonder why Asenat is expressly mentioned as the daughter of an Egyptian priest, and yet three times – always including the entire title. The Egyptian city of On, better known by the Greek name Heliopolis, was an important cultic place. What does it mean that the important northern tribes Ephraim and Manasseh go back to a non-Israelite mother?

Strangely enough, the monographies about the tribal and genealogical contexts neglect this question[1]. And even the modern Genesis commentaries show little interest. They are often satisfied with the short remark that a pre-exilic narrator had no difficulties with such a marriage, but that this marriage – initiated by Pharaoh – was glorious[2]. The commentaries do not go into questions about the mother of the two Israelitic tribes.

2 The Hypothesis of a "Diaspora Novel"

The situation is quite different since Bernd Diebner and his pupil Thomas Römer. As early as 1992, they published the thesis that this narrative is a novel or a post-exilic midrash by the Egyptian diaspora. One of its goals is the legitimation of mixed Israelitic-Egyptian marriages. Diebner and Römer interpret the Joseph narrative as a deliberate polemic against the ban of mixed marriages, propagated in Jerusalem (as well as in the Mesopotamian diaspora).

This publication, in French and in a remote place[3], was hardly noticed. Without knowing it, a decade later, Andreas Kunz from Leipzig came to similar conclusions about the intentions of the narrative and the marriage with Asenat[4]. Since then, Thomas Römer[5] disseminated the thesis of his teacher and included it also in his German textbook of 2014.

Today it is no longer objectionable to date this narrative into post-exilic times. The arguments put forward seem to be plausible: The diaspora-friendly attitude, the elaborated form of a long novel, as well as the rare mention of the Joseph narrative outside Genesis, can best be explained by a late date. Nevertheless, many difficulties remain; I will discuss five points:

2.1 Dating

The problem of dating is connected with questions concerning the intentions of the novelist. Diebner proposed provocatively the end of the 2nd

[1] NOTH, *Personennamen*; NEEF, *Ephraim*; HIEKE, *Genealogien*; HENSEL, *Vertauschung*. The same deficit can be observed in the studies of Josef's family by HUMPHREYS, *Joseph* and BRETT, *Procreation*.

[2] See, e.g., SEEBASS, *Josephgeschichte* and WILLI-PLEIN, *Genesis* (*ad locum*); more prudent is EBACH, *Genesis*.

[3] DIEBNER, Joseph; RÖMER, Joseph.

[4] KUNZ, Ägypten, 215.

[5] RÖMER, Pentateuch, 101-103.

century. His pupil Römer was more cautious and thought of the 6th or 5th century; today he favors the 5th or 4th century. Nearer to Diebner is Kunz, who found the concrete relations of the Ptolemaic 3rd century mirrored here. This broad spectrum of attempted datations points to the difficulty of a definable *Sitz im Leben*.

Since when is it conceivable that a diaspora in Egypt refers to non-Judaic eponyms such as Joseph, Ephraim, and Manasseh? Diebner and others postulate an exodus from the north on the occasion of the Assyrian annexation (722 BCE), or even a northern Israelitic foundation of the military colony of Elephantine. But all this is pure speculation without any textual or archaeological source[6]. The Elephantine papyri (5th century) mention indeed many personal names, but Joseph, Manasseh, Ephraim, and Asenat appear neither as contemporary figures nor as biblical persons.

The preparation of such a long novel demanded a period of maturation during a longer exile. But the later the Joseph narrative, the more difficult it is to explain the astonishingly skillful (though not seamless) embedding of this alien element into the Pentateuch. What speaks especially against a late date: The Greek and the Samaritan traditions[7] follow here remarkably literally the Masoretic text. The later a text insertion occurs, the more varied is the still insufficiently stabilized text tradition[8]. Furthermore, we can ask why the (more recent) Greek novel *Joseph and Aseneth* presupposes Aseneth's conversion to the Jewish faith, whereas the Hebrew novel is not interested in it.

2.2 The Language of the Narrative

Even an archaizing text, written in an earlier style, reveals the author's later style here and there by the vocabulary and by the syntax[9]. In contrast to the Aramaic Elephantine papyri, it is noticeable that Aramaisms are absent in the

[6] Additional speculations by DONNER, *Geschichte*, 415; SCHMID, Josephs-Geschichte, 111 and RÖMER, Joseph Story, 195.

[7] Samaritan Pentateuch and Targum.

[8] An example from the New Testament: The alien pericope "Jesus and the adulteress" is preserved by multiple textual variants in the manuscripts and put in divergent places: after John 7:52 or 7:36 or 21:24 or Luke 21:38.

[9] The view that later authors were capable of imitating perfectly an earlier classical style is disproved by POLAK, Storytelling, 449-454.

Joseph narrative[10]. This is clearly in contrast to the books *Esther* and *Daniel*, also reflecting a diaspora situation. Moreover, the sentences are much shorter than in Esther and Daniel and syntactically not so overcharged. And if we can follow the sociolinguistic investigations by Frank Polak from Tel Aviv, we may presuppose a formulation of the Joseph narrative in the pre-exilic period[11].

2.3 Tribal History as Background?

In a late text, it would be understandable that the narrator is no longer interested in tribal eponyms, but freely creates literary figures. However, the question arises as to why the election of names fell precisely on Joseph, Ephraim, Manasseh (and Asenat). Is this a pure invention, or do older traditions lie behind? The same question also arises particularly when Jacob blesses his grandchildren and prefers the younger Ephraim (Gen 48): Is this merely a literary copy of the common motive of the "change of the firstborn right", or may we suppose remembrances of ancient tribal history? These questions are even more acute, if the passages about Asenat are seen as late *Fortschreibung* of a text which knew nothing about this Egyptian figure[12].

[10] It is true that REDFORD, *Study*, 54-65 wants to show late language by means of listed lexemes and idiomatic expressions, which are found especially in late literary works. But Redford can not find any real aramaisms in Gen 37–50. Against Redford's comparison with post-exilic literature, it is also clear that typical grammatical phenomena of preexilic literature are common in the Joseph narrative but are very rare in typical post-exilic Hebrew. Based on the electronic datebase of accordance™, I give some examples by a comparison with the Book of Esther (half length of Gen 37–50): the *He locale* attached to a noun (53 × / Esth 0 ×), the accusative particle *'et* followed by a pronominal suffix (70 × / 7 × [= Esth 5:12; 8:7.11; 9:17.18.22.25; against 37 cases of verbal forms with pronominal suffix in all chapters in Esth]), the modal particle *nā'* (17 × / 0 ×), the *perf. consecutivum* after an imperative (4 × [= Gen 44:4; 45:9.19; 47:29] / 0 ×; in Esth command chains are always continued by further imperatives or by imperfects). Significant is also the shift in the use of the *infinitivus absolutus*: from the classical figura etymologica (14 × / 2 × [= Esth 4:14 and 6:13]) to the use as finite verb form within a chain of finite verb forms (1 × [= Gen 41:43] / 11 × [= Esth 2:3; 3:13; 6:9; 8:8; 9:1.6.12.16^{bis}.17.18]). And the preposition *'et* "with" (51 × / 3 ×) demonstrates a shift to *'im* (16 × / 11 ×).

[11] See particularly POLAK, The Oral and the Written, and POLAK, Sociolinguistics; he analyses the pre-exilic "plain classical style" of the Joseph narrative.

[12] See, for instance, recently GIUNTOLI, Ephraim, who claimed that Ephraim and Manasseh, in Genesis 41 and 48, were inserted by a late Judaic redactor, who wanted to reconcile the returners born in the Babylonian exile with the native population of Juda.

2.4 Egyptian Lokalkolorit?

The numerous efforts of Egyptologists and Old Testament scholars to prove the familiarity of the Joseph narrative with Egyptian life conditions gave a poor result[13]. Even the Egyptian names (Asenat, Potiphera, Zaphenat-paneach and others) allow no clear etymology. Thus, one must assume that the author(s) did not live in Egypt, but either in Israel or possibly in another diaspora.

2.5 Theological Remarks

Finally, a fundamental theological remark: The interpretations by Diebner, Römer and Kunz, praising the progressiveness of intercultural mixed marriages, confirm 1:1 their own liberal-humanist philosophy, deleting any irritation over the biblical text. In my opinion, however, the value of biblical texts lies precisely in the fact that we can learn from them new and irritating things, which resist the human desire for self-affirmation.

So, I remain skeptical against a smooth classification of the Joseph narrative as a young diasporic literature[14].

3 Personal Names

My own small contribution, of course, cannot lead to a clear decision. However, my following observations point to tribal aspects which hitherto were rarely observed, and which can be helpful for comprehending the complex Joseph narrative. I see surprising connections between Egypt and Ephraim, which are found in the Old Testament as well as in inscriptional material. I must confess, however, that these observations are rather isolated mosaic stones from which can scarcely be derived a closed picture. But at least my observations point in a definite direction.

a) Aaron's son, El'asar, is buried in the Ephraimite hill country at the place of his son and successor, Pinchas (Josh 24:33). With Pinchas we find a personal name of Egyptian origin. His maternal grandfather also bears an Egyptian name: Puțiel (Exod 6:25).

[13] Against VERGOTE, *Joseph*, see, for instance, REDFORD, *Study*, 187-243, and RUPPERT, *Genesis*, 44-47.

[14] Other arguments for a pre-exilic north-Israelitic origin are presented recently by WEINGART – BLUM, The Joseph Story.

b) Joshua is buried in his Ephraimite inheritance, at Timnat Cheres (Judg 2:9). Cheres probably goes back to the Egyptian god Horus[15]. That such a prominent person as Joshua has hereditary possessions in a place with an Egyptian name is surprising.

c) A review of other Egyptian names in the OT is also revealing[16]. Surprisingly, the Egyptian names Pinchas and Pashchur are found among the temple staff: In Shilo – in the tribe of Ephraim! – are Hofni and his brother Pinchas[17]. The name Pinchas is a priestly name documented during many centuries: as grandson of Aaron, as son of Eli at Shilo, and up to the post-exilic period, where an El'asar ben Pinchas – probably also a priest – is mentioned for Jerusalem (Ezra 8:33). But, also on the Samaritan Garizim the priests named Pinchas often are documented in the Hellenistic period[18].

d) The name of Pashchur ("Son of Horus") is documented during many centuries for priests (and also for other officials) in the Negev and in Jerusalem, but not in Ephraim/Samaria. At the end of the 8th. century, the name is documented at Arad and Aroer[19]. In Arad eight ostraca were found near the temple district, one of which mentioned the name of Pashchur and one of the priesthood Meremot[20]; these ostraca may be priestly lots[21]. At the end of the 7th. century, we find in Jerusalem a Pashchur as priest and temple guardian, who made life difficult for the prophet Jeremiah[22]. In the books Ezra and Nehemiah, the name often occurs for priesthood[23].

These observations are surprising and irritating. In view of the strong economic and cultural Egyptian influence, it is astonishing that the region of

[15] The variant Timnat Serach (Josh 24:30) is an israelitizing correction. Joshua is also an Ephraimite in Num 13:8.16 and 1 Chr 7:27.

[16] See ZADOK, Namen, 392-395 and ZADOK, *Pre-Hellenistic Anthroponymy*, 175f. Of course, not all derivations from Egyptian are beyond doubt.

[17] 1 Sam 1–4. A further activity of this priestly family is mentioned in 1 Sam 14:3.

[18] MAGEN, *Mount Gerizim*: inscriptions nr. 24-25; 61; 384; 385.

[19] RENZ – RÖLLIG, *Handbuch*, 163.168: Arad(8):50 and Ar(8):2.

[20] See Ezra 8:33; Neh 3:4.21; 10:6.36.

[21] So, RENZ – RÖLLIG, *Handbuch*, 160 with bibliography.

[22] More namesakes (probably non-priests) are mentioned in the Book of Jeremiah and in bullas of the 7th and 6th century; see RENZ – RÖLLIG, *Handbuch*, under nr. 1.22 and 11.39-43, as well as DAVIES, *Hebrew Inscriptions*.

[23] Ezra 2:38 (= Neh 7:41); 10:22; Neh 10:4; 11:12; compare 1 Chr 9:12.

Judah – being nearest to Egypt – knows Egyptian names exclusively for the temple staff, but otherwise is largely free from Egyptian onomastics. However, a more varied picture emerges for the north of Israel, especially for the tribe of Ephraim where also the non-priest Joshua has a connection to an Egyptian toponym. This ensemble of Egyptian onomastics cannot be accidental but must have a deeper reason (or more). The wide geographic spectrum of the temple staff with Egyptian names – from the south to the north – makes an explanation not easier. In view of the broad temporal spectrum, it seems impossible to explain the phenomena as a late development by intermingling of different traditions.

It is true that the reference to a Samaritan diaspora in Egypt, mentioned mainly by Flavius Josephus[24], would tempt to a Samaritan track. However, one can hardly assume that a Samaritan novel legitimizes a diaspora existence by the birth of Ephraim and Manasseh in Egypt. On the contrary, all Samaritan informations on Asenat are following literally the Masoretic text. Only the (non-Samaritan!) Targum Jerushalmi brings an extension to Gen 48:9 (Joseph presents his sons to the blessing Jacob), adding the common rabbinical interpretation that Asenat is the daughter of Dina: Asenat sprouted from the problematic connection with Shechem, then was expelled by Jacob under a bush, and finally adopted in Egypt by Potiphar[25]. Such an israelitization of the Egyptian Asenat is, as far as I know, lacking in the Samaritan tradition.

In view of a possible late date, observations on 1 Chr are also interesting. Here, Asenat is completely lacking. This is all the more striking as 1 Chr 1–9 integrated many Canaanite and Aramaic family traditions into the citizens' lists of Israel, as the commentary by Thomas Willi has shown. In addition, Willi calls the tribe Ephraim the "most Egyptian of all tribes"[26]. But the Egyptian names – Assir, Mushi, and Moses – are focused on the citizen list of the tribe Levi[27]. Also here are striking connections to the temple staff.

[24] See HENSEL, *Juda*, 85-90: beginning of a Samaritan diaspora in Egypt in early Hellenistic time.

[25] See the index under Asenath in GINZBERG, *Legends*.

[26] WILLI, *Chronik*, 265 about 1 Chr 7:36.

[27] Compare WILLI, *Chronik*, 205. Also the names of Aaron and Mirjam may have an Egyptian origin.

4 Conclusion: Different Understanding Over the Centuries

For all these reasons, I remain skeptical about a late authorship of the Joseph narrative and its mention of Asenat and her sons. Instead, I suspect old relations between Egypt and Ephraim, which are however difficult to scrutinize. The fact that the text found new and changed relevance in later times does not speak against this. Above all, the evaluation of the narrated events changed, according to the different profile of the recipients. Pharaoh's marriage arrangement to Joseph with an Egyptian priest's daughter was initially regarded as an honour; but later on, this view was brought into the critique of those circles which were opposed to mixed marriages, as well as threatened by the rivalry with the former northern tribes.

Possibly Jacob's blessing of his grandsons Ephraim and Manasseh (Gen 48) gives an apparent critique: Significantly, Asenat is no longer mentioned here, but Jacob embraces (or even usurps) his grandchildren as his legitimate descendants ("they shall be mine as Reuben and Simeon"; 48:5). That the two eldest sons are mentioned here, can be interpreted as a special honour. On the other hand, the book of Genesis also blames Reuben and Simeon (35:22; 49:5)[28].

Therefore, contrasting interpretations are possible:

- Either there is an Israelite "nostrification" of its Egyptian origin, as Jacob personally legitimates his grandsons; and Asenat is forgotten.
- Or the northern tribes are in the twilight of the rivalry between Jerusalem and Samaria. The association with Samaria is especially clear in v. 22: Jacob gives the Joseph line "a ridge" (*šᵉkäm ʾaḥad*), which associatively points to the city of Shechem[29]. In addition, the comparison with the sons of Reuben and Simeon can be interpreted as a clear defamation because of their misconduct: Benedikt Hensel[30] sees an anti-Samaritan denunciation by the rabbinic connection of Asenat with Simeon and the violent events in Gen 34, inasmuch as Ephraim and Manasseh owe their existence to the Canaanite Shechem who raped their grandmother Dina.

So, we can observe that the positive valuation of Asenat in the Book of Genesis gets lower and lower in the course of time.

[28] May we say that Ephraim and Manasseh should replace Reuben and Simeon, who receive only a theoretical role in the further course of tribal history?

[29] Manuscripts of the Samaritan Pentateuch bring the feminine form *ʾaḥat*, clearly pointing to the city of Shechem.

[30] HENSEL, *Anti-Samaritan Denunciation*. E-mail communication.

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Summary

Israelite identity is often defined by genealogy. Therefore, it is surprising that the tribes Ephraim and Manasseh derive from Joseph's wife Asenat, the daughter of an Egyptian priest residing at On (Heliopolis). The threefold mention in Genesis (41:45.50 and 46:20) excludes random information and lacks an explanatory comment or an intention to conceal an irritating information that is not mentioned in the other genealogies. What is the intention of these texts – in case they are late, and in case they are pre-exilic? This contribution examines possible relations between Ephraimitic and Egyptian traditions.

Keywords: Asenat, Joseph, Ephraim and Manasseh, Samaritans.

Zhrnutie

Identita Izraelitov sa často definuje pomocou genealógie. Je preto prekvapujúce, že kmene Efraim a Manasses pochádzajú z Jozefovej manželky Asenet, dcéry egyptského kňaza, žijúceho v meste Ón (Heliopolis). Trojnásobná zmienka v Knihe Genezis (41,45.50 a 46,20) vylučuje, žeby išlo iba o náhodnú informáciu a tiež absentuje vysvetľujúca poznámka alebo zámer skryť iritujúcu informáciu, že sa neuvádza v iných genealógiách. Aký je úmysel týchto textov – v prípade, ak sú z neskorého obdobia, a v prípade, ak sú predexilové? Tento príspevok skúma možné vzťahy medzi efraimskou a egyptskou tradíciou.

Kľúčové slová: Asenet, Jozef, Efraim a Manasses, Samaritáni.

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