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Chapter 7

A Robe like Lightning: Clothing Changes and Identification in *Joseph and Aseneth*

Meredith Warren

# Dressing Judeans and Christians in Antiquity

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## Introduction

*Joseph and Aseneth* is a pseudepigraphic Hellenistic romance novel that elaborates on the biblical character of Joseph and his wife Aseneth. An expansion of Genesis 41:45, the text describes how Aseneth is transformed into a radiant bride fit for Joseph, and is thereby associated with his God.<sup>1</sup> Previous studies may have overstepped the limits of what *Joseph and Aseneth* is willing to tell us about religious identity; rather than treat the novel as a description (or prescription!) of religious initiation, I propose to view it as a reflection of the complex interactions of Judean and “pagan” modes of religious experience.<sup>2</sup> Aseneth’s transformation associates her with the divine realm through several methods, one of which, I argue, is her clothing, a culturally anticipated identity marker for both Judeans and “pagans.”

Aseneth’s multiple clothing changes punctuate her transformation process until at last she is clothed in shining garments, ready to be presented to Joseph as his divinely chosen bride. Ross Kraemer has previously argued that Aseneth transforms into a state of angelic being, parallel to other apocalyptic descriptions of angelic presence.<sup>3</sup> Kraemer’s observations regarding the texts of the biblical milieu are helpful in pinpointing precisely what Aseneth’s transformation signifies in this context. Building on

<sup>1</sup> For a concise review of the various discussions about date, manuscript tradition, and provenance, see Ross Kraemer’s introduction to her book, *When Aseneth Met Joseph: A Late Antique Tale of the Biblical Patriarch and his Egyptian Wife, Reconsidered* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 1–16; although I disagree with her conclusions, Rivka Nir also gives a good, up-to-date overview (*Joseph and Aseneth: A Christian Book* [Sheffield: Sheffield University Press, 2012], 1–18).

<sup>2</sup> For the purpose of this chapter “Judean” encompasses the religious affiliations of people who identify with the temple in Jerusalem whether or not they participate in worship at that location. See Steve Mason, “Jews, Judeans, Judaizing, Judaism: Problems of Categorization in Ancient History,” *Journal for the Study of Judaism in the Persian, Hellenistic and Roman Period* 38.4–5 (2007): 457–512 for issues of terminology. Likewise, the term “pagan” serves as a placeholder for the various non-Judean and non-Christian religious practices and communities of the Hellenistic Mediterranean.

<sup>3</sup> Kraemer, *When Aseneth Met Joseph*, 105.

Kraemer's analysis of the role of light in apocalyptic texts, I will widen the pool of literary data which suggests Aseneth's transformation associates her with God. *Joseph and Aseneth* also uses "pagan" divine imagery to depict Aseneth in her transformed state; thus the category of conversion seems inadequate, since conversion implies the renunciation of one set of religious affiliations in favor of *exclusive* affiliation to another.<sup>4</sup> Instead, the narrative trope of shining clothing indicates that a variety of overlapping religious identities share narrative space in *Joseph and Aseneth*. This novel, then, reflects a 'sliding scale' of religious affiliation that marked the Greco-Roman world, something which also reflects the complexity of Judean religious affiliation.

This chapter will explore how Aseneth's post-transformational clothing intersects with the descriptions of the attire and appearance of the heroines of romance novels, a genre to which *Joseph and Aseneth* belongs.<sup>5</sup> Imagery involving light and shining is used to signify correspondence with divinity in Hellenistic romances such as *Chaereas and Callirhoe*. Callirhoe appears as the epiphanic manifestation of a deity, recognizable by her shining garments and radiant appearance throughout the novel, often prompting those around her to regard her with reverence typically reserved for the divine.<sup>6</sup> The romances make use of pre-existing Hellenistic understandings about epiphanic experiences and the relationship between human beings and divinities. Likewise, Aseneth's transformation associates her with Joseph's God, and her new status is manifested by her radiant clothing; the first person who meets her—her

<sup>4</sup> For an excellent discussion of the problems with conversion and its applicability to the ancient world, see Zeba A. Crook, *Reconceptualising Conversion: Patronage, Loyalty, and Conversion in the Religions of the Ancient Mediterranean* (Berlin: W. de Gruyter, 2004).

<sup>5</sup> The dates of the Greek Romances range from the first century B.C.E. to the third or fourth century C.E. (Bryan P. Reardon, ed., *Collected Ancient Greek Novels* [Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989], 5). The dating for *Joseph and Aseneth* is controversial but most scholars, including the present author, assign it a date between the first century B.C.E. and the second century C.E. A few scholars date it later. Ross Kraemer, for instance, proposes a date "no earlier than the third or fourth century C.E." (*When Aseneth Met Joseph*, 237).

<sup>6</sup> On the significance of luminosity associated with dress and appearance, see also the essays by Kristi Upson-Saia and Arthur Urbano in this volume.

"foster-father"—falls down in reverence as a result. As a trope within the genre of the romance, I propose that shining garments articulate a shared cultural expectation concerning divine identification. Their use in *Aseneth* reflects that this expectation also was shared by Judean communities of the Hellenistic world.<sup>7</sup> The shining light imagery used to describe the heroines in the romances therefore serves to emphasize the transformation Aseneth has just experienced which brings about her new association with the Most High God. As such, viewing *Joseph and Aseneth* as a conversion narrative under-emphasizes those elements Aseneth's appearance and transformation share with "pagan" descriptions of similar events; in reading Aseneth's experience in light of stories like *Callirhoe*, we can better understand the complexities of religious identity and identification in the ancient world.

#### *Joseph and Aseneth*<sup>8</sup>

We first hear of Aseneth's clothing early on in the narrative when Aseneth dresses in ornate clothing in order to greet her parents. Her dressing is described in detail:

And Aseneth hurried into the chamber, where her robes lay, and dressed in a (white) linen robe interwoven with violet and gold, and girded herself (with) a golden girdle and put bracelets on her hands and feet, and put golden buskins<sup>9</sup> about her feet, and around her neck she put valuable ornaments and

<sup>7</sup> Kraemer and Nir argue that *Joseph and Aseneth* reflects Christian authorship, but the majority of scholars assume a Judean-Egyptian origin for the text, as do I. See Kraemer, *When Aseneth Met Joseph*, 245–74; Nir, *Joseph and Aseneth, passim* but especially 23–65; and for opposing views, see, among others, Christoph Burchard, trans., "Joseph and Aseneth," in *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha*, ed. James H. Charlesworth (Garden City: Doubleday, 1983), 187 and Randall D. Chesnutt, *From Death to Life: Conversion in Joseph and Aseneth* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1995), 76–80; Kraemer, *When Aseneth Met Joseph*, 6 nn.7–8 provides a good overview of the opinions.

<sup>8</sup> Greek citations are from Christoph Burchard, *Joseph und Aseneth* (Leiden: Brill, 2003). When relevant, differences will be noted between Burchard's long recension and the shorter recension translated by David Cook, "Joseph and Aseneth," in *The Apocryphal Old Testament*, ed. H.F.D. Sparks (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984), 473–503. Burchard's editions do not indicate the verses only found in the shorter version. Unless otherwise indicated, English quotations of *Aseneth* are from Burchard, "Joseph and Aseneth," 177–247.

<sup>9</sup> Burchard calls buskins "an ill-defined piece of oriental clothing," giving trousers as an unlikely option here for the translation of the word ἑναξυπίδαξ, since Aseneth wears them on her feet (Burchard, "Joseph and Aseneth," 206.n).

costly stones which hung from all sides, and the names of the gods of the Egyptians were engraved everywhere on the bracelets and the stones, and the faces of all the idols were carved on them. And she put a tiara on her head and fastened a diadem around her temples, and covered her head with a veil (3.6).

Aseneth's parents are impressed with her finery—likening her to a bride of God—and tell her about her impending marriage to Joseph (4.8).<sup>10</sup> When we meet Joseph in 5.5, he is dressed in a similar manner to Aseneth: a white tunic, a purple robe with gold threads, and a golden crown encrusted with jewels. Aseneth is taken aback by his grand appearance, comparing him to “the sun from heaven” who “shines in [the house] like a light upon the earth” (6.2). She wonders, indeed, how a person born of a woman could possibly produce such a light, wondering if he is a son of a god (6.3–4). Joseph's dazzling appearance, the light he seems to be giving off in his finery, is mentioned four times in Aseneth's soliloquy.

After being rejected by Joseph for her worship of idols, Aseneth locks herself in her room and replaces her fancy clothing with a “black tunic of mourning” (10.10). The text again details the items of clothing that Aseneth removes: the golden girdle, the tiara and diadem, her bracelets and anklets, and her linen and gold “royal robe.” Dressed as a mourner, she destroys her golden and silver gods and throws various food items or sacrificial offerings, including the serving implements, out the window. At this point, she further debases her appearance by putting on sackcloth, loosening her hair, and covering herself in ashes (10.14). She spends the next seven days fasting, weeping, and screaming. Aseneth now gives two soliloquies about her wretched state and her decision to destroy the statues of her gods in order to please Joseph and his god (11.3–18).<sup>11</sup> After a third statement, this time a prayer to Joseph's God, during which

<sup>10</sup> This scene is similar to the dressing scene in Judith 10.3–4, where Judith beautifies herself with bracelets, earrings, and a tiara. Although Judith's scene also describes her taking off clothes of mourning previous to this, the description of items is closer to *Aseneth* 3.6 than to the later, post-heavenly visitor scene.

<sup>11</sup> It is peculiar that neither the two soliloquies nor the prayers use the imagery of light or darkness—imagery that pervades the narrative portions of Aseneth's transformation—to describe her suffering. There is indeed only one mention of light in the prayer, 12.1, which refers to God's role in creation rather than to Aseneth's religious state. Given Chesnut's assertion that the light and dark imagery is part of the overall theme of conversion, it is surprising that such imagery is not found in the very prayers which result in her visit with the angel and thus her transformation (*From Death to Life*, 125–6).

she again lists the items of clothing she has put on or removed (13.3–6), Aseneth sees the sky ripped open with a great light. Now begins her visit with the heavenly being (14.1–4).

This heavenly man is dressed “in every respect” like Joseph, down to the crown and the robe, “except that his face was like lightning, and his eyes like sunshine, and the hairs of his head like a flame of fire of a burning torch, and his hands and feet like iron shining forth from a fire, and sparks shot forth from his hands and feet” (14.9). The man instructs Aseneth to take off her mourning outfit, to wash herself, and to dress herself in a new linen robe with a “twin girdle of [her] virginity” (14.12, 14). Aseneth follows his instructions and again the text repeats the items of clothing that Aseneth puts on, which includes Aseneth's own addition of a new veil for her head (14.15), which the heavenly man asks her to remove, since her “head is like that of a young man” (15.2).

It is at this point that Aseneth hears the result of her week of fasting and mourning. She learns that her name has been written in the book of the living in heaven (15.4), and that she has been made alive again (15.5).<sup>12</sup> As a result, she is now eligible to become Joseph's bride (15.6). The heavenly being then instructs Aseneth to prepare for Joseph's arrival by dressing in her wedding dress, “the ancient and first robe which is laid up in [her] chamber since eternity, and put around [her] all [her] wedding ornaments, and adorn [herself] as a good bride, and go meet Joseph” (15.10). But instead of going to do this, Aseneth remains with the heavenly visitor and invites him to eat. At this point we reach the climax of the work, the so-called honeycomb scene, where Aseneth's transformation is completed through consuming a portion of a heavenly honeycomb (16.1–16), which gives her heavenly knowledge (17.1–2).<sup>13</sup> Aseneth is dramatically and physically transformed in chapter 18, where she dresses as a bride. When she is seen after her experience with the heavenly man by her “foster-father,” her face is still tear-streaked and marked from her fasting and weeping (18.4); after she dresses, however, she is transformed into an awe-inspiring beauty (18.11):

<sup>12</sup> Here the text uses the eating and drinking imagery used before by Joseph in 8.5–6.

<sup>13</sup> For more on this topic, see my thesis, “‘Like Dew From Heaven.’ Honeycomb, Religious Identity and Transformation in *Joseph and Aseneth*” (Master's thesis, McGill University, 2006).

And Aseneth remembered the man (from heaven) and his commandment, and she hurried and entered her second chamber where the chests (containing) her ornaments were, and opened her big coffer and brought out her first robe, (the one) of wedding, like lightning<sup>14</sup> in appearance, and dressed in it. And she girded a golden and royal girdle around (herself) which was (made) of precious stones. And she put golden bracelets on her fingers and on her feet golden buskins, and precious ornaments she put around her neck in which innumerable costly (and) precious stones were fastened, and a golden crown she put on her head, and on that crown, in front on her brow, was a big sapphire stone, and around the big stone were six costly stones. And with a veil she covered her head like a bride, and she took a scepter in her hand (18.5–6).

At this point, Aseneth remembers that her face is still “fallen” from seven days of tears, and thinks she had better clean herself up. In the basin of water brought for her, she catches sight of her face and decides not to wash it after all, for fear of washing off such great beauty:

And it was like the sun and her eyes (were) like a rising morning star, and her cheeks like fields of the Most High, and on her cheeks (there was) red (color) like a son of man’s blood, and her lips (were) like a rose of life coming out of its foliage, and her teeth like fighting men lined up for a fight,<sup>15</sup> and the hair of her head (was) like a vine in the paradise of God prospering in its fruits, and her neck like an all-variegated cypress, and her breasts (were) like the mountains of the Most High God (18.7–9).<sup>16</sup>

When Joseph sees her, he does not recognize Aseneth, such is her transformation (19.5); Aseneth’s parents, too, are amazed (20.7). The next day the couple marries, but here Aseneth’s clothing does not

<sup>14</sup> *Shepherd of Hermas* 4.2.1 describes a vision of the Church as a bride all in white, with white robe, hair, and sandals. Aseneth’s description differs in that her beauty and finery are emphasized, as is her dazzling brightness.

<sup>15</sup> A similarly militaristic description of female beauty can be found in Song of Songs 4:4.

<sup>16</sup> In both the short and the long recensions, Aseneth’s robe is described as “like lightning” and in both when she sees her reflection in the water, her face and eyes shine with celestial brilliance. The shorter version gives the following for 18.3–7: “And Aseneth went into her room and opened her wardrobe, and she took out her finest robe that shone like lightning, and she put it on. And she tied a resplendent royal girdle round her waist—and this girdle was of precious stones. And she put golden bracelets round her hands, and golden boots on her feet, and a costly necklace about her neck; and she put a golden crown upon her head, and in the crown, in front, were the costliest of stones. And she covered her head with a veil. And she said to her maidservant, ‘Bring me pure water from the spring.’ And Aseneth bent down to the water in the basin [on the cockle-shell]; and her face was like the sun, and her eyes like the rising morning star.”

appear significant. Her great beauty is mentioned yet again (21.4) but there is no detailed account of her attire as we might expect in a text which has been more than forthcoming about clothing changes at other significant events. The conspicuous absence of such a description suggests that clothing in *Joseph and Aseneth* does not serve merely a descriptive role, but rather that it functions to impart some sort of ontological meaning to the wearer. In this light, Aseneth’s marriage to Joseph, therefore, is not ritually significant whereas her clothing before, during, and after her transformation is.

#### **Clothing as an Indicator of Transformation**

Aseneth wears a total of four outfits that punctuate her transformation: her original finery, her mourning clothes, and two outfits demanded by the heavenly visitor, the first with the “twin girdle” and the second with the “robe like lightning.” Aseneth is seen by other humans at only two times during the process: after the first outfit and just before the final outfit. These human onlookers act as witnesses to her transformation. The first outfit is seen by her parents, by Joseph, and presumably by the rest of her household, as well as Aseneth’s virgin attendants. After the visitor returns to heaven, Aseneth’s fallen face is seen by her foster father, who likewise witnesses her transformed and radiant state once she dons that final ensemble with the robe that is “like lightning.”

Scholars who have focused on Aseneth’s clothing changes have framed their analysis either in terms of biblical parallels or initiation rituals. Randall Chesnutt’s contribution falls under the latter category but he ignores the final change of clothing into the robe like lightning since he sees it as “explicitly related to Aseneth’s marriage to Joseph rather than her conversion.”<sup>17</sup> Generally, Chesnutt views the mourning clothes as symbolic of Aseneth’s death and he therefore associates them with the death-to-life imagery that he argues symbolizes her conversion.<sup>18</sup> However, it seems unlikely to me that Aseneth remained in her final outfit for the whole remainder of the day, overnight, and into the next, since her wedding is not to occur until the following day (20.8). Rather, the final description of clothing is

<sup>17</sup> Chesnutt, *From Death to Life*, 125–6. Burchard, “Joseph and Aseneth,” likewise does not remark on this event.

<sup>18</sup> Chesnutt, *From Death to Life*, 126.

significant for Aseneth's transformation *rather than* for her wedding; her wedding to Joseph is clearly chronologically and sartorially distinct from her transformative experience.<sup>19</sup>

Kraemer's analysis is closer to the mark, in my opinion; she finds affinities between Aseneth's transformation and mystical transformations in the *hekhalot* traditions. Indeed, there are similarities between *Joseph and Aseneth* and the Enoch traditions: *2 Enoch* 22.8–10 describes brilliant and radiant clothing, as does *3 Enoch* 12; likewise, the various traditions share the imagery of glowing splendor attained by those transformed in this way.<sup>20</sup> Kraemer acknowledges some important deviations, however, such as the absence of anointing in *Joseph and Aseneth* and the fact that Aseneth changes into special attire twice at the visitor's command, not once.<sup>21</sup> Regardless, the similarities are strong enough for Kraemer to conclude that Aseneth's experience with the heavenly man represents her transformation into some kind of angelic being, as evidenced by her radiant face and eyes.<sup>22</sup>

Clearly, the imagery used to describe both the heavenly visitor and Aseneth shares affinities with this tradition; but the description of a heroine in these terms should also be examined in the context of other novels from the Hellenistic era, which describe heroines in similar terms and which, as I discuss below, have well-established generic links with our text. Thus, while I agree that Aseneth's clothing could reflect the imagery used in heavenly visits in biblical texts, I would also suggest that a more complete understanding of her clothing and its functions can be understood in light of these other novels.

<sup>19</sup> Recently, Jung Hoon Kim's discussion of clothing in *Joseph and Aseneth* also makes the claim that Aseneth's clothing changes reflect actual historical rituals such as "Jewish proselyte baptism" (*The Significance of Clothing Imagery in the Pauline Corpus* [London: T&T Clark International, 2004], 60). I find that Kim's conclusions, in being unconvincing, actually support my proposal that Aseneth's transformation is best viewed in its narrative context rather than through hypothetical historical parallels.

<sup>20</sup> Kraemer, *When Aseneth Met Joseph*, 127–8.

<sup>21</sup> Kraemer, *When Aseneth Met Joseph*, 128.

<sup>22</sup> Kraemer, *When Aseneth Met Joseph*, 129; Burchard writes: "the details of the angel's description are traditional," e.g. Daniel 10.6; *Apocalypse of Abraham* 17.12; *Apocalypse of Zephania* 9.3f.; Matthew 28.3; Revelation 1.13–5, 10.1 (Burchard, "Joseph and Aseneth," 225.q); and "[Aseneth] comes close to being an angelic creature" (Burchard, "Joseph and Aseneth," 232.o).

As a Hellenistic text, *Aseneth* likely also shares "pagan" understandings of transformation and divine association.

### **Epiphanic Light in *Chaereas and Callirhoe***

The use of the trope of the divine epiphany in the ancient romance novels is the key event for this chapter. Epiphanies in ancient literature are common and their use persisted through the Hellenistic period.<sup>23</sup> This section on epiphanic representations of the heroines of the romances illustrates how the novels use descriptions of goddesses' appearance in order to blur the line between the goddess and the heroine, most frequently borrowing tropes from the earlier epic literature, such as shining appearance and a glowing aura.

The ancient novel, according to Lawrence Wills, is a "written popular narrative fiction, expanded significantly beyond a single episode, which focuses on character and virtue."<sup>24</sup> Certainly, *Joseph and Aseneth* fits this description; it further includes the tropes of romantic love between characters, a component of danger which is simultaneously a threat to the chastity of the character(s) (in the second part of the text, chapter 21, Aseneth faces an attempted abduction), its location in a 'far away' land (Egypt), and its characterization of the hero and heroine as divinely beautiful.<sup>25</sup> Wills goes further than other scholars who have made connections between *Aseneth* and Hellenistic Romances by arguing that *Aseneth* fits this generic character more than any other Judean authored novel.<sup>26</sup> Likewise, I argue, her

<sup>23</sup> Tomas Hägg, "Epiphany in the Greek Novels: The Emplotment of a Metaphor," in *Parthenope: Selected Studies in Ancient Greek Fiction (1969–2004)*, eds Lars Boje Mortensen and Tormod Eide (Copenhagen: Museum Tusulanum Press, University of Copenhagen, 2004), 141–55; Daniel Turkeltaub, "The Gods' Radiance Manifest: An Examination of the Narrative Pattern Underlying the Homeric Divine Epiphany Scenes" (Ph.D. diss., Cornell University, 2003).

<sup>24</sup> Lawrence M. Wills, *Ancient Jewish Novels: An Anthology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 5.

<sup>25</sup> Kraemer, *When Aseneth Met Joseph*, 10.

<sup>26</sup> Lawrence M. Wills, "The Jewish Novellas" in *Greek Fiction: The Greek Novel in Context*, eds John Morgan and Richard Stoneman (London: Routledge, 1994), 233. See also Kraemer, *When Aseneth Met Joseph*, 10; Nir, *Joseph and Aseneth*, 15; Wills, *Ancient Jewish Novels*, 121–62; Richard I. Pervo, "Aseneth and Her Sisters: Women in Jewish Narrative and in the Greek Novels," in *Women Like This: New Perspectives on Jewish Women in the Greco Roman Period*, ed. Amy-Jill Levine (Atlanta:

radiance and beauty are comparable with those of the romantic Greek heroines; the divine beauty of the Greek heroines often takes the form of shining appearance and the (mis)taking of the character for a deity, a reflection of classical literary tropes.<sup>27</sup> It is this shining appearance which I argue is integral to understanding the shifts in clothing in *Joseph and Aseneth*. In sharing this literary trope of shining beauty, *Aseneth* reflects the complexity of religious affiliation.

Chariton's *Chaereas and Callirhoe* is perhaps the best text through which to view the use of epiphanic imagery in *Aseneth*'s transformation. The typical use of Homeric tropes of divinity to associate the romantic heroines with goddesses is represented most visibly in this text.<sup>28</sup> Chariton's Callirhoe makes a clear link with Homer when referring to his characters, given the prolific use of direct Homeric quotations to describe Callirhoe. Two examples makes this link clear: first, in 4.7.5, Callirhoe is announced to the Persian court as a woman as beautiful as Artemis or "Aphrodite the Golden" (Cf. *Odyssey* 17.37; 19.54, both in reference to Penelope); and second in 6.4.6, the King of Persia likens his

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Scholars Press, 1991), 145–60. For an excellent overview of the scholarly conclusions on this connection, see especially Catherine Hezser, "Joseph and Aseneth in the Context of Ancient Greek Erotic Novels," *Frankfurter judaistische Beiträge* 19 (1997): 1–40.

<sup>27</sup> Kraemer, *When Aseneth Met Joseph*, 10.

<sup>28</sup> Despite the prevalence of the epiphanies in both Classical literature and in the romances of the Hellenistic and Roman periods, Tomas Hägg's "Epiphany," remains the only recent treatment of this device in the novels. Kerényi's 1927 work (*Die griechisch-orientalische Romanliteratur in religionsgeschichtlicher Beleuchtung* [Tübingen: J.C.B. Mohr, 1927; repr. Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1962] esp. pages 95–122) has largely been dismissed, as has Reinhold Merkelbach's *Roman und Mysterium in der Antike* (Munich: Beck, 1962) and Merkelbach, *Die Hirten des Dionysos: Die Dionysos-Mysterien in der römischen Kaiserzeit und der bukolische Roman des Longus* (Stuttgart: B.G. Teubner, 1988). See Roger Beck, who discusses the problems with Merkelbach and Kerényi's conclusions in "Mystery Religions, Aretalogy and the Ancient Novel," in *The Novel in the Ancient World*, ed. Gareth Schmeling (Leiden: Brill, 2003), 131–50. For a more detailed analysis of the tropes of divinity in the Hellenistic romances, see Meredith Warren, *My Flesh is Meat Indeed* (PhD Diss, McGill, 2013), 80–158.

beloved Callirhoe to Artemis the archer (*Odyssey* 6.102–04, this time in reference to Nausikaa).<sup>29</sup> Heroines of the romances are frequently mistaken for goddesses in part because of their extraordinary beauty, but also because of their shining appearance. It is taken for granted by both ancient authors and modern scholars that gods and goddesses can be recognized by their shining faces and radiant, ethereal light. In Homer, humans experience the epiphanies of gods and goddesses as manifestations of light and brightness, among other descriptive terms.<sup>30</sup> Since the time of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, then, epiphanies are described using tropes such as the radiance and beauty of a not-so-ordinary human being, and as such, identifying the romantic heroines as having a special association with the goddess in question.<sup>31</sup> The heroines of the Hellenistic romances are described as divine beings created in the images of the epiphanic forms of Hellenistic goddesses; the main characters, but most often the females, are described with language used to depict goddesses. Further, they are frequently worshipped as goddesses by other

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<sup>29</sup> Hägg, "Epiphany," 154; Hägg observes that in most cases in Homer, the heroine, Penelope for instance, is merely likened in her beauty to the goddess, not actually mistaken for one; the few exceptions include *Odyssey* 6.149ff, where Odysseus first addresses Nausikaa and wonders whether she is Artemis or a mortal.

<sup>30</sup> Bernard C. Dietrich, "Divine Epiphanies in Homer," *Numen* 30.1 (1983): 54–5. Indeed, Alfred Heubeck, commenting on the *Odyssey*, notes that the source of light attributed to Athena's lamp in 19.36–40 is actually emanating from the goddess herself, something he understands as "characteristic of a divine presence" (Joseph Russo, Manuel Fernández-Galiano, and Alfred Heubeck, eds, *A Commentary on Homer's Odyssey*, vol. 3 [Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2002], 76). Whether this manifestation is in the lighting of lamps, in a bright light from seemingly no source at all, or from the eyes, face, or hair of a god in human form, it is clear that this trope is commonly used as a marker of divine presence in ancient literature. Achilles' power, for instance, is shown in the *Iliad* by the light that shines from his armor (for example *Iliad* 19.374–6; 22.25–32). Fritz Graf writes that it is simply standard that deities appear surrounded by light ("Epiphany" *New Pauly Online* [Brill, Accessed 30 Jan 2012]); and Burchard agrees that light is a "must" for heavenly appearances ("Joseph and Aseneth," 14.2f). Finally, N.J. Richardson, in his commentary on the *Homeric Hymn to Demeter*, concurs that "divine radiance is a common epiphany feature" (*The Homeric Hymn to Demeter* [Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1974], 208).

<sup>31</sup> Dietrich, "Divine Epiphanies," 70–71. For example, *Hymn to Demeter* 275–80; *Hymn to Aphrodite* 172–5; Hesiod, *Scutium* 7–8; *Theogony* 9; Aeschylus, *Prometheus Vinculus* 115; Euripides *Hippol.* 1391. In Latin poetry, see Vergil, *Aeneid* 1.403; Ovid, *Fasti* 5.375. See also Turkeltaub, "The Gods' Radiance Manifest," esp. 16–39.

characters. *Chaereas and Callirhoe* is the novel in which epiphanies of this sort most frequently occur. In comparing *Joseph and Aseneth* with this novel, I aim to show how the radiance of Aseneth's lightning-colored robe and the brilliant quality of her transformed beauty, when examined in the context of other Hellenistic literature, identifies her with her heavenly visitor and therefore with the God of Joseph. In turn, *Aseneth's* participation in this novelistic trope suggests a more ambivalent example of exclusive religious affiliation than is usually assumed of this text.

In Chariton's *Chaereas and Callirhoe*,<sup>32</sup> Callirhoe is either compared to or assumed to be a goddess because of her great beauty. Callirhoe is a double of Aphrodite, a point which drives the plot continually forward, as Hägg shows.<sup>33</sup> Unlike other women, she is not simply beautiful, but radiantly so:<sup>34</sup>

Then Chaereas ran forward and kissed her; recognizing the man she loved, Callirhoe, like a dying lamp once it is replenished with oil, **flamed (ἀνέλαμψε)** into life again and became taller and stronger.

When she came out into the open, all were astounded, as when Artemis appears to hunters in lonely places. Many of the onlookers even **kneel in homage (προσεκύνησαν)** (1.1.15–16).<sup>35</sup>

In this situation, it is not just that the crowd is comparing Callirhoe's radiant beauty to that of a goddess; rather, they actually behave as if they are in the presence of a goddess and begin to worship her, again a not uncommon occurrence in the plot of *Chaereas and Callirhoe*. The verb **προσκυνέω** is most often used to describe this act, and occurs in this sense in the other novels as well.<sup>36</sup> The onlookers kneel down

<sup>32</sup> Greek citations are from the critical edition: Chariton of Aphrodisias, *De Callirhoe Narrationes Amatoriae*, ed. Bryan P.

Reardon (Munich: K.G. Saur, 2004). Unless otherwise noted, English translations are from LCL *Callirhoe*.

<sup>33</sup> Hägg, "Epiphany," 143.

<sup>34</sup> The first time we hear of her beauty is in 1.1.2: "Her beauty was more than human, it was divine (ὁμοῦ καὶ ὑπερφύσινον ἄλλο θεῖον), and it was not the beauty of a Nereid of a mountain nymph at that, but of the maiden Aphrodite herself" (Reardon, *De Callirhoe*, 1; trans. Goold, LCL *Callirhoe*, 29). Here we have three categories of beauty distinguished: ordinary, human beauty; semi-divine beauty; and divine beauty attributed to goddesses. This judgment on Callirhoe's beauty is confirmed at the end of the first section, where, at her wedding, the girl is shown to the public in her finery.

<sup>35</sup> Reardon, *De Callirhoe*, 4; trans. Goold, LCL *Callirhoe*, 35.

<sup>36</sup> See, for example, Xenophon of Ephesus, *An Ephesian Tale*, 1.2.2ff, 1.12.1–2.

in homage. This is ironic because Callirhoe seems so far to be a mortal woman; but her hints of divinity point to a different ontology, one which would make worship not only appropriate but necessary.<sup>37</sup> The crowd behaves in this way because of her radiance. The use of flames in her description is not incidental; rather, it conforms to a pattern of divine descriptions in Hellenistic literature that uses light and fire imagery to identify divinity.

Another incident takes place while the other household slaves are bathing Callirhoe in order to show her at her best advantage to her new master, Dionysius. This event foreshadows the epiphany Dionysius is about to experience in 2.3.6:

After she had gone in [to the bath] they rubbed her with oil and wiped it off carefully, and marveled at her all the more when undressed, for, whereas when she was dressed they admired her face as divine, they had no thoughts for her face when they saw her hidden beauty. Her skin **gleamed (ξοιλιψεν)** white, **shining (μαρμαρυγῆ)** just like a **shimmering (ἀπολάμπων)** surface (2.2.2).<sup>38</sup>

The servants marvel at her gleaming and shimmering appearance. Callirhoe's shining skin is more than just the shimmer of oil. Just as in the *Homeric Hymn to Aphrodite* where Aphrodite's jewelry and clothing gleam and shine *both* in a mundane way to denote their high quality *and* in a way that suggests her divinity,<sup>39</sup> in the case of Callirhoe's skin, a visual *double entendre* is taking place: her skin gleams because of the oil, but also to signify that she is divine. Shining is a hallmark of divine presence and serves as another marker of Callirhoe's complicated ontological status, implying that she is both divine and human. In the next section, when her master catches sight of her, he assumes she is the goddess and is only prevented from prostrating himself (**καταπίπτοντα**) before her by his servant Leonas (2.3.6).

A final, clear example which juxtaposes the dazzling radiance of Callirhoe's visage and her worship by other characters is found in 5.3.9:

<sup>37</sup> See Turkeltaub, "The Gods' Radiance Manifest," *passim* for more on ironic treatment as indicative of divinity in Homeric texts.

<sup>38</sup> Reardon, *De Callirhoe*, 25; trans. Goold, LCL *Callirhoe*, 89, 91.

<sup>39</sup> Turkeltaub, "Gods' Radiance Manifest," 58, esp. n. 101.



Callirhoe's face **shone** (ἐξέλαμψε) with radiance which **dazzled** (μαρμαρυγή) the eyes of all, just as when on a dark night a blinding **flash** (φωτὸς) is seen. Struck with amazement, the Persians **knelt** (προσεκύνησαν) in homage.<sup>40</sup>

Callirhoe is in Persia to take part in a trial to determine whose wife she really is, but when the Persians first catch sight of her in a beauty contest arranged by the other royal women (who clearly did not properly vet their opponent), not only does she win the contest, but her shining brightness convinces the Persians that she belongs to an ontological category deserving of worship. The terms used in this passage, the shining of the face, the dazzling of the eyes, the amazement felt by the witnesses, are all typical terms used to describe epiphanies, as I have shown above.

In sum, *Chaereas and Callirhoe* makes use of the epiphanic trope of shining, light, and brightness<sup>41</sup> to make a clear association between its main character, Callirhoe, and the goddess Aphrodite. Aseneth, too, displays characterization consistent with the use of shining and light to describe the heroines, a pattern shared with the Greek romances in general and with *Chaereas and Callirhoe* specifically.

#### Aseneth's Robe Like Lightning

Upon close examination of the two passages where Aseneth clothes herself to prepare for Joseph, once before and once after her transformation, it becomes apparent that the passages are striking literary parallels. The items Aseneth selects with which to adorn herself are nearly identical in both cases, with just a handful of important differences.

<i>Joseph and Aseneth</i> 3.6	<i>Joseph and Aseneth</i> 18.5–6
a (white) linen <b>robe</b> interwoven with violet and gold,	her first <b>robe</b> , (the one) of wedding, like lightning in appearance, and dressed in it.
and <b>girded</b> herself (with) a <b>golden girdle</b> and put <b>bracelets</b> on her hands and feet, and put <b>golden buskins</b> about her feet,	And she <b>girded</b> a <b>golden</b> and royal <b>girdle</b> around (herself) which was (made) of precious stones. And she put golden <b>bracelets</b> on her fingers and on her feet <b>golden buskins</b> .
and around her <b>neck</b> she put valuable <b>ornaments</b> and <b>costly stones</b> which hung from all sides, and the names of the gods of	and precious <b>ornaments</b> she put around her <b>neck</b> in which innumerable <b>costly</b> (and) precious <b>stones</b> were fastened.

<sup>40</sup> Reardon, *De Callirhoe*, 83; trans. Goold, LCL *Callirhoe*, 245.

<sup>41</sup> There are also other examples which do not use the trope of radiance or brilliance that associate Callirhoe with the goddess:

1.1; 1.1.15–16; 1.14.1; 2.1.5; 2.2.2; 2.2.5; 2.3.6; 3.2.14; 3.9.1; 4.1.9; 4.7; 5.3.9; 5.9.1–2; 6.3; 6.4; 8.6.

the Egyptians were engraved everywhere on the bracelets and the stones, and the faces of all the idols were carved on them.	
And she put a <b>tiara</b> on her <b>head</b> and fastened a diadem around her temples,	and a golden <b>crown</b> she put on her <b>head</b> , and on that crown, in front on her brow, was a big sapphire stone, and around the big stone were six costly stones.
and <b>covered her head with a veil</b> . (3.6)	And with a <b>veil she covered her head</b> like a bride, and she took a sceptre in her hand.

Notable differences in the second example are the description of the robe being “like lightning;” the absence of Egyptian religious ornamentation on the necklace; the increase in ornamentation of the head-gear; and the presence of a sceptre. The parallel order in which the clothing is described serves to highlight these differences in her attire.

Some new elements in Aseneth's clothing match descriptions of Joseph's clothing: when we first meet him, his crown is set with stones and ornamented with golden rays, and he, too, holds a sceptre (5.5). Aseneth describes him in her prayer as giving off light in his appearance as well, and compares him to the sun (6.2), but does so in the figurative language of a prayer; Joseph does not dazzle in person. The heavenly man, too, is described in terms that associate him with post-transformation Aseneth. His face is like lightning (ὡς ἀστραπή),<sup>42</sup> his eyes like sunshine, his hair like flames, his limbs and fingers glowing like hot metal, and sparks come out from his body; when Aseneth sees him, she falls down in worship (ἔπεσεν ἐπὶ πρόσωπον) (14.9–11).<sup>43</sup> Aseneth would have recognized her visitor in herself when she caught sight of her own transformed appearance in the mirror in 18.9; her face is also described as like the sun, her eyes like stars. Joseph and Aseneth wear ornamented clothing; this ornamentation associates them with one another. But it is Aseneth (and not Joseph) whose appearance is described using the same radiant descriptors as those used to describe the heavenly visitor. Thus, Aseneth's sceptre and her

<sup>42</sup> Burchard, *Joseph und Aseneth*, 178.

<sup>43</sup> Burchard, *Joseph und Aseneth*, 180.

elaborate crown associate her with Joseph while her shining appearance associates her with the heavenly visitor and therefore with the divine.<sup>44</sup>

Since *Joseph and Aseneth* has such close generic ties to the Hellenistic romances, it seems reasonable to draw parallels about the shining and radiant heroines described by these texts. Aseneth's description as wearing clothing "like lightning" dovetails with the above conclusions about the visibility of divine beings through their shining appearance. As such, while both Aseneth and the heavenly being are described using language which mirrors other epiphanic scenes from biblical<sup>45</sup> and extra-canonical texts, I would argue that this representation can be contextualized, like much else from Aseneth's story, by identifying its similarities with the Hellenistic novels.

<sup>44</sup> Rivka Nir connects the imagery of 18.3–7 to biblical texts referring to the bride of God and concludes that Aseneth is a metaphor for the Christian church (*Joseph and Aseneth*, 136–37, esp. n. 5). Indeed, similar imagery describes the clothing that brides wear in biblical examples Nir lists such as Isa 49.18; 61.10; 62.4–5; Jer. 2.1; Ezek. 16.8–14, and so on; however, none of these texts references the brightness that we see used to describe Aseneth's appearance, both her face and her dress. A parallel is found in John Chrysostom's description of Christian post-baptismal attire, which he calls "shining," and in Methodius' commentary on Revelation 12.1–6 where the Lady Church is "clothed [...] in the brightness of the Word" (John Chrysostom, *Baptismal Instructions*, 4.23; 5.18; 7.24, as cited in John Chrysostom, *Baptismal Instructions*, ed. Paul W. Harkins, trans. (Westminster: Newman Press, 1963); Methodius, *Symposium: A Treatise on Chastity*, Logos 8.5, as cited in Methodius, *The Symposium: A Treatise on Chastity*, ed. Herbert Musurillo, trans. (Westminster: Newman Press, 1958); Nir, *Joseph and Aseneth*, 138). This is not surprising, since other ancient texts depicting initiation rituals also describe their special clothing in such terms—for example, the clothing in Apuleius, *Metamorphoses*, 11. Nir notes also that Ephrem, a fourth-century Syrian Christian, described Adam and Eve as wearing clothes of light which they were obliged to remove as part of their exile from the garden (Nir, *Joseph and Aseneth*, 139; Ephrem, *Nativity*, 1.43). Nir concludes that Aseneth's robe of light, then, refers to the sin-free garments Ephrem mentions and that therefore Aseneth's clothing should be read in Christian terms. Ephrem's conclusions about Adam and Eve's clothing, however, can also be read in the way that I read Aseneth's clothes: they are heavenly and can only be worn by those belonging in paradise. Just as Aseneth puts on the robe as a result of her identification with the divine, Adam and Eve must take them off once they are no longer permitted to walk with God.

<sup>45</sup> The transfiguration is a good example from the New Testament (Matthew 17:2; Mark 9:3; Luke 9:29.)

This connection is particularly clear when we look at the reaction Aseneth gets from her foster father after her final clothing change: "when he saw her he was alarmed and stood speechless for a long (time), and was filled with great fear and fell at her feet (ἔπεσεν)" (18.11).<sup>46</sup> We saw this same term of reverence previously with Aseneth in 14.10; when Aseneth sees the heavenly visitor for the first time, she, too, falls down before him (ἔπεσεν).<sup>47</sup> Already Burchard connects the foster father's behavior with the novels.<sup>48</sup> As I observed above, multiple times in the novel Callirhoe is worshipped by onlookers viewing her as a deity; the foster father's behavior to Aseneth aligns with this pattern of worshipful behavior as seen in the novel, further highlighting not only her appearance, but also *that her appearance—and therefore her association with God—has been transformed* by this last clothing change. Despite the fact that she wears almost identical articles of clothing, the radiance and light that come from first her robe and then her face have marked her as having a special affiliation with the divine, a fact which her foster father recognizes in his prostration.

### Conclusions

*Joseph and Aseneth* engages in the description of clothing and clothing changes at significant plot points in the narrative; the attire for the wedding to Joseph is not included but multiple other changes of attire punctuate and define Aseneth's transformation. The early description of Joseph's clothing foreshadows Aseneth's final outfit which, in turn, reflects the divine radiance of the heavenly man's appearance. The parallel descriptions of Aseneth's original clothing and her final clothing serve to highlight important distinctions, the most significant of which is the radiance which connects Aseneth—with her lightning-dress and shining face—to the heavenly visitor and therefore to God.<sup>49</sup> Thus, in putting on clothes that

<sup>46</sup> Burchard, *Joseph und Aseneth*, 238–40.

<sup>47</sup> Burchard, *Joseph und Aseneth*, 180.

<sup>48</sup> Burchard, "Joseph and Aseneth," 232.y.

<sup>49</sup> The idea that Aseneth's clothing signifies her close affiliation with Joseph's God is supported by Mary Ellen Roach and Joanne Bulbol Eicher's statement about clothing as an indicator of a magico-religious condition: "adornment [...] may also be a means

shine with divine light, Aseneth establishes her close association with God. The radiance of her final clothing change highlights the distinction between mere finery and divine attire. Further, the transformation that Aseneth undergoes is emphasized by the way her behavior when she meets the divine visitor parallels the behavior of her foster father when he meets the transformed Aseneth. Whereas earlier, Aseneth bows down to the visitor, after her transformation she is the one to receive such honor; in both cases the worship occurs when the worshipper connects the brilliant, fiery appearance with the divine realm.

Aseneth's glistening new appearance and this worshipful behavior find affinities with similar examples of divine protagonists in the Hellenistic romance novels, such as the character of Callirhoe, who is constantly mistaken for a deity because of her shining appearance; those who meet her cannot resist falling down in worship. Thus, while Aseneth's radiance shares many points of contact with biblical and extra-canonical literature dealing with divine experience, given *Joseph and Aseneth's* established connections to the genre of the novel, her clothing and appearance are more fully understood in light of these parallel narrative events. As such, Aseneth's transformation from ordinary woman to divinely chosen bride is made clear by her marked clothing changes, where epiphanic tropes of light and brilliance from the Hellenistic world are put to work to make clear Aseneth's new ontological category. This use of narrative tropes found also in the Greek romances indicates that this text reflects the sliding scale of religious affiliation of the ancient Mediterranean world, and as a result, calls into question the practice of examining *Joseph and Aseneth* as a text which depicts conversion. Aseneth's transformation uses culturally expected tropes about clothing and light to affiliate her with Joseph's God—tropes which are not unique to Judean narratives. In expanding the cultural and narrative repertoire available to understand this text, I suggest that Aseneth's transformation has less to do with conversion and more to do with her new association with the powerful God of her beloved. Calling Aseneth's experience a conversion not

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for [the individual] assuming the power of the supernatural as [the individual] puts on the clothes of God" ("The Language of Personal Adornment," in *The Fabrics of Culture: The Anthropology of Clothing and Adornment*, eds Justine Mayer Cordwell and Ronald Allan Schwarz [The Hague: Mouton, 1979], 18).

only prevents us from seeing parallels to her experience elsewhere in Hellenistic literature, but also, as Crook has pointed out, imposes modern language and assumptions on the complex relationships between human beings and gods in the ancient world.<sup>50</sup> Taking a step away from our notions of religious belonging and religious transformation allows for Aseneth's experience to be viewed on the spectrum of the many literary examples of affiliation to the divine.

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<sup>50</sup> Crook, *Reconceptualizing Conversion*, *passim* but esp. 10–12.