

Joseph's wife, Asenath

Genesis 41:45-52

41:45 And Pharaoh called Joseph's name Zaphnath-Paaneah; and he gave him to wife **Asenath** the daughter of Poti-Pherah priest of On. And Joseph went out over all the land of Egypt. **41:46** And Joseph was thirty years old when he stood before Pharaoh king of Egypt. And Joseph went out from the presence of Pharaoh, and went throughout all the land of Egypt. . .

41:50 And unto Joseph were born two sons before the years of famine came, which **Asenath** the daughter of Potipherah priest of On bare unto him. **41:51** And Joseph called the name of the firstborn **Manasseh**: For God, said he, hath made me forget all my toil, and all my father's house. **41:52** And the name of the second called he **Ephraim**: For God hath caused me to be fruitful in the land of my affliction.

Genesis 46:19-20

46:19 The sons of Rachel Jacob's wife; Joseph, and Benjamin. **46:20** And unto Joseph in the land of Egypt were born **Manasseh and Ephraim**, which **Asenath** the daughter of Poti-Pherah priest of On bare unto him.

Genesis 48:3-6

48:3 And Jacob said unto Joseph, God Almighty appeared unto me at Luz in the land of Canaan, and blessed me, **48:4** And said unto me, Behold, I will make thee fruitful, and multiply thee, and I will make of thee a multitude of people; and will give this land to thy seed after thee for an everlasting possession. **48:5** And now thy two sons, **Ephraim and Manasseh**, which were born unto thee in the land of Egypt before I came unto thee into Egypt, are mine; as Reuben and Simeon, they shall be mine. **48:6** And thy issue, which thou begetteth after them, shall be thine, and shall be called after the name of their brethren in their inheritance.

a neglected, pagan wife?

Manasseh and Ephraim, the two sons of Joseph, are well known, since they became the heads of two large tribes within the nation of Israel, rather than just one tribe. Joseph's Egyptian wife, Asenath, who bore them, however, is hardly mentioned. Why is this? The basic answer is that we do not know, but it is still helpful to think about the possibilities.

Perhaps Asenath is kept in the background because she was not a true believer in the God of Israel. Though she at least believed in Joseph in a superficial way, she may not have truly committed her heart to the Lord. Pharaoh also believed Joseph, but that does not mean that he and all his servants were willing to submit to the God of the Hebrews in every way. *(See various arguments against this view on the next page.)*

Another possible reason why Joseph's wife is not mentioned much is because the story of Joseph who saved his people from a great famine was intended to be much like the story of Jesus who came to save his people from their sins. Both S/saviors were rejected by their brothers and suffered greatly. And there are many other parallels. Yet, there are also some differences, and Joseph being a married man in contrast to Jesus is one of them. So if Asenath were mentioned prominently in Genesis, it would distract from God's work through Joseph and from the parallels with Jesus in the Gospels.

negatives

As often in this series, it is easy to be negative about the lack of information. Was Asenath a believer or not? It does not say. But there are things that indicate she may have become a believer, even though she was not raised in a Hebrew home.

Today, there are many divided homes, in which one parent believes in Jesus and the other does not. In New Testament times, that was the case as well, as seen in 1 Cor. 7:12-16. Even so, would godly Joseph have married Asenath if she was opposed to his God?

Some believe that Pharaoh forced Joseph to marry the daughter of a pagan priest (41:45). But the context (41:41-44) shows the king of Egypt giving authority to his trusted prime minister rather than forcing him to do anything. Joseph was no longer a lowly slave!

We are forced to talk about probabilities when we discuss Asenath, but that does not mean that we know nothing about her. Was it likely that Pharaoh would have selected a wife for Joseph who hated the Hebrews and the Lord, their God? Probably not!

Mark the points below as correct (C), incorrect (X), or partly correct (▲).

A	() We know - Asenath was an Egyptian.
A-1	() Her father was an Egyptian priest.
A-2	() She was selected by Pharaoh (41:45).
A-3	() She probably did not understand Hebrew.
A-4	() She was from On, the city of the sun god, Ra.
B	() We do not know - much about what Asenath did.
B-1	() All we know is that she had two sons (48:5-7).
B-2	() She probably never left the land of Egypt (50:7-8).
B-3	() There were probably many servants in the home.
B-4	() Genesis chapters 39-50 are mostly about Joseph.
C	() We do not know - anything about Asenath's faith.
C-1	() Nothing is directly stated about her personal faith.
C-2	() She may have disapproved of circumcision (Ex. 4:24-26).
C-3	() Joseph probably did not care what she thought about God.
C-4	() Her sons were known as Egyptians, not as Hebrews (48:3-6).

positives

The setting in which Asenath appears tells us a lot about the kind of person that she probably was. The leaders, from Pharaoh downward, respected Joseph in chapter 41. And that respect and trust grew over time as the famine set in. Near the end of the Book in chapter 50, the mourning by the Egyptians for Jacob shows this respect in a climactic way. So since virtually the whole nation of Egypt honored Joseph, would not his wife have done so as well? Does it have to directly say that Asenath respected Joseph in order for us to believe that such was the case?

Regarding their two sons, Joseph gave God credit for their conception and birth in 41:51-52. And Jacob spoke in a similar way later in 48:3-7. God enabled both Jacob and his son Joseph to be fruitful, through Rachel (Joseph's mother) and Asenath (Joseph's wife) who were the God-given means (*and more!*).

Did Joseph love Asenath? Again, it does not say. But if Joseph was thankful for his two sons (41:51-52), would he not have been thankful for their mother as well? -- *Admittedly these verses are more focused on God and the children than on Asenath.*

Mark the points below as correct (C), incorrect (X), or partly correct (▲).

D	() Asenath respected Joseph.
D-1	() She knew 1 Pet. 3:6 and Eph. 5:33.
D-2	() She was a better person than Potiphar's wife.
D-3	() Most of the Egyptians respected Joseph (50:7-11).
D-4	() There were not many radical feminists in ancient Egypt.
E	() Asenath helped Joseph.
E-1	() She helped Joseph be fruitful (41:52).
E-2	() She helped Joseph forget the past (41:51).
E-3	() She helped Joseph avoid temptation (2:18, 39:7-21).
E-4	() It helped Joseph to have an Egyptian name and an Egyptian wife.
F	() Joseph loved Asenath.
F-1	() Their sons' names show that Joseph was thankful (41:51-52).
F-2	() Joseph probably viewed his wife as a blessing from God.
F-3	() There is no reason to think Joseph was a bad husband.
F-4	() Asenath in chapter 41 is like Rebekah in chapter 24.

conclusions

worksheet answers

There are many more correct lines on the positive worksheet than on the negative one. For instance, all of the E lines, about Asenath helping Joseph, are probably correct. Of course, it is also important to add that it was God who most helped Joseph, and Asenath was simply one of his means of doing so.

There are two obviously incorrect lines on the negative worksheet, lines C-3 and C-4. A godly man like Joseph would, of course, have cared about his wife's faith. And the two sons of Joseph and Asenath became known as sons of Jacob (48:5) rather than as Egyptians.

Some other lines, like B-2 and A-3, are more difficult to judge. Asenath may have gone to the promised land as part of "Joseph's household" when Jacob was buried (50:7-8). (She would not have needed to stay home with Manasseh and Ephraim, because they were already young men rather than small children.) As for Joseph's wife not understanding the Hebrew language, this is possible in general, but it also seems very somewhat unlikely. Even if she knew little Hebrew when first married, she would undoubtedly have learned some over the years.

So what?

Though little is said in chapter 41 about how Asenath helped Joseph, we know some about this from the rest of Genesis. It was not good for Adam to be alone in the garden of Eden (2:18). Likewise, it was not good for Joseph to be a single man in the garden of the Nile.

Though Joseph exhibited great self-control regarding Potiphar's wife (39:7-10), the amoral nature of Egypt must be kept in mind. There would have been many women casting lustful eyes toward Joseph after his promotion. So Pharaoh helped and protected his prime minister in several ways—including morally—by selecting a wife for him.

Above all, as always in Joseph's life, God was at work. Earlier, his brothers were allowed to sell him into slavery but not to kill him. Likewise, Pharaoh apparently selected a pagan woman as his prime minister's wife, but such could not have been done without God's permission. *We do not know if she was converted before the marriage or not, but Scripture in general suggests that she probably was.* For sure, her descendants played huge roles in Israel's future. So it all worked out for good (Rom. 8:28).

applications

Apply the points which you believe are most important or seem most useful.
