



Why did Joseph marry Asenath, the daughter of an Egyptian priest? Didn't this violate God's instructions against marrying a pagan non-believer?

Genesis 41:44-46 reads as follows:

"Pharaoh also said to Joseph, 'I am Pharaoh, and without your consent no man may lift his hand or foot in all the land of Egypt.' And Pharaoh called Joseph's name Zaphnath-Paaneah [the Margin of the New King James Bible states here: "Probably Egyptian for 'God Speaks and He Lives.'"]. And he gave him as a wife Asenath, the daughter of Poti-Pherah priest of On. So Joseph went out over all the land of Egypt. Joseph was thirty years old when he stood before Pharaoh king of Egypt."

We also read, in Genesis 46:20: "And to Joseph in the land of Egypt were born Manasseh and Ephraim, whom Asenath, the daughter of Poti-Pherah priest of On, bore to him."

In Genesis 48, we read the stirring account of Jacob's adoption of Joseph's two sons (Genesis 48:5); his blessing of the two sons; his placing his name (that of "Israel") on them (v. 16); and his "setting Ephraim before Manasseh," Joseph's firstborn son (v. 20). Jacob prophesied that Manasseh would become a great people, but that Ephraim would be "greater than he, and his descendants shall become a multitude of nations" (v. 19). We know from history that Manasseh became the United States of America, while Ephraim became Great Britain and the Commonwealth of nations -- quite literally "a multitude" of nations.

With this background, let us begin to answer why Joseph submitted to Pharaoh and accepted from him, in marriage, Asenath, the daughter of Poti-

Pherah, the priest of On.

Some propose that Poti-Pherah and Asenath were not pagan worshippers. Jamieson, Fausset and Brown, Commentary on the Whole Bible, states: "[Joseph's] naturalization was completed by this alliance with a family of high distinction. On being founded by an Arab colony, Poti-pherah, like Jethro [father-in-law of Moses], priest of Midian, might be a worshipper of the true God; and thus Joseph, a pious man, will be freed from the charge of marrying an idolatress for worldly ends."

This conclusion is not necessarily negated by the fact that Poti-Pherah and Asenath were called with pagan names. The Ryrie Study Bible comments: "In order to 'Egyptianize' Joseph, Pharaoh gave him an Egyptian name and an Egyptian wife. The meaning of his Egyptian name is uncertain. Asenath means 'she belongs to Neith' (a goddess of the Egyptians). On is the city of Heliopolis, a center for the worship of the sun god, Ra." Still, the fact that Joseph's wife and his father-in-law were called by such names does not prove that they were pagan worshippers. Pharaoh gave Joseph an Egyptian name which could, in some contexts, refer to an Egyptian god (compare the Nelson Study Bible). However, it is interesting that the Bible, apart from this passage in Genesis 41, never uses this name to refer to Joseph.

The New Student Bible comments: "Proud Egyptians did not care for Hebrews. In order that Joseph's ethnic past be erased as quickly as possible, Pharaoh gave Joseph an Egyptian name and married him into a prominent Egyptian family. Joseph gave his own sons Hebrew names, however, a practice that suggests he maintained his own identity."

In addition, Soncino points out that the Hebrew word for "priest" in "priest of On," i.e., "kohen," can also be translated as "ruler," as is the case in 2 Samuel 8:18. In that passage, the Authorized Version says, "chief rulers," while the New King James Bible says, "chief ministers." In any event, the meaning in 2 Samuel 8:18 is clearly not one of a religious function. Accordingly, Soncino suggests as a possibility that in Genesis 41:45, Poti-Pherah

was not a "priest" of On, but a "ruler" of On.

Others feel strongly that Joseph's wife and father-in-law were pagan worshippers at the time of Joseph's marriage. If so, such a marriage would have been against God's law. Abraham insisted that his son Isaac would not marry a wife "from the daughters of the Canaanites," but from his own family and country (Genesis 24:3-4). Later, God specifically prohibited the Israelites to "make a covenant with the inhabitants of the land [of Canaan] where you are going, lest it be a snare in your midst" (Exodus 34:12). He warned them not to "take of [an idolater's] daughters for your sons, and his daughters play the harlot with their gods and make your sons play the harlot with their gods" (Exodus 34:16).

In this light, the following statements by the Broadman Bible Commentary are quite interesting:

"The name given Joseph is an Egyptian one probably meaning, 'the God speaks and he hears'..., a pagan testimony to the reality of God in Joseph's life. Potiphera is pure Egyptian, meaning 'he whom Re gave,' and is essentially the same name as Potiphar. Asenath means 'belonging to (goddess) Neith.' Potiphera was priest of On, one of the most influential offices in Egypt. Joseph married into one of the most prominent priestly families in Egypt, but they were nevertheless pagan. Isaac and Jacob had secured wives from their own cultural background. Joseph did the very thing which the others sought to avoid. Could this deed possibly have met with God's approval? The writer of the Joseph story is silent, but that silence does not necessarily mean assent... It does not appear to be coincidence that the descendants of Joseph and Asenath, the principal northern tribes of Ephraim and Manasseh, were always addicted to idolatry. The golden calves of Jeroboam I in North Israel were based upon experiences during the flight from Egypt (cf. Ex. 32:4 with 1 Kings 12:28). Thus the silence of this section of Genesis is followed by the judgment of history."

It is noteworthy that the modern descendants of Ephraim and Manasseh are likewise steeped in paganism and idolatry. Religious feasts such as Christmas or Easter are being celebrated, which

have nothing to do with true Christianity, but which are clearly derived from pagan worship. For more information, please read our free booklet, "Don't Keep Christmas." You may also want to read the Editorial in Update #89, dated April 18, 2003, titled, "Why We Don't Celebrate Easter."

Whether Asenath was a pagan idolatress or not, it is clear that God never allowed His followers to marry unbelievers. This is true today for Christians, as it was always true in God's eyes -- since God does not change. We read in 1 Corinthians 7:39 that a marriage should be conducted "only in the Lord." However, we are also told that a believing mate is not to divorce from his or her unbelieving mate, if the "unbelieving" mate is pleased to dwell with the believer, and that their children are "holy," having access to God (1 Corinthians 7:12-14). Ephraim and Manasseh's descendants did not have to become idolaters. They could have continued to follow God. The same can be said about the modern descendants of Ephraim and Manasseh. God warns them today, through His Church, of impending disaster. They COULD listen and repent of their evil deeds, as the ancient Ninevites did (compare the book of Jonah). The question is, Will they?