

Apocalyptic Imagery In Joseph and Aseneth



By
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In this brief essay I would like to present two ideas to you. Firstly that the story of Joseph and Aseneth contains apocalyptic imagery, mostly similar to that used in the book of Revelation. However, the second theory, which Kraemer puts forward, is very different, and it is that the story of Aseneth and her visitation of an angel shows nothing of what we would see as apocalyptic in style, but solely that she was adjuring (or ordering) an angel to come and tell her the future, which was, in fact, a practice in the Greco-Roman world.

However, we begin with the first theory and this includes the references to apocalyptic imagery, especially with regards to the book of Revelation. I would like to examine the language used in this text. It is used, interestingly enough, only up to Chapter 18, and so it is the first 18 chapters that I will focus upon.

First of all, I would like to define the word apocalyptic. The term is derived from the Greek word which means revelation or uncovering (hence the name of the last book of the New Testament). Apocalyptic writings are usually concerned with the end times and the symbols and stories about this time are usually communicated by an angel or by other divine means. The eschatology works on a "*personal as well as a cosmic dimension*" (J.J. Collins, page 299, *The New Jerome Biblical Commentary*). This is an important distinction to remember; I will come back to it

at the end. In the story of Aseneth, therefore, we can see that there is more of a personal level and not so much a level of talking of the end times. However, despite the apparent lack of direct talk of the end times its imagery is very similar to that found in Revelation and so, perhaps, it speaks in hidden language about heaven and God's purposes for His Church.

How can we ascertain this? Well, the first imagery used of Aseneth portrays her as the "Bride of God" (4:2), and later Aseneth is told, "*...you shall be his bride, and he shall be your bridegroom for ever,*" both of which are used for the Church in Revelation (Rev. 21:2: "*...the new Jerusalem coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride beautifully adorned for her husband.*") The description of her house and courtyard is very similar to the description of the new Jerusalem. It has four courtyard walls (not very exciting at first glance, but the number four is often used to portray the world, due to the four corners of the earth, the four seasons and winds.) Inside the courtyard there was "*every kind of beautiful tree that produces fruit.*" (2:19). The picture of a stream ever bubbling, flowing through the middle of the court and watering all the trees there is reminiscent of Ezekial 47, and the river flowing from God's Temple, watering everything in its path.

The most striking elements in the story, however, are in the descriptions of Aseneth and Joseph, and also the visitation of the angel. I would like to turn to these now. Something that struck me was the remarkable comment about Aseneth's attire when she came down to greet her parents:

"And there were precious stones all about her, with the names of the Egyptian gods inscribed on them everywhere, on the bracelets and on the stones; and the names of the idols were stamped on the stones." (3:10)

In Revelation 2:17 there is a similar picture of God's elect carrying a white stone with "*a new name*" inscribed upon it. At the same time the

angel promises to the Church that God will "*give some of the hidden manna*" and as manna tastes like honey, this is very interesting with regards to later comment about the honey comb.

Two other descriptions of people interested me greatly. One is of Joseph, on his arrival at Pentephres' house (5:5), and the other is of the angel who is reputed to have looked just like Joseph (14:7-12). Both the descriptions are incredibly similar to those in Revelation 1:12-16 and Daniel 7:13, where the man is described as dressed in glowing white, with a golden sash around the waist, face like lightning, shining like the sun, and feet like iron from the fire (although in Rev. it is bronze not iron). The response from the one(s) looking upon this person is similar too, they all fall upon their faces and either pay homage or worship (5:11 and 14:11).

The physical description is not all that leads us to see similarities with the angelic and Son of Man appearances in Revelation, and other such texts (such as 11QMelch, Apocalypse of Abraham, Ezekial the Tragedian, 1 Enoch 69:29 and Matthew 25:31). The description of name and manner of these appearances are also important. For example, Joseph arrives on four white horses, in a golden chariot (see Rev. 19:11ff), and Joseph is described as "the Son of God" in 6:7. When the angel departs from Aseneth she sees him leave in "*what looked like a chariot of fire being taken up into heaven towards the east*" (17:6), reminiscent of Elijah's journey up to heaven (2 Kings 2:11ff). The angel also describes himself as "*the commander of the Lord's house*" (14:7). The Oxford companion to the Bible relates that Archangel Michael is a key figure in apocalyptic texts (Rev. 12:7), which "*later tradition identifies him as the nameless divine messenger*" (p 518), which fits well with this description.

Most strikingly, Aseneth's eyes are described as looking "*like the rising morning star*" (18:7) which is the 3rd time that the morning star is mentioned in the Aseneth text, which Jesus describes himself as in Rev. 22:16. Is it possible that this imagery is connected to Aseneth's conversion previous to this glowing in her eyes?

In Aseneth's encounter with the angel in 15:3ff, she is told that her name is written in the "Book of life" (mentioned in Rev. 20:12). She is encouraged that she has eaten the bread of life and drunk the cup of immortality which has very Christian imagery caught up in it which will be dealt with in other seminars. The honey-comb is also very intriguing. The description of it was that it "*smelt like the breath of life*" and in Revelation 10:9-11, John is told to take a scroll and eat it and it tasted like honey in his mouth. A further connection is that of the name that Aseneth is given in 15:6: *City of Refuge*: "for many nations will take refuge in you..." This comment about Aseneth's witness to the nations was the same commitment that John made when he took the scroll and ate it: it was the prophecy to the nations.

The fact that there are no other eschatological elements in this text has led some, such as Kraemer, to believe that what we have in the angelic visitation and other such imagery is not actually a way of describing the conversion of Aseneth, but is actually a continuation of a relatively popular use of adjuring angels (that is, calling them up to ask of them their future). We can see that the angel does indeed say to Aseneth: "*Take heart Aseneth, lo the Lord has given you to Joseph to be his bride, and he shall be your bridegroom.*" (15:6) The Bible however takes a very negative view on humans trying to initiate encounters with angels and divine beings for the security of knowledge for the future. It is shown especially in Saul's encounter with a seer in 1 Samuel 28:7ff. If this is the case, Kraemer argues, what is Aseneth doing in summoning an angel to enquire of her future unless this text is influenced by texts other than the Bible?

Mystical texts, in comparison to the Bible, depict humans as having the capacity to call forth divine beings. A human compelled divine beings to appear in order to find out their future love life, finances or security, much like our horoscopes, but through an angel rather than through Russell Grant. Details of Aseneth's repentance and meeting with the double of Joseph seem to fit in well with these mystical accounts of angelic adjuration. In fact, Kraemer writes:

"The perception of Aseneth as fundamentally a tale of conversion has so dazzled earlier scholars... that we have largely failed to see the encounter between Aseneth and the angelic figure for what it is: a tale of the adjuration of an angel by a woman." (P90)

So, what are these details which so clearly show mystical Greco-Roman writings? Well, the use of honey was largely used in Mithraic mystery stories. The repentance scene, then becomes the preparation for meeting with the angel, which according to Kraemer fits in well with early accounts of summoning Helios (mystic divine being to do with the sun). To begin with the person had to withdraw from society (9:1) and then they gathered a leather curtain and filled it with ashes to roll in (10:4-5). Fasting from food and drink (10:2) and wearing mourning clothing (10:10) is also important. For seven days they wept and repented of idols (which is more of a Jewish or Christian concern) and then they wait until sunset (9:3) to begin the proceedings of calling down the divine. Having thrown out their food they wait for the divine (see 10:15); notice also in this quotation from the *Sepher ha-Razim* the similarity to Aseneth going to the east (12:1):

"When the moon is full go by yourself to the eastern section of your city, village or house and throw out on the ground the leftover morsels. Then go very quickly to your quarters and shut yourself in..." (p 97)

Kraemer also noticed that in all mystical writings the adjurer experienced fear and trembling and fell down at the feet of the angel. This text is taken from the *Sepher ha-Razim* (a Greco-Roman text about adjuring Helios):

"And after you see him you will assuredly bow down to the ground and fall upon your face to the earth." (P101)

Kraemer further points out that *"the absence of any explicit and undeniable Christian language, such as direct references to Christ, the gospels,*

the blessed Virgin Mary, and/or Christian scriptural quotations, is sometimes offered as evidence that Aseneth must not be Christian." However, she does also realise that it would be foolish to wait for a text to "*scream Christian*" at us, and so therefore, it would be foolish to assume that this text is based entirely on a mystic religion or Greco-Roman tradition. This has been done in a similar way in the past by scholars who have assumed its Jewish authorship due to the lack of direct Christian evidence and the obvious danger of this is that we can label the text and therefore read it in the light of a particular box idea.

In light of this, though, I would like to return to the idea of apocalyptic imagery and suggest that our reading of apocalyptic texts is also quite narrow. We assume it has to be to do with the end times and direct eschatology and yet Revelation, which is assumed as being apocalyptic, interests itself in speaking to churches, turning people from luke-warm to hot, and turning them from their idol worship to God in order that they should enter into heaven.

I think that there is more in Aseneth that suggests her conversion than there is that suggests mystic angel adjuration, due to the loaded line that she turns to believe in the Most High God (see her prayer in 12:2-11 which seems to resonate Genesis 1, Isaiah and Psalm 51). Apocalyptic literature deals directly and primarily with the revealing to a person or persons of the divine and instating in them a renewal and change back to the divine. I think that this is shown quite clearly and to put labels such as "Christian," "Jewish," or "Greco-Roman" is (i) impossible, (ii) desirable, but (iii), unhelpful, due to our distinct lack of being able to understand the intention of the original author(s). Kraemer puts it thus:

"I do believe that persons in antiquity would generally have had a fairly clear sense of their own cultural, ethnic, and religious identity, but I am less certain that we would find their categories easy to map onto our own, even our own understandings of ancient categories as distinguished from modern ones." (p 246)

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