

**Ideal Man Versus  
Ideal Woman  
In  
Joseph and Aseneth**



# **Ideal Man Versus Ideal Woman in Joseph and Aseneth**

by  
**Moira Forbes**

**(3rd Year B. A. Hons. Theology candidate, University of Birmingham)**

**T**HIS ESSAY INTENDS TO SHOW THAT JOSEPH is considered to be an ideal man throughout whereas Aseneth, a woman, has need of change before she can be ideal. Furthermore it will seek to discover why this change is a necessity for the author of the text.

It is clear from the very beginning that Joseph is an ideal man and that no improvement is needed:

## **Structure: Joseph is first in many things in the text.**

1. Although chapters 1 and 2 are more concerned with the Aseneth perspective, Joseph and his obedience to Pharaoh (which from the first exhibits his good qualities) is mentioned in the first few lines (1 v1-3). This places him first of all the personae in the text.
2. Joseph is the first to use the medium of poetry / prayer in the text (8v10-11). This asserts his authority over the other characters because if anyone uses the same device later on, they are simply following his example in the eyes of the reader.
3. In addition, Joseph is also the last to be mentioned in the text (29 v11-12), which ensures that the last thoughts of the reader are focused upon Joseph.

**Plot:** The theme of being first amongst men is carried on through into the plot.

1. Pentephres is the first, the chief of all of Pharaoh's satraps (1 v4-6) and is a priest of Heliopolis (1 v6), yet Joseph ranks above him as Pharaoh's first man; his viceroy (5 v4).
2. Joseph is the first non-related male to see Aseneth (2 v1). This is a privilege which, the reader is assured, all the other men in the rest of the land would wish to receive (1v 9-14), including the Pharaoh's son (1v 11-14). This device makes it clear to the reader that Joseph is meant to rank above all his contemporaries.

**Rhetoric:** The rhetoric of the text also reflects that Joseph is meant to be distinct from all others.

1. When others speak of him, they reveal through their language use that they are in awe of him.
  - a. Pentephres is "overjoyed" (3 v4) at the news of Joseph's coming, for he is the "mighty man of God" (3 v7).
  - b. Aseneth is "cut to the quick" (5 v1) at the sight of Joseph because she recognises him as the "son of God" (6 v2).

It is very clear that such reactions mean not only that Joseph is someone special but that he is also in some way godly and to be feared.

2. This idea is reinforced by the use of rhetoric at his entrance to Aseneth's home.
  - a. It is made clear that Joseph has kingly qualities; He has a purple robe (5 v6), which was the colour of kings and rulers because the dye was so expensive. Much more clearly, he also wears a "golden crown" (5 v6) and carries a "royal sceptre" (5 v7). This sets him above all others and gives Joseph almost

divine qualities because Egyptian rulers were often viewed as being semi-divine. Hence Joseph would appear to be an ideal man to Aseneth's family.

**b.** There is also much light phraseology used in this passage; Joseph's tunic (5 v6) and his four horses are white (5 v5) and he drives a golden chariot (5 v6) these are both shades of the sun and therefore 'light' shades. In the next chapter 'light' language is also applied to his character; Aseneth twice mentions the "light" (6 v3,7) that is within him and compares him to the sun.

This could be said to be some kind of Gnostic dualism or Johannine Christ imagery. Yet there is also another possible explanation. Pentephres is the priest of Heliopolis. The English translation of this Greek name is 'the sun city'. This could just be a coincidence, however it should be remembered that the Egyptians did worship the sun god: Ra. It is quite possible that Pentephres was a priest of Ra (the highest of the Egyptian gods), thus both he and his household would have worshipped Ra, amongst others. The writer of this text, therefore, could simply have written rhetoric that was true to his Egyptian characters.

If they were supposed to see something godly in Joseph it does not necessarily follow that this would be expressed in the language of the Judaeo/Christian tradition (especially as neither yet existed in the time in which the text is set) but rather that they would use the familiar terminology of the sun god. This explains, too, why Aseneth's parents are not converted in spite of their recognition of these exceptional qualities, and also why they would not worry about their daughter marrying a foreigner with strange beliefs.

**Characterisation:** The characterisation of Joseph also exhibits his ideal manhood.

1. In spite of his status Joseph is not arrogant but obedient to Pharaoh (1 v1-2, 21 v1), courteous to Pentephres, asking his permission to come to his house (3 v2-4)

2. Joseph is also chaste; a virgin (4 v9) who wants nothing to do with women (7v1-6) and so remains physically pure.
3. It could be argued that Joseph is arrogant in that he refuses to eat with the others in the household. However this is unlikely for two reasons; firstly his portrait so far has been painted impeccably by the author and it is unlikely that the writer would now wish to spoil that with an unfavourable image. Secondly, it is explained that this is really a matter of ritual pureness; just as he will not eat at the same table, so he will not use his lips that bless god and eat his food, to kiss a woman who worships idols, and so defile them (8 v5-8).

This picture of Joseph as an ideal man is constant throughout the text: Joseph is godly:

1. Joseph is told by heaven that Aseneth has been converted (19 v2-3)
2. Godly language is continued to be used of him; Aseneth calls him a "mighty man of God" (18v2) when she sees him coming.

Joseph is faithful:

1. Joseph remembers his allegiance to Pharaoh and asks his permission to marry Aseneth (Ch 21).
2. Joseph is protective of Aseneth, ensuring that she is always accompanied on long journeys either by himself (22 v4) or by an armed guard (24 v11).
3. When Aseneth is afraid, Joseph shows his faith in God as he reassures Aseneth that God will protect her (26 v2-3).
4. Joseph's loyalty to Pharaoh is rewarded by his becoming Pharaoh for a time himself (29 v11) and then being able to

## Ideal Man versus Ideal Woman in Joseph and Aseneth

give up ruling in favour of Pharaoh's grandson when he came of age (29 v12).

At the beginning of the text it appears that Aseneth is an ideal woman.

**Structure:** The structure points to the importance of Aseneth to the text.

1. Aseneth is the first woman to be mentioned in the text (1 v6), putting her above all other women (including her mother) who appear after her.
2. Most of the first two chapters are taken up with a description of Aseneth, emphasising her importance.

**Plot:** the plot reinforces this idea.

1. It is emphasised that Aseneth is desired by all the men in the land (1 v9-14); she is their ideal woman. This is a quality that Joseph may also possess for Aseneth immediately falls for him on sight.
2. Yet the plot also makes it clear that Aseneth is an innocent; she has been kept away from male society for all of her life (Ch 2).

**Rhetoric:** At the beginning of the text rhetoric is used to describe at least two ideal qualities.

1. Aseneth is beautiful; Yet what seems to be even more important to the writer is that her beauty is emphasised not as Egyptian (1 v7), but as being Hebrew (1 v8). This may be so that her beauty is seen to be the physical compliment to Joseph who is also said to be handsome.
2. Aseneth is also a virgin (1 v7) (as was implied above). It is made very clear that she has had no exposure to men at any part of her life and that she is the only one who has ever

## Ideal Man versus Ideal Woman in Joseph and Aseneth

slept or even sat upon her bed (2 v16), indeed she even hates men (2 v1, 7 v11). Virginity seems to be a quality that all ideal women as well as men were supposed to share if they were not yet married, for as has been stated; Joseph too is a virgin.

**Characterisation:** It is in the characterisation of Aseneth that the reader is made aware that all may not be as idyllic as it seems.

1. Aseneth is devout. She worships her gods faithfully (2 v5) and even wears stones with their names upon them (3 v10). However it is apparent that these gods are not the God of Joseph.
2. Aseneth owns many fine clothes (2 v6) and adorns herself with jewellery (3 v9-11). This may in fact imply that she was vain. It appears to be perfectly acceptable for Joseph to wear fine clothing, however it seems that for a woman finery is a sign of being irreligious for the converted Aseneth is dressed much more simply. Are these double standards?
3. Furthermore, the unconverted Aseneth seems to be somewhat spoilt or quick-tempered, speaking arrogantly to her father (4 v16). This is not exactly an ideal quality. As the text continues it becomes clearer that the unconverted Aseneth is not the author's ideal woman.

### **Aseneth is impure:**

1. Aseneth is not permitted to eat at the same table as Joseph before she is converted (7 v1).
2. Aseneth is not allowed to kiss Joseph because her lips have worshipped gods and not Joseph's God (8 v4-8).

### **Aseneth has slandered Joseph:**

1. Aseneth told her father the bad things that she had heard about Joseph (4 v12-15) even though she had never met him before.

### **Aseneth has need of conversion:**

1. Aseneth herself realises that she needs to be converted once she has seen the ideal man; Joseph (9 v1).
2. Joseph prays that Aseneth will be converted (8 v10-11). The author makes the reader aware that such qualities are not those to be found in an ideal woman.

Once Aseneth is converted she becomes the writer's ideal woman.

### **Aseneth is no longer vain:**

1. She has taken off her finery (10 v9-11) covered herself in ashes (10 v16-19) and old clothes (10 v10), even throwing her finery and food out of the window (10 v12-14) and fasting (10 v14). Aseneth only puts a fine robe back on because she is told to do so by the angel (14 v13-16).

### **Aseneth is obedient:**

1. Aseneth is obedient firstly to God, repenting of her sins and asking for forgiveness (Ch 12). However one has to wonder whether she is repenting for herself or for Joseph.
2. Aseneth is obedient to the angel (Ch 14-Ch 17). Again, however, one has to ask whether she really had a choice; would you say no to an angel? In addition it should be mentioned that the angel did resemble Joseph (14 v8) which may also have influenced her.
- 3 Aseneth takes on the role of Joseph's servant once he returns to her, even offering to wash his feet for him (20 v3). This could just be out of respect for him, because she was symbolising her wifely duties, or it could be that this conversion had actually robbed her of some of the spirit of character that she had before. Either way it seems slightly

worrying that an effect of conversion appears to be some loss of one's independence in a woman.

### **Aseneth is pure:**

1. Aseneth's name is written in the "book of life" (15 v3), and like Joseph she has eaten a food of life (16 v9) and will never die.
2. Joseph will now kiss her (20 v4), which he refused to do before because her lips worshipped idols. Furthermore she is now pure enough to become his wife (Ch 20) and both have "received new life in their spirit" together (19 v3).
3. Aseneth became "like a young man" (15 v1). This idea is highly problematic. For some reason it appears that to be converted Aseneth also had to become a man in some way. This casts a shadow over what the author thinks it is to be female and what it is to be pure. It appears that they are in some way incompatible. Does the writer believe that women are in some way innately sinful? Is it only men who can be pure? Remember that Aseneth only came to be converted through men; firstly developing the desire to be pure through her meeting with Joseph and secondly being made pure by the male figure of the angel.

This has disturbing implications for women; that they are incapable of being saved as they are but have to rely upon a man for their salvation. This in turn implies that women are second class people and are somehow more sinful than men.

In Joseph and Aseneth the author ensures that the ideal man will always win, for no matter what she might gain a woman loses her independence, having to depend upon a man to become the ideal woman.

**The End**



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