

Wisdom and Apocalypticism in *Aseneth*

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for the Wisdom and Apocalypticism in Early Judaism and Early Christianity Group:
Apocalyptic and Sapiential Registers of Communication
Society of Biblical Literature, 2004 Annual Meeting

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In the course of history, few women have managed to preserve their mystery and to keep their secret as well as *Aseneth*, the acclaimed heroine of the ancient novel of the same name. Likewise, few women have got themselves talked about as much as her. I will not attempt to solve all the problems raised by this novel today¹. I will content myself with approaching it from the viewpoint of this session, that is wisdom and apocalypticism.

My purpose today is as follows: through a narrative analysis, I will argue that the motif of speech is essential to the understanding of the novel and that it creates a framework in which both parts of *Aseneth* have a role to play. More specifically, through the lens of Aseneth's speech, I will attempt to show the manner in which Aseneth's femininity is constructed in the framework of wisdom and apocalypticism². To phrase it differently, I will argue that wisdom and apocalyptic literary patterns are closely

¹ Bibliography on the subject is abundant but an excellent status quaestionis is provided by R. D. CHESNUTT, *From Death to Life: Conversion in "Joseph and Aseneth"*, Journal for the Study of the Pseudepigrapha Series 16, Sheffield Academic Press, Sheffield, 1995. For more recent bibliography, see R. S. KRAEMER, *When Aseneth Met Joseph, A Late Antique Tale of the Biblical Patriarch and his Egyptian Wife, Reconsidered*, Oxford University Press, New York – Oxford, 1998.

² The most important study regarding gender in Joseph and Aseneth is A. STANDHARTINGER, *Das Frauenbild im Judentum der hellenistischen Zeit: Ein Beitrag anhand von "Joseph und Aseneth"*, Brill, Arbeiten zur Geschichte des Antiken Judentums und der Urchristentums 26, Leiden, 1995. There are also interesting elements in R. CHESNUTT, *Revelatory Experiences Attributed to Biblical Women, "Women Like This" New perspectives on Jewish Women in the Greco-Roman World*, Ed. A.-J. Levine, Society of Biblical Literature, Early Judaism and Its Literature 1, Scholars Press, Atlanta, 1991.

interwoven in order to construct the feminine in the novel. Obviously, the issue of speech is central to the insights of gender-studies, on which this paper is partly based. I will suggest here that a focus on speech provides a useful method of analysing the manner in which wisdom and apocalypticism are articulated within a larger discourse of the feminine. This approach may, in its turn, provide arguments in favour of the unity of the novel. Indeed, because the initiation-conversion scene of the first part is so enigmatic, many scholars' attention has been focused on this sole passage. The religious setting of the text has been thoroughly investigated, although not always successfully. As a result, the second part of the novel (22-29) has often been neglected³. I hope that this short paper raise some of the important points of the second part.

Firstly, it is necessary to give a short presentation of recent scholarship on the *sitz im leben* of the novel. As you know, scholars have hardly agreed on the location and date of *Aseneth*⁴. To make a long story short, Batiffol⁵ the first scholar to publish the Greek text at the beginning of the XXth century, saw it as a Christian fourth or fifth century work. However, since the work of Philonenko⁶ and Burchard⁷ in the sixties, scholarship usually considers that *Aseneth* dates back to the first century CE and was redacted in an Egyptian milieu. 135 CE has often been taken as a *terminus ante quem* for the redaction of the work. However, G. Bohak challenged this consensus by arguing in favour of an

³ Burchard argued in favour of the unity of the novel on the basis of style and content of both parts: cf. "Joseph and Aseneth" 82; cf. Philonenko, *Joseph and Aseneth* 27, Kraemer, *When Aseneth Met Joseph* 40.

⁴ For all the details, see CHESNUTT, *From Death to Life: Conversion in "Joseph and Aseneth"*, and KRAEMER, *When Aseneth Met Joseph*, 3-16 and 225-244.

⁵ P. BATIFFOL, *Le livre de la prière d'Aséneth*, *Studia patristica: étude d'ancienne littérature chrétienne*, vol. 1/2, Leroux, Paris, 1889-1890.

⁶ M. PHILONENKO, *Joseph et Aséneth: introduction, texte critique, traduction et notes*, *Studia Post-Biblica*, Brill, Leiden, 1968.

⁷ Chr. BURCHARD, *Untersuchungen zu "Joseph und Aseneth", Überlieferung-Urtsbestimmung*, WUNT 8, Gutersloh, Tübingen, 1965. Most of his works are now gathered in -, *Gesammelte Studien zu Joseph und Asenath*, *Studia in Veteris Testamenti Pseudepigrapha* 13, Brill, Leiden, 1996.

earlier date (2d century BCE), suggesting that this work dealt with Onias' Temple⁸. Nevertheless, this hypothesis did not meet the agreement of the scholarly community. Finally, Ross Kraemer⁹ has recently questioned all these assumptions, arguing that no evidence earlier than the sixth century CE has been found regarding the redaction of *Aseneth* (the prologue to a Syriac translation). She has also shown the circularity of the reasoning that dates the novel back to the first century because it is Egyptian and Jewish and vice-versa. Moreover, Kraemer has carefully analyzed the affinities between *Aseneth* and late antique philosophical and religious texts. Therefore, she has suggested that the novel might well be Christian and could have been written virtually anywhere in the Greek-speaking world. Although I share many of the views defended by Kraemer, I remain convinced that the message of the novel itself is best understood in the context of Hellenistic-Roman Egyptian Judaism.

Regarding textual matters, the text of *Aseneth* exists both in a short and a long version. The latest research on the subject has been pursued by Angela Standhartinger and Ross Kraemer. Both studies show that each text has its own specificities and deserves attention on its own terms. However, Kraemer goes one step further than Standhartinger since she advocates that the longer recension is based on the shorter one. In this paper, I will mainly focus on the shorter text, examining the longer recension when it brings to the fore elements that are significant to the present discussion.

⁸ G. BOHAK, *Joseph and Aseneth and the Jewish Temple in Heliopolis*, Scholars Press (SBL), Atlanta, Georgia, 1996.

⁹ KRAEMER, *When Aseneth Met Joseph*.

Aseneth's speech in the first part of the novel (1-21)

I suggest that we begin with a small overview of Aseneth's words in the first part of the novel. Aseneth's first participation in a dialogue comes at 4. 12-15, where she answers to her father's command to marry Joseph. Interestingly, Aseneth's answer completely opposes Pentephres': the latter presents Joseph as "pious, chaste (*sôphrôn*) and virgin like Aseneth" and as "powerful in wisdom and knowledge, having the spirit of God upon him and the Grace of the Lord with him". On the contrary the manner in which his daughter depicts Joseph is very negative. It is worth citing in full:

"When Aseneth heard her father's words, an abundant red sweat came over her, and she was furious (*ethumôthè en orgè*) and looked sideways at her father 12. and she said "why should my lord and my father speak like this and talk as if he would hand me over like a prisoner to a man of another race, to a fugitive, sold as a slave? Is he not the shepherd's son from the Land of Canaan and was he not abandoned by him? Was he not the one who slept with his mistress, who was put into a dark jail by his master and Pharaoh led him out of prison because he interpreted his dream? No but I shall marry the first born son of Pharaoh because he is the king of all the earth."

In other words, she caricatures Joseph as a foreigner, the son of a shepherd, a promiscuous adulterous and a dream-interpreter. Aseneth is described as being terribly angry (*ethumôthè en orgè*). Her father decides to stop talking to her because his daughter answered with insolence and rage (*meta alazoneias kai orgès*)¹⁰.

In this reading of the novel this scene is crucial because Aseneth is represented as a disobedient, insolent woman. Moreover, the reader who has the story of Joseph in Genesis in his cultural encyclopaedia, takes her for a liar: he/she knows that Aseneth's description of Joseph is unfair if not wrong. Joseph did not have intercourse with Mrs

¹⁰As. 4. 16.

Robinson, his master's wife. Moreover, Aseneth omits the new status of Joseph as second to Pharaoh. In addition to distorting Joseph's biography, she severely criticizes her husband-to-be and even disobeys her father. These elements clearly situate her attitude in contrast to the perfect woman, as constructed in the Graeco-Roman world¹¹. Aseneth's character comes in opposition to Joseph's *sophrosunè* and she even blames herself for being *aphrôn*¹², a word which opposes *sôphrôn*. It is worth noting that *sôphrôn* does not only mean prudent, discreet but also refers to temperance regarding sexual desires¹³. Aseneth, challenging her father's authority, claims that she will marry the son of Pharaoh instead of Joseph; She challenges custom by choosing her own husband and claiming it¹⁴. Her choice is largely dependent on the social status of the candidate.

This indicates not only that the content of Aseneth's speech is inappropriate to a respectable woman, but also that the pragmatics of her speech defies a respectable woman's attitude. Through speaking her mind and expressing her anger, Aseneth clearly challenges male authority and specifically fatherly authority. By doing so, she subverts the expected attitude from a respectable woman in antiquity.

¹¹ See, e.g., S. POMEROY, *Goddesses, Whores, Wives and Slaves*, Schocken Book, New York, 1976; S. POMEROY Ed., *Women's History and Ancient History*, The University of North Carolina Press, Chapel Hill and London, 1991; I. McAUSLAN and P. WALCOT (Ed.), *Women in Antiquity*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1996; R. HAWLEY and B. LEVICK (Ed.), *Women in Antiquity, New Assessments*, Routledge, London, 1995; B. EGGER, The Role of Women in the Greek novel. Woman as Heroine and Reader, *Oxford Readings in the Greek Novel*, Ed. S. Swain, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1999, 108-136; K. COOPER, *The Virgin and the Bride: Idealized Womanhood in Late Antiquity*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, 1996; K. HAYNES, *Fashioning the Feminine in the Greek Novel*, Routledge, London, 2003.

¹² As. 6. 7.

¹³ For more details, see Kraemer, *When Aseneth Met Joseph*, 191-221.

¹⁴ In her article on women in ancient novels (B. EGGER, The Role of Women in the Greek novel. Woman as Heroine and Reader, *Oxford Readings in the Greek Novel*, Ed. S. Swain, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1999, 108-136), Egger underlines the "archaizing tendency" of this genre in which women "return to conditions which had long since been part of history" (133).

Indeed, rejection of speech right to women appears in numerous ancient texts from classical antiquity up to late antiquity. As Aristotle reminds us¹⁵, Sophocles in his *Ajax* correctly claims that “Silence is women’s glory”¹⁶. Aristotle adds that “the courage of a man is in commanding, of a woman in obeying”. In Christian texts too this feature is emphasized: I Timothy 2:8-14 says thus “a woman must be a learner, listening quietly and with due submission...she should be quiet”.

Sophrosunè is also perceived as an important feature of female respectability. A Neopythagorean work of the Hellenistic age attributed to Perictione, Plato’s mother, constitutes important evidence for my reasoning: entitled *On Women’s Harmony*¹⁷, it deals with the behaviour appropriate to women and their virtues. It specifically focuses on *sôphrosunè* and *phronèsis*¹⁸ of which we have seen the importance. In particular, chastity is central to Greek novels in which it is celebrated as a positive value for both the hero and the heroine¹⁹. Examples could be multiplied²⁰.

The importance of Aseneth’s speech is confirmed in chapter six, which describes Aseneth’s reaction to Joseph’s appearance as a solar king. After a couple of impressive physical reactions of shock, she starts regretting her words about Joseph. She seems to fear Joseph’s reaction to her speaking ill (*lèlalèka kaka*)²¹ and asks Joseph’s God to be favourable to her because “she has spoken evil out of ignorance” (*lèlalèka egô rèmata*

¹⁵ *Politics*.

¹⁶ *Ajax* 293.

¹⁷ Cf. H. THESLEFF, *The Pythagorean Texts of the Hellenistic Period*, Acta Academiae Aboensis, Ser. A Humaniora, Humanistika vetenskaper – Socialvetenskaper – teologi vol. 30 nr I, Abo Akademi, Abo, 1965, 142-146. The text is excerpted from Stob. 4. 28. 19 ff.

¹⁸ L. 19 p. 143 Thesleff; l. 24 p. 144 Thesleff.

¹⁹ See, e.g. HAYNES, *Fashioning the Feminine in the Greek Novel*, *passim*, esp. 16, 34, 42, 45, 53 etc.

²⁰ E.g. Stob. 16. 30 = Theophrastus.

²¹ *As.* 6. 2.

ponèra en agnoia)²². She adds that she wrongly called Joseph the shepherd's son from Canaan. She calls herself foolish and arrogant (*aphrôn kai thraseia*) for despising Joseph and speaking evil of him²³. Finally, she repeats that she is unfortunate and foolish (*talaipôros kai apherôn*) because she spoke evil to her father²⁴. Later on, when Aseneth begins her official penitence, in her prayer to God²⁵, she repeats this confession. However, she modifies it slightly by adding that she sinned against God out of ignorance and spoke blasphemy (*blasphèma*) against Joseph. And I quote:

“and I did not know, wretch that I am, that he is thy son, O Lord, for they told me that Joseph was a shepherd's son from the land of Canaan and I believed them. But I was wrong and I despised Joseph, thine elect one, and I spoke evil of him not knowing that he is thy son.”²⁶

The big difference here lies in Aseneth's new claim that she lied about Joseph because she listened to gossips. But in any case, her sin remains the same. Moreover, in the description of her physical penitence, Aseneth says that during seven days and nights she has neither eaten nor drunk and that her mouth is dry like a drum and her tongue dry like horn, her lips like a postherd²⁷. Although this may also refer to a purification of her eating impure food from the idols, I would suggest that it also alludes to her sin of speech.

Finally, it is worth noting with Kraemer, that the longer text emphasizes interest in speech absent in the shorter text. For instance, the longer text contains two lengthy

²² As. 6. 4.

²³ As. 6. 6. Cf. Pb 8. 5.

²⁴ As. 6. 7. I understand it as I translated it and not as “she spoke evil *about Joseph* to her father” as in H. F. D. SPARKS (ed.), *The Apocryphal Old Testament*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1984 pp. 473-503.

²⁵ As. 12-13.

²⁶ As. 13. 10-11.

²⁷ As. 13. 8.

soliloquies²⁸. The first one, we are told, is uttered “in her heart” because Aseneth is exhausted by her abasement. However, significantly enough, the second one is also silently recited because she is terrified to pronounce the name of God aloud. In this second silent prayer, Aseneth expresses her fear about opening her mouth to God and telling God’s name aloud. At 12. 6 she says “I am not worthy to open my mouth before you”. At 12. 1-15, she confesses, that she has spoken evil and unspeakable things before the Lord. All this undeniably points to the importance of speech in the novel.

Apocalypticism in Aseneth

Aseneth’s repentance is followed in the novel, by the appearance of an angel. As Sanger and Chesnutt have shown²⁹, the encounter with the angel is the divine confirmation of Aseneth’s new status as a full member of the people of God. I would like to add that this episode is pivotal in the sense that it presents Aseneth as a wisdom figure through apocalyptic imagery and that it will lead to a significant speech change for her.

This episode has obviously raised different interpretations. Edith Humphrey, in the *Ladies and the Cities*³⁰, has contended that we are here dealing with an apocalyptic scene. She bases her argument on a comparison between the features of the episode and the features of the apocalypse as noted in the *Semeia* profile³¹. These include a vision, an epiphany, an otherworldly mediator, a present salvation by knowledge, instructions to recipient etc. She concludes that *Aseneth* belongs to the sub-type Ic, that is, ‘Apocalypses

²⁸ As. 11. 3-19.

²⁹ R. D. CHESNUTT, Revelatory Experiences Attributed to Biblical Women, “Women Like This” 113, D. SANGER, *Bekehrung und Exodus* 29 ff. And *Antikes Judentum* 156 ff. But Humphrey claims that “it seems more likely that the angel’s announcement is *performative* and enacts what God is doing for Aseneth” (*The Ladies and the Cities*, 44).

³⁰ E. HUMPHREY, *The Ladies and the Cities: Transformation and Apocalyptic Identity in Joseph and Aseneth, 4 Ezra, the Apocalypse and the Shepherd of Hermas*, Journal for the Study of the Pseudepigrapha Supplement Series 17, Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1995.

with only personal eschatology'. But paradoxically, she acknowledges that the major problem with labelling the passage apocalyptic is its "apparent lack of emphasis on eschatology"³². She concludes that "one might even say that the eschatology is not wholly personal. Aseneth's status as 'city of refuge' places her in some sort of relationship to others of the eschatological community, the community which will 'enter the rest provided for those who have been chosen'"³³. Humphrey's hypothesis has generally not been accepted³⁴, because scholars rejected the idea that Aseneth could be included in the apocalyptic literary corpus.

More recently, Kraemer has argued in favour of a kinship between the *Aseneth* episode and magical texts of adjuration of angels³⁵. Kraemer's demonstration is convincing, which does not mean that apocalyptic imagery in *Aseneth* should be excluded. Just as Kraemer contends that an author or authors "knowingly and intentionnally drew upon the imagery" of adjuration of angels³⁶, I believe it is possible that a literary use of apocalyptic imagery is here at play. In my opinion, the cause of *Aseneth's* reluctance to let itself be pigeonholed lies in the conjugation of multiple layers of interpretation. Several motifs and symbols, relevant to several different contexts are often at play in the novel.

This is certainly the case with the bee episode, which has raised so much interest in the scholarly community. It has been interpreted as biblical manna³⁷, and a symbol of

³¹ J. J. COLLINS, *Apocalypse: the Morphology of a Genre*, Semeia 14, Scholars Press, Missoula; 1979 (Reprint 1998).

³² *Ibid.*

³³ *Ibid.*

³⁴ See, e.g. Stephen L. Cook's review in the *Review of Biblical Literature* on the internet.

³⁵ Kraemer, *When Aseneth Met Joseph*, 89-109.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 105.

³⁷ Burchard 1965, Philonenko and Sanger 1980, 192.

immortality of the soul³⁸. Gideon Bohak even interpreted it as a scenario of priestly conflict in the second century BCE³⁹. Most scholars, including Gideon Bohak and Burchard⁴⁰, have rejected any association with honey and bees as a symbol of inspiration and rhetorical skills in the Greco-Roman World. Indeed, some texts narrate that bees posed on the lips of Plato⁴¹, Pindar⁴², Hesiod or even Ambrose, thereby providing them with eloquence and inspiration⁴³. I would argue here that this motif may have been appropriated and distorted by the author(s) of *Aseneth*. Indeed, the connection between bee and speech is made obvious at 16. 14 where Aseneth's body is said to be covered by bees and her lips covered by bees as big as queen bees. Likewise, at 16. 6, Aseneth suspects that the honey comes from the angel's mouth. Consequently, Aseneth's speech undergoes a striking transformation. Robert Triomphe⁴⁴ has convincingly shown the connection between bee, honey and speech, whether poetic, prophetic or philosophical in the Greek world. As I have attempted to show, Aseneth's inappropriate speech reflects both her impiety and her condition of anti-model of the feminine in the first part of the novel. However, after the bee-episode, Aseneth is transformed into a new character, a role-model not only of piety, but also of the feminine values as reflected in Graeco-Roman texts. As Marcel Detienne has shown in his study on bees⁴⁵, the latter are construed as bearing the ideal values of femininity, that is chastity, fidelity, productivity

³⁸ *When Aseneth Met Joseph*, 155-190.

³⁹ G. BOHAK, *Joseph and Aseneth and the Jewish Temple in Heliopolis*.

⁴⁰ Burchard, *Joseph and Aseneth: A New Translation and Introduction*, *OTP II*, Ed. J. H. Charlesworth, Doubleday, Garden city (NY), 1985, 230, n. 16 f 2 and 16 h 2. BOHAK, *Joseph and Aseneth and the Jewish Temple in Heliopolis*, 10.

⁴¹ Aelian, *VH XII*. 45,

⁴² Pausanias IX. 23. 2.

⁴³ Cf. Olck, *sub art.* "Biene", *RE III/1* (1897), 431-450.

⁴⁴ *Le lion, la vierge et le miel*, La vérité des mythes, Les belles lettres, Paris, 1989.

⁴⁵ M. DETIENNE, Orphée au miel, *Quaderni urbinati* 12, Rome, 1971 = Id., *Faire de l'Histoire*, Edd. J. Le Goff et P. Nora, 1974, III, 56-75.

and hardwork confined in the household. This transformation is visible in Aseneth's attitude of fidelity, concern for the family field of inheritance and her in-laws, and in her two pregnancies. But it is also very obvious in her speech. In contrast to her interventions in the first part, which are discourse of the false and gossip, in the second part, her only words are words of wisdom. Therefore, I would like to suggest that the bee episode is the confirmation of this speech transformation. I would also argue that the Greek motif of the bee is one of these pluri-levelled symbols in the novel. In addition to the connection between bee and the immortal soul, as underlined by Kraemer⁴⁶, I would not dismiss the connection between speech and bee, as well as between bee and woman. The latter is made obvious in several texts such as in Semonides of Amorgos' *On Women*⁴⁷ and in Xenophon's *oeconomicon* 7-10.

Aseneth and Wisdom

Now, what is Aseneth's new speech about? I would argue that it is very close to spiential sentences as found in the book of Proverbs. But before focusing on this hypothesis, let us briefly review Aseneth's interventions in the second part.

At 17. 8, when Aseneth is attacked by Gad and Dan, she addresses God directly: "O Lord my God, that quickened me from death, that said to me, 'your soul shall live forever', deliver me from these men." Accordingly, God heard her and the swords of her ennemies were reduced to dust⁴⁸. This also shows the power of speech gained by

⁴⁶ KRAEMER, *When Aseneth Met Joseph*, 167-179. The latter also deals with the transformation of Aseneth from the dangerous foreign wo,an to the *theosebês gunê* (193-196) but she does not specifically focus on speech problems.

⁴⁷ Fr. 7 (7 W) ll. 83-93 cf. A. PELLIZER and I. TEDESCHI, *Semonides. Testimonia et fragmenta, Introduzione, testimonianze, testo critico, traduzione e commento*, Edizione dell' Ateneo Roma, Roma, 1990.

⁴⁸ As. 27. 8.

Aseneth. We could virtually say that from her conversion onwards, she acquires the ability of speech-acting, in a way.

Right after, when Gad and Dan, after this miracle, beg her to have mercy on them, she replies: "Take heart and do not be afraid for your brothers are men who worship God and do not repay evil for evil to any man. But retire to the woods until I can secure your pardon and mollify their wrath, for what you have been trying to do to them is indeed no trifling matter. Take heart and do not be afraid for the Lord will see justice done between us."⁴⁹

Further on, she calms the anger of Leah's sons, telling them: "spare your brothers and do them no harm for the lord has shielded me and reduced the swords in their hands to dust, and they melted away like wax before the fire. Surely this is enough for us that the Lord is fighting for us so spare your brothers"⁵⁰.

Finally, she replies to the nervous Simeon, ready to start the fight "no brother, you must not repay evil for evil to your neighbour for the LORS will avenge this outrage"⁵¹

What a change with the first Aseneth! Implementing her role as a city of Refuge, Aseneth protects her unfortunate brothers-in-law from their brothers' rightful anger. But maybe more interestingly, she has clearly abandoned the inappropriate speech of the first part to embrace a deeply moral and religious speech. God is indeed mentioned in every passage and mercy and non-violence are expressed. In fact, Aseneth adopts Levi's speech in 23. 9 where he claims in the first place that evil should not be repaid with evil. This sentence, as Philonenko has noted⁵², is not found in the OT but a similar one occurs at

⁴⁹ As 28. 4-6.

⁵⁰ As. 28. 10-11.

⁵¹ As. 28.14.

⁵² Philonenko, ad loc. 23. 9.

Proverbs 17. 13, at Qumran (Rule 10. 17-18) and Apocalypse of Sedrach 7.7, Romans 12. 17, Thessalonians 5. 15 and I Peter 3. 9.

The connection between *Aseneth* and sapiential works such as Proverbs has been emphasized by Kraemer⁵³. She persuasively shows that *Aseneth* has much in common with the strange woman and wisdom in Proverbs, Sirach and Wisdom of Solomon⁵⁴, and even more so in the longer text. Claudia van Camp's monograph on wisdom in Proverbs is also illuminating from this point of view⁵⁵. I will not go back to this into detail. Suffice it to say that the transformation of *Aseneth* can be interpreted as a transformation from the strange woman to *Aseneth* as wisdom.

R. I. Pervo, in 1976, has also suggested that *Aseneth* could be read as a sapiential novel⁵⁶ by comparing it with *Ahiqar*, *Tobit*, and *Daniel 1-6*. However, his suggestion was soon rejected by Doran who argued that *Aseneth* had nothing to do with court contests as *Ahiqar* and *Daniel 1-6*. However, we may consider the possibility that *Aseneth* displays sapiential elements and I would argue that as far as her character is concerned, it is particularly obvious in her speech in the second part.

The affinities between wisdom literature and *Aseneth* are numerous. I will present only a short enumeration of these features, basing my list on the features established by Gerhardt von Rad⁵⁷. First of all, the belief in God's justice is essential to both sapiential

⁵³ *When Aseneth Met Joseph 22-27*.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵⁵ Cl. VAN CAMP, *Wisdom and the Feminine in the Book of Proverbs*, Sheffield, Almond Press, 1985.

⁵⁶ R. I. PERVO, *Joseph and Aseneth and the Greek Novel*, *SBL Seminar Papers*, Scholars Press, Missoula, 1976, 171-181.

⁵⁷ G. VON RAD, *Israël et la sagesse*, traduction d'É. Pleyel, Geneva, Labor et Fides, 1971. For a critique of von Rad, especially of the link between wisdom and apocalypticism, see M. A. KNIBB, *Apocalyptic and Wisdom in 4 Ezra*, *JJS* 13, 1982, 56-60. On Wisdom in the OT and the NT see also the various studies published in J. TRUBLET ed., *La sagesse biblique de l'Ancien au Nouveau Testament, Actes du XVe congrès de l'Association catholique française pour l'étude de la Bible (Paris 1993)*, Les Éditions du Cerf, *Lectio divina* 160, Paris, 1995, 129-139.

books (at least in the first stage when they are set in an optimistic framework) and *Aseneth*. More precisely, the belief that God will reward the good and punish the the bad is particularly well illustrated in the second part of the novel. Likewise, in both *Aseneth* and Sapiential texts, the fear of God is a crucial feature. The description of God as creator is also essential as well as polemic against idolatry.

In particular, intertextual readings of *Aseneth* and Proverbs may be helpful in order to illuminate the sapiential aspect of the novel. Just like *Aseneth*, Proverbs recurrently resorts to mouth and lips imagery and focuses on speech in many passages. For instance, at 16. 23, it is said “the heart of the wise teaches his mouth and adds learning to his lips”.

Honey imagery is also at play on several occasions in Proverbs. At 16. 24, we read “pleasant words are as a honey comb, sweet to the soul and health to the bones”. 16. 10 “a divine sentence is in the King’s lips, his mouth transgresses not in judgement”; 16. 13 “righteous lips are the delight of the kings; and they love him that speaks right.” There are a countless number of these⁵⁸.

Moreover, the honey imagery occurs in several passages in Proverbs and in one of them, it is identified with wisdom; at 24. 13-14, it is said: “my son, eat your honey, because it is good and the honeycomb which is sweet to your taste so shall the knowledge of wisdom be unto your soul. When you have found it, then there shall be a reward, and your expectation shall not be cut off”.

Last, but not least, the sentence “do not repay evil with evil” is not found as such in the OT but the closest occurrence is in Proverbs 17. 13 “who repays good with evil, evil shall not depart from his house”.

⁵⁸ Cf. Also 21. 6; 21. 19; 21. 23; 21. 24; 22. 14; 22. 17-21; 22. 15-16; 24. 1-2; 24. 22B; 26.28 etc.

Again, I do not wish to advocate that *Aseneth* is, as a whole, a sapiential novel. I am more interested in showing that sapiential elements are at play in *Aseneth* and that they play an important role in the construction of the feminine.

Summary and Conclusion

Aseneth is a work of some literary sophistication, capable of sustaining different readings. In this paper, I have chosen to explore the significance of gender in relation to speech through the lens of apocalypticism and wisdom.

I hope to have shown that speech is one of the main motifs through which the image of the feminine is constructed. This construction entails the use of wisdom and apocalyptic imagery as literary devices. Apocalyptic imagery enables the literary transformation of *Aseneth* from a feminine anti-role model to a feminine role-model. Once transformed, *Aseneth* becomes a figure of wisdom and the narrative itself uses patterns of the sapiential genre.

Therefore, *Aseneth*'s transformation is not only gender-focused. Through a subtle intertextual play with Greek and Biblical texts, the author of the novel, whether a man or a woman, closely associates the values of the feminine to those of piety: a shameless idolatrous, *Aseneth* is also a unworthy woman; celebrating the one true god, she becomes a bee-woman uttering words of wisdom.

If this analysis is meaningful, it is possible that the feminine is used as a medium to deal with transformation, but not only feminine transformation. Most significantly, at the end of the novel, because of the conflicts caused by *Aseneth* with the son of Pharaoh, Joseph inherits the crown of Egypt. Through *Aseneth*'s adventures, he also undergoes a transformation absent from Genesis (but not from other intertestamental literature):

second to Pharaoh, he becomes the king until the great-son of Pentephres is in age of ruling. On the other hand, the unfortunate son of Pharaoh, unable to change and to adopt Joseph's values, ends up crownless in a thumb.

At any rate, *Aseneth* allows a plurality of readings without neither excluding any nor restricting itself to any. This is probably why she fared so successfully through so many centuries, languages and cultures.