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The Ladies and the Cities: Transformation and Apocalyptic Identity in Joseph and Aseneth, 4 Ezra, the Apocalypse and the Shepherd of Hermas

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In *The Ladies and the Cities*, Edith Humphrey studies four Judeo-Christian texts from late antiquity that she holds share both a common genre, the genre "apocalypse," and a common motif, the image of a Lady who becomes disclosed as and identified with a city. Humphrey focuses on the "apocalyptic" transfiguration that the Lady-City figure undergoes in each of her texts and on how these transformations address readers' central questions of communal identity. Her aim is not only for a close reading of her chosen texts but also to further the study of apocalypses in general by uncovering the significance of the element of transformation in that genre. Transfigurations may well express both the heaven/earth dualism and the imminent intersecting of heaven and earth inherent in apocalypticism, so her hypothesis about their relevance was well intuited.

Humphrey's methodology in this study is largely a literary one. Her focus is on the aesthetic and generic qualities on the synchronic level of the four texts she treats, rather than on the texts' historical dimensions or theologies. In particular, Humphrey works on elucidating her texts' surface structures, with an eye especially on the place of transformation within these structures. Humphrey reads the ancient texts sympathetically, attempting to bracket modern ideological concerns, and thus achieves a nuanced critique of her texts in line with her aim that "the text may be heard, and not simply reacted against."

Humphrey's study confirms her initial intuition, concluding that, based on the literary structures and the place of the transformed-Lady images in her four texts, a concern with the mystery of identity is a key issue, even a constituent element, in the apocalypse genre. The texts reveal a transcendent mystery to the identities of the Ladies that they picture and thus to the communities or subcommunities of God with which their Ladies are linked. The transformations of the Ladies in the texts unveil and access this "identical

mystery," a hitherto underdocumented concern and focus of apocalypses, and thus establish communal self-identity. And, in apocalyptic fashion, these transformations evoke a change of perspective or even of paradigm on the part of readers.

Humphrey's study helpfully clarifies the literary uniquenesses of each of the four texts she examines. And her focus on the contrasting ways that the Lady-City images work in these texts proves illuminating. The contrasts that Humphrey highlights between these texts and their transformations, however, also constitute a vulnerability in her study's coherence. These contrasts are in fact so strong as to call into question the bases presented by Humphrey for her texts' comparison.

First, many readers will immediately question whether two of Humphrey's four texts, *Joseph and Aseneth* and the *Shepherd of Hermas*, can really be considered apocalypses. Humphrey does present arguments that eschatological and cosmic dimensions are not wholly absent in the two texts and that traits from the increasingly accepted categorization of the genre "apocalypse" published in *Semeia* 14 (1979) can be detected in them. This is not the point, however. The two texts lack main thrusts and features that would give them a genuine resemblance to apocalyptic literature. For its part, *Joseph and Aseneth* is a romance, an erotic and sapiential novel, with no apocalyptic leanings. The novel is concerned with private and personal religion, not God's imminent interruption of history. And although a struggle between good and evil is pictured, the arena of struggle is mundane, earthly, and present. Its resolution does not usher in a glorious new eon or even a just world. As for the *Shepherd of Hermas*, its visionary genre focuses more on fostering single-mindedness and purity in the current era than on the heavenly plane and the future of the cosmos. To be sure, the third vision, on which Humphrey concentrates, does present a shining eschatological hope for the church. For the present, however, the church is viewed as still in-process, and the order of the day is renewal and modest transformation.

A second problem turns on the question of whether Humphrey's four texts really share in common a parallel Lady-City motif. Unlike the case in *Joseph and Aseneth* and in *4 Ezra*, there is no transformation of a Lady into a City in the *Shepherd of Hermas*. In the book a Lady and a Tower both represent the church, but they appear simultaneously; there is no transfiguration of the former into the latter. Rather, during the book's third vision the Lady is present as an *angelus interpres* before, during, and after the building of the Tower.

The *Shepherd of Hermas* does at least view a Lady and a City synoptically, but such a view is not assured in the case of the NT Apocalypse. The persecuted mother of Revelation 12 and the New Jerusalem of Revelation 21 may perhaps be related, as Humphrey argues, but the text itself does not connect them. And even if Humphrey is

correct to link these two figures, the book does not explicitly describe the transfiguration of one into the other.

Some final contrasts between the Lady-City images in Humphrey's four texts relate specifically to my contention that these images occur in works that differ in genre. The cities in the non-apocalyptic works, *Joseph and Aseneth* and the *Shepherd of Hermas*, differ from their apocalyptic counterparts in *4 Ezra* and Revelation 21 in being mere literary symbols, not mythic-realistic entities. In the latter, apocalyptic texts, the cities are literal realities from the heavenly plane of existence. Aseneth, by contrast, is a metonymic figure, whose transformation is just a story, with symbolic but not physical effect. The transformed Aseneth does at least parallel the cities of *4 Ezra* and Revelation 21 in disclosing a spatially transcendent reality, but the same cannot fully be said for the Tower image in the *Shepherd of Hermas*. Besides lacking mythic-realistic concreteness, the Tower is much less reflective of a dualistically separate plane than are Humphrey's other cities. Far from being a pure, heavenly reality, it symbolizes the contemporary church, which displays humility and whose glory is merely latent. The Tower image is thus rather different from the type of ontologically polarized entities often disclosed by apocalyptic literature.