

Smell, Sight, Taste, Hearing, and Touch:
Including the Senses in Theological Anthropology
An Examination of Eden and Matthew

A Paper

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Introduction

John Walton describes Genesis 2-3 as the *functional* origins of humanity, rather than the *material* origins as is typically argued in Creationism debates.¹ Along this line, we find it significant that in the unfolding of what it means to be human each of the five senses are gradually introduced into the narrative. Moreover, Cortez has effectively argued that Christ's humanity provides us an image of the fullness of humanity, even more clearly than that of Eden.² Excellent studies have been done about the use of the senses in Mark,³ Luke,⁴ and John.⁵ However, a similar study on the Gospel of Matthew was found lacking in the scholarly literature.

In this paper I will first explore the use of the senses in Eden, briefly suggesting as a result an alternative interpretation to Eve's alleged addition, "do not eat it, *or touch it.*" Second, I will explore the use of the senses in the Gospel of Matthew.⁶ Third, I will briefly discuss a few relevant issues with including the organic sensations of the senses in discussions of theological anthropology, showing that they are rather tools of language to provoke responses that transcend their organic sensations. With this, I will conclude by arguing that the introduction of the five senses in Eden establishes the mechanism from creation through which God and man engage one other, and that the five senses, therefore, ought to be included in theological-anthropological descriptions of what it means to be human.

¹ John Walton. *The Lost World of Genesis One: Ancient Cosmology and the Origins Debate* (Downers Grove: IV Press, 2009). John Walton. *The Lost World of Adam and Eve: Genesis 2-3 and the Human Origins Debate* (Downers Grove: IV Press, 2015).

² Marc Cortez. *ReSourcing Theological Anthropology: A Constructive Account of Humanity in the Light of Christ* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2017).

³ Louise Lawrence. "Exploring the Sense-Scape of the Gospel of Mark." *Journal for the Study of the New Testament*, Vol. 33, 2011.

⁴ Dennis Hamm. "Sight to the Blind: Vision as Metaphor in Luke." *Biblica*, Vol. 6, 1986.

⁵ Dorothy Lee. "The Gospel of John and the Five Senses." *JBL*, Vol. 129, 2010. See also Meredith Warren. "Tasting the Little Scroll: A Sensory Analysis of Divine Interaction in Revelation 10.8-10." *Journal for the Study of the New Testament*, Vol. 40, 2017.

⁶ While I am briefly exploring the senses in Matthew, there is room for an in-depth look than I presently have space for at the use of the senses in the Gospel of Matthew, parallel to the other studies.

The Five Senses in Eden (Gen. 2-3)

In the narrative of Genesis 2-3 outlining the *functional* origins of humanity, the five senses are gradually introduced. While two senses (sight and taste) are predominantly discussed, the other three (smell, touch, and hearing) nevertheless play a role. Interestingly, the first uses of the five senses are all positive, despite the traditionally negative interpretation given to Eve's "Do not eat it, *or touch it.*"⁷ As such, the five senses in Eden should be seen as positive for three reasons. First, their initial usage introduces the sense in relation to God. Second, their initial use occurs *prior* to the fall. And third, their first post-fall usage is in clear contrast with their first pre-fall usage.⁸ What follows is an elaboration of these three reasons, followed with implications on the interpretation of Eve's addition of touch to God's command.

The initial usage of each sense is in relation to God and occurs prior to the fall in Gen. 3:6. "The LORD God formed the man of dust from the ground and *breathed* into his *nostrils* the breath of life." In Gen. 2:7, the breath of life was breathed into the nostrils of Adam *by God*. "Out of the ground the LORD God made to spring up every tree that is *pleasant* to the *sight* and *good* for *food*." In Gen. 2:9, the good-looking and good-tasting trees were made for Adam *by God*. "And the LORD God *commanded* the man, *saying*, '...of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall surely die.'" In Gen. 2:16-17, Adam is passively implied to have heard the command given *by God*. "But God said, '...you shall not eat of it or *touch* it, lest you die.'" In Gen. 3:3, Eve inclusion of the abstention from touching in her reply to the serpent's temptation was connected with the protection against death established *by God*. Each of the first usages of the five senses—smell (2:7); sight (2:9); taste

⁷ By negative, I do not mean that they are formulated in the form of a negative command as is differentiated between, for example, the fifth commandment to "Honor your..." vs. the sixth commandment "Do not..." (Ex. 20). By negative, I refer to the undesirability of something.

⁸ The one exception to this is smell, which is mentioned just once in the narrative.

(2:9); hearing (2:16-17); and touch (3:3)—occur prior to the fall in Gen. 3:6, thus meaning our interpretation of them must still be in the realm of the desirable/ideal. A negative interpretation of anything *prior* to the fall is inadequate in light of Gen. 1:31 that it was all “very good.”

The first post-fall usage of the senses is in clear contrast with the respective first pre-fall usage. “When the woman *saw* that the tree was good for food, and that it was a *delight to the eyes*...she took of its fruit and ate...and he ate.” In Gen. 3:6, sight is directly linked to the first sin of Adam and Eve. The perversion of the sense of sight is the means through which sin first entered the world. This is in contrast with the first usage in 2:9 in which the tree was pleasant but has now become a source of “greed” or “desire,” either of which are more preferable translation than “delight.” Moreover, to separate the disobedience from the physical eating is to misunderstand the disobedience. The goodness of the food to eat is elaborated in 2:16-17 as that which is freely given and in protection from that which leads to death. These two eatings are in contrast to one another.

“And they heard the sound of the LORD God walking in the garden in the cool of the day... And he said, ‘I heard the sound of you in the garden, and I was afraid.’” In Gen. 3:8-10, the hearing of God by Adam led him to fear *because* of his disobedience by eating the fruit from which he was commanded to abstain (3:12, specifically the final clause “and I ate”). This is in clear contrast with Adam’s first hearing of the command of God in which there is no response; however, based on the brief conversation between God and Adam post-fall, we infer that Adam *heard* God’s sound in the garden after his disobedience in a different way than he did prior.

“Behold, the man has become like one of us in knowing good and evil. Now, lest he *reach out his hand* and take also of the tree of life and eat...” In Gen. 3:22, touch is again mentioned in direct connection with eating. However, whereas the first use of touch revolves

around protecting man from an eating that leads to death, this second use of touch resolves around preventing man from an eating that leads to life. There is clearly a contrast in the aspect of touching that takes place between the two passages, all while preserving the connection between *eating* and *touching*.

This connection between *eating* and *touching* is significant in that it provides the framework through which Eve could supply this “addition” without actually adding anything, for her recounting of the command retains the singularity of the command rather than splitting it up into two separate parts. On a separate note to the same end: her alleged addition is connected to identical grammatical constructs concerning other dietary prohibitions in Leviticus 11 and Deuteronomy 14, specific to the priesthood, in which “do not eat” and “or touch” are treated not as two separate commands but a single command. Moreover, these dietary prohibitions organize creatures in categories that generally mirror the order of creaturely creation in Gen. 1. Additionally, as with other holy artifacts later in Israel’s history that expressly prohibit even touching the objects, so too does the avoidance of this tree necessarily include a prohibition of touch, an addition over which Eve was never subject to rebuke.

Eve’s addition of touch effectively completes the gradual introduction of the five senses into the narrative of Genesis 2-3 in a synchronistic way that stays true to the spirit of the command, namely protection from death.⁹ Her addition of touch also fits the pattern of the other senses in that its first use is in relation to God and prior to the first sin and that its second use is after the fall and in clear contrast with the first use prior to the fall. Eve’s addition of “or touch

⁹ Phyllis Trible. *God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality*. Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1978, page 86, 110.

it” does not make her the first legalist,¹⁰ but it itself an evidence of her priestly status.¹¹ Eve’s addition of touch should therefore be interpreted positively.

The Senses in the Gospel of Matthew

The Gospel of Matthew makes use of four of the five senses in significant ways that extend beyond merely organic sensation.¹² What follows is an examination of how the Gospel of Matthew uses the senses of touch, taste, sight, and hearing.

Touch is used all throughout the Gospel of Matthew; it is one of the most frequently used of the senses. However, its wide use does not translate into a wide variety of use. There is certainly an implied touch in the devil’s second temptation regarding an angelic salvation (4:6). There are also two parallel passages regarding Jesus’ teaching that if body parts cause you to sin you ought to amputate them (5:29-30; 18:8-9). Certainly he is speaking hyperbolically, appealing to a sharp sensation of touch to emphasize the body’s role in sin. After the transfiguration when the disciples were afraid, Jesus touched them and told them not to be afraid (17:17). And following the resurrection, whereas the sight of Jesus led the disciples to worship, the touching of Jesus led the women to worship (28:9; cf. 28:17).

However, the most frequent use of touch is to demonstrate the healing power of Jesus, referenced in connection with almost every healing event (8:3; 8:15; 9:18; 9:20; 9:25; 9:28; 14:36; 15:30; 20:34). In his study of legal settings in the first century Roman world, Bernard Hibbs has shown that touch was the means by which a person exercised authority over another

¹⁰ G.K. Beale and Mitchell Kim, *God Dwells Among Us: Expanding Eden to the Ends of the Earth* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2014), 26.

¹¹ At risk of opening a can of worms in this paper, I will simply say here that a dual-gendered Edenic priesthood is the subject of my thesis proposal.

¹² The sense of smell is almost entirely absent from the Gospel of Matthew. The sparse usage of smell includes the woman who poured perfume on Jesus’ head to anoint him for burial (26:7-12). Yet even this is a passive mention of the organic sensation of smell, a dynamic also present in the parallel accounts of Mark 14:3-9 and Luke 7:36-50.

person.¹³ Aside from the parallel passages of 5:29-30 and 18:8-9, there is no other metaphorical or symbolic use of touch. This predominant use, as well as some of the minor uses, of touch in the Gospel of Matthew demonstrate that touch was the organic sensation through which the power and presence of Jesus was manifested. It is significant that such a sense requires in almost every instance another person. Therefore, the power and presence of Jesus is manifested intimately by use of touch.

The Gospel of Matthew uses taste in a variety of ways. We hear of John the Baptist's diet (3:4). We hear of Jesus being physically hungry after fasting (4:2); of course, in response to the devil's first temptation, Jesus describes the Word of God as better food than physical bread (4:3-4). And we hear of eating as a means by which fellowship occurs (9:11). The Gospel of Matthew uses taste as a metaphor in two minor ways. First, Jesus uses hunger and thirst in a way that transcends physical nourishment, instead referring to a longing for righteousness (5:6). Second, and in the same context, Jesus calls on his disciples to make the world salty (5:13); however, it may be better seen as a metaphor for preservation than taste.

Aside from the organic sensations of tasting through eating or drinking, and aside from these two minor metaphors, the primary metaphor employed through the use of taste is that which refers to death. The first instance of this metaphor is when Jesus announced that some among them would not taste death before they saw the Son of Man and Kingdom of God (16:28). Additionally, the mother of the sons of Zebedee desired for her sons to drink from Jesus' cup without realizing such a task referred to his death (20:22). Jesus identified his betrayer as the one with whom he dipped bread in the bowl (26:23). Lastly, Jesus promised not to drink wine again until he entered into his kingdom (26:29), and when his crucifiers gave him wine on the cross, he

¹³ Bernard Hibbs. "Coming to our Senses: Communication and Legal Expression in Performance Cultures." *Emory Law Journal*, 2009, page 96.

rejected it after tasting it (27:34). For taste to be a metaphor for death seems odd; yet, it is taste by which sweetness, sourness, sharpness, etc. are immediately felt. These tastes are not gradual but immediate, just as is the case with death.

In the Gospel of Matthew, sight is the organic sensation through which the compassion of Jesus is prompted (9:36; 14:14), a means through which the disciples followed suit (18:31). Sight, along with hearing, is a metaphor directly connected to understanding, drawing upon Isaianic fulfillment, with understanding leading to repentance (11:4-6; 13:13-15). In such a way can the metaphor of seeing be described by Jesus as a lamp that directs a life of wellness or a life of darkness (6:22-23). The lack of sight is a metaphor for hypocrisy. Jesus makes this distinction with his message about identifying the speck in your brother's eye while ignoring the log in your own eye. The Pharisees take the brunt of these words, after which he calls them blind guides, connecting their hypocrisy with a lack of sight (15:14; 23:16-36). The Pharisees asked to see a sign, but Jesus told them twice to look, for something greater than a sign was before them (12:38-42). The immediate aftermath of Jesus' crucifixion was also a visual spectacle, with the sky dark, the veil ripped, an earthquake, and dead saints rising from the dead and hanging out in the city (27:51-54). The sight of this led the Centurion to understand the identity of Jesus: Truly this man was the Son of God. In like manner, sight is the means through which God is worshipped and glorified (2:2-11; 5:16; 28:17).

Hearing in the Gospel of Matthew can refer to the organic sensation, such as when the voice came down from heaven at Jesus' baptism (3:17). Hearing is also connected by metaphor to attention, such as those who give and then sound a trumpet, or those who babble in prayer (6:2, 7). In these two instances, imagery connected to hearing makes the point about religious activities intended to grab the attention of others; although, he does indicate that when the

darkness turns to light the disciples ought to proclaim what was whispered to them (10:27). However, the predominant use of hearing in the Gospel of Matthew is connected to understanding, in similar ways as sight, for Isaianic fulfillment (11:4-6), by which sight to the blind and hearing to the deaf are intended to lead to understanding, which itself leads to repentance (13:15). This is captured well by his thrice repeated refrain: those with ears to hear should listen (11:15; 13:9; 13:43). Jesus even begins a discourse with “listen and understand...” (15:10). Moreover, the effective correction of a brother is described by the sinning brother listening to the correction and repenting (18:15-16).

This raises the potential paradox for someone to hear a message but not really hear it. Jesus draws a distinction between the organic sensation of hearing and the metaphorical hearing in three ways. First, he contrasts those who hear and act with those who hear and do not act (7:24-27). Second, he draws a distinction between someone who hears a flute or hears a song of lament and does not respond accordingly (11:17). Third, in the parable of the sower, hearing is connected to understanding the Word of God in a way that leads to the production of fruit, rather than the literal organic sensation of hearing in the ear (13:19-23). Therefore, it is right for us to understand the use of hearing in the Gospel of Matthew as a metaphor for understanding the previously hidden mysteries made known through Christ (13:35).

The Five Senses as Tools of Language

The study of the senses in anthropology is always limited to a cultural understanding and the mode by which they are examined.¹⁴ Examining the senses in the Bible will be limited by the fact that the Bible is a written form of communication and not a matter of tangible life through

¹⁴ K.L. Guerts. *Culture and the Senses: Bodily Ways of Knowing in an African Community* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002, page 395. Pieter Craffert. “Coming to (Terms With) Our Senses: Seeing, Hearing and Smelling the Gods.” *Journal of Early Christian History*, Vol. 7, 2017, page 34.

which organic sensations may be physically experienced by all who receive the communication. When it comes to forms of written communication, senses are not merely defined by biology but by culture.¹⁵ By even speaking of five senses though, I am presupposing Aristotle's model of metaphysics, a distinctly western concept.¹⁶ Other cultures around the world have explored additional senses, as defined by their own cultural context—some up to even twelve.¹⁷

In the written communication of the Bible where the organic sensations of the senses cannot be experienced, the usages of the senses are primarily tools of language to provoke responses that transcend their mere organic sensations. We do not “encounter senses as mere passive receptors, but rather integral components of social experience.”¹⁸ The senses are the tangible means through which we ritualize transcendent realities through our participation in them with the purpose of remembering them. “The awakening of the senses is the awakening of the capacity for memory.”¹⁹ The use of the senses in written communication provides the reader with tangible mechanisms through which to understand a transcendent or spiritual reality/truth.

In answering the question of what it means to be human from the perspective of theological-anthropology, the five senses ought to be included alongside our other descriptors. However, the mere biology of the senses is not what is in view. Hector Avalos is correct when he appreciates how “biblical authors conceptualize and treat human embodiment. Biblical authors do recognize what we regard as ‘senses’ (Seeing, hearing, smell, taste, touch) that are, in great

¹⁵ Lawrence, page 388. F.H. Brynie. *Brain Sense: The Science of the Senses and How We Process the World Around Us* (New York: Amacom, 2009), page 44. R.R. Llinas. *I of the Vortex: From Neurons to Self* (Westwood: MIT, 2001), page 44.

¹⁶ Stefanie Knauss. “Aisthesis: Theology and the Senses.” *Crosscurrents*, 2013, page 107. Lee, 115. Craffert, 34.

¹⁷ Craffert, 34-35.

¹⁸ Lawrence, 388-389.

¹⁹ C.N. Seremetakis, ed. *The Senses Still: Perception and Memory as Material Culture in Modernity* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), page 28.

part, tools for obtaining information.”²⁰ The senses are rather a theological-cultural paradigm through which to memorialize and ritualize the written Word of God and the acts of Christ.

While the definitions of what these senses mean may differ from culture to culture, they nonetheless are the cross-cultural means through which humans explain transcendent or spiritual realities. This dynamic has roots in Eden, in which the senses are means established in creation by which to connect to God but also means to disconnect from God through misuse. This dynamic also has roots in the ministry of Christ, which this paper has shown from the Gospel of Matthew specifically, emphasizing that the means by which God’s people understand his Word is through their senses.

²⁰ Hector Avalos. “Introducing Sensory Criticism in Biblical Studies: Audiocentricity and Visiocentricity” in *The Abled Body: Rethinking Disabilities in Biblical Studies*, ed. Hector Avalos, Sarah Melcher, and Jeremy Schipper (Atlanta: SBL, 2017), page 44.

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