

SENSES LOST IN PARADISE?
ON THE INTERRELATEDNESS OF SENSORY AND ETHICAL
PERCEPTIONS IN GENESIS 2–3 AND BEYOND

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With “Senses Lost in Paradise” I allude to the epic poem “Paradise Lost,” written by John Milton in 1667.¹ In this piece, the author retells and expands the creation story of Gen 2–3; he wrestles with the fate of the first humans who—after eating the fruit of insight into good and bad—no longer live in paradise. Milton, presupposing as I do a link between aesthetics and ethics, inquires: “Will it not be found ... that what is beautiful is ... true; and what is at once both beautiful and true is, of consequence, agreeable and good?”²

A common trait of the exhaustive modern interpretation history of the paradise story in Gen 2–3 is a disregard for the role of aesthetics and in particular the senses.³ It seems that after gripping the fruit of knowledge, as induced by the senses, the trust in the use of the senses for acquiring knowledge of good and bad is lost. As a result, interpretation often focuses on the ambiguous outcome and long-term consequences of the first humans’ actions (i.e., expulsion of the garden). Even those interpreters who believe that the acquisition of knowledge was

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¹ John Milton, *Paradise Lost: A Poem Written in Ten Books* (London: Parker, 1667).

² Milton, *Paradise Lost*, 2:268–69.

³ The exceptions prove the rule: Gerhard von Rad comments on the emergence of the different senses (in a positive way), naming hearing, smell, sight, and taste. Gerhard von Rad, *Das erste Buch Mose*, 10th ed., ATD 2/4 (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1976), 73. Phyllis Tribble stresses the oral sense. According to her this leads to the shift of humans to “moral responsibility.” Phyllis Tribble, *God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality*, OBT 2 (Philadelphia: Fortress 1978), 86.

inevitable leave out the role that the senses play in the dramaturgy of the story. I invert the common reading: tasting the attractive fruits in the creation myth is not the origin of sin but the origin of the senses and hence the origin of the capability of humans to grasp the good (and eventually the bad).⁴ In order to make this argument, I shall examine the Hebrew concept of “good” (טוב) as an aesthetical and ethical concept in Gen 2–3. Indeed a paradox seems to be that knowledge is gained through disobedience.⁵ I shall focus on the role of the sensory perception as a means to acquiring ethical perception in this narrative and other wisdom literature in the Hebrew Bible, mainly the book of Proverbs.⁶

The book of Proverbs demonstrates that there are two different ways of using the senses: acquiring wisdom and warning against folly.⁷ I shall argue—by reading Gen 3 through the lens of Proverbs—that sensory perception of the good is indispensable for human discernment. In Gen 3, for the first time in the narrated story of humanity in the Hebrew Bible, the first woman, makes uses of her senses. Therefore, this story seems to answer the questions: “How are the senses of the first human beings portrayed? If there is a fall from grace, does this come about through the misuse of any particular sense?”⁸ Genesis 2–3 develops, through narrative, how the senses become involved in gripping the knowledge of good and evil.

Before starting, I must clarify two key terms: *ethics* and *aesthetics*. Aesthetics refers to the Greek word *αἰσθησις*, meaning perception or sense. Hence aesthetical

⁴ For the history of interpretation, see Frederick R. Tennant, *The Sources of the Doctrines of the Fall and Original Sin* (New York: Schocken, 1968); Elizabeth A. Clark, “Heresy, Asceticism, Adam, and Eve: Interpretations of Genesis 1–3 in the Later Latin Fathers,” in *Genesis 1–3 in the History of Exegesis: Intrigue in the Garden*, ed. Gregory Allen Robbins (Lewiston, NY: Mellen, 1988), 99–133.

⁵ On the notion of paradox in the story, see Deanne Westbrook, “Paradise and Paradox,” in *Mappings of the Biblical Terrain: The Bible as Text*, ed. Vincent L. Toller (Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press, 1990), 121–43. Westbrook identifies in Gen 2–3 a current literary strategy that does not try to resolve antithetical components.

⁶ I subsume the creation narrative in Gen 2–3 under the vast label of wisdom literature as the text is about introducing relevant categories and themes within wisdom literature such as “good and evil” and human finitude. For the discussion on the denotation of wisdom literature as genre, see Mark R. Sneed, ed., *Was There a Wisdom Tradition? New Prospects in Israelite Wisdom Studies*, AIL 23 (Atlanta: SBL Press, 2015).

⁷ Greg Schmidt Goering, “Attentive Ears and Forward-Looking Eyes: Disciplining the Senses and Forming the Self in the Book of Proverbs,” *JJS* 66 (2015): 242–64.

⁸ David Howes and Constance Classen, “Conclusion: Sounding Sensory Profiles,” in *The Varieties of Sensory Experience: A Sourcebook in the Anthropology of the Senses*, ed. David Howes (Toronto: University of Toronto Press 1991), 280. See chapter 1 above in the present volume.

experience overlaps with sensory experience.⁹ The second term, ethics, refers to the concern for the good. Ethics, as an analytical endeavor, rises from lived practice.

Ethics as discourse on good and evil, as I use the term, is neither restricted to modern philosophical treatises nor to the legal directives found in the Hebrew Bible.¹⁰ Along with others in the field,¹¹ I assume that one can read texts from the Hebrew Bible philosophically. This is true because the texts themselves address philosophical questions either explicitly or implicitly. Even if philosophical approaches to the Hebrew Bible are not common, it has been argued that the corpus can be considered a part of Western philosophy in antiquity. Moreover, I assume that ethical directives are found throughout the Hebrew Bible. Traditionally, within Hebrew Bible studies ethical questions have been discussed primarily in connection with legal texts, since ethics tend to be equated with normative or legal requirements. As a consequence, there is resistance to considering literary genres beyond legal texts as they seemingly possess no explicit normative claim. However, other genres, like narratives and poetical-lyrical sayings, also teach ethical lessons through their aesthetics, as we shall see. It is therefore appropriate to include proverbial sayings and a creation narrative in my examination of Hebrew Bible ethics here.

Finally, an underlying presupposition of my argument is that our worldview is shaped by language.¹² The investigation of semantic fields will therefore serve

⁹ Although they overlap, these two modes of perception stem from different scholarly fields: where aesthetics is used in the arts, sensory perception belongs to the field of cognitive sciences and cultural anthropology. See Jason Michael Peck, "Ethics," in *German Aesthetics: Fundamental Concepts from Baumgarten to Adorno*, ed. J. D. Mininger and Jason Michael Peck, *New Directions in German Studies* 16 (New York: Bloomsbury, 2016), 77: "Aesthetics referring to the Greek *αἰσθητική* ("I perceive, I sense") beyond the study of poetics and arts in general, would be the science of sensory perception." See also Berys N. Gaut, "Ethics and Aesthetics," in *The Routledge Companion to Aesthetics*, ed. Berys N. Gaut and Dominic McIver Lopes (London: Routledge, 2001), 341–52.

¹⁰ See Henri Frankfort et al., *The Intellectual Adventure of Ancient Man: An Essay on Speculative Thought in the Ancient Near East* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1946), 10–11. The volume has been edited in midst the collapse of the modern western civilization while speaking of the logic of mythopoetic thought.

¹¹ See Eckart Otto, "Die Geburt des moralischen Bewusstseins: Die Ethik der Hebräischen Bibel," in *Bibel und Christentum im Orient: Studien zur Einführung der Reihe "Orientalia Biblica et Christiana,"* ed. Eckart Otto and Siegbert Uhlig, *OBC* 1 (Glückstadt: Augustin, 1991), 63–87; John Barton, *Ethics in Ancient Israel* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 2–4.

¹² See Meir Malul, *Knowledge, Control and Sex: Studies in Biblical Thought, Culture and Worldview* (Tel Aviv: Archaeological Centre, 2002), 67–69 (esp. remarks on cognitive anthropology).

as the basis for classifying sensory experiences and their roles concerning the reflection on the Hebrew term for “good.” My linguistic analysis will take into consideration the specific cultural notion of the senses in the Hebrew Bible, as well as presuppose that sensory experiences transmit embodied knowledge since the sensory organs play a major role in acquiring insight. I shall combine this philological and cultural anthropological reading with a philosophical approach.¹³ The aim is to highlight the contribution of sensory experiences to the process of judgment, an enactment of ethics. This will lead to an appraisal of sensory experience (aesthetics) for ethical learning.

THE SENSORY PERCEPTION OF KNOWLEDGE OF GOOD AND EVIL IN GENESIS 2–3

The paradox that (the perception of) what is good and beautiful turns out to be fatal is the starting point for my investigation of the role of the senses in ethical decision making according to Gen 2–3. Or in the words of Eve, as offered by Milton: “Naming thee the tree of knowledge, knowledge both of good and evil; forbids us then to taste.”¹⁴ Long time the history of interpretation has focused on how to understand the phrasing “knowledge (of) good and evil.” One can identify mainly four interpretations which are interwoven:¹⁵ (1) It is understood as a merism composed of a binary pair meaning “knowledge of everything” (omniscience, which is restricted to God and should hence be forbidden). (2) It denotes coming to age and maturity (cf. Deut 1:39) within a psycho-mythical setting.¹⁶ (3) It refers to sexual knowledge; after the ingestion of the fruit, the humans realize that they

¹³ The latter seems quite common up to the middle of the last century. Herold Stern pleads that “a philological analysis of such key ethical terms as ‘good’ and ‘evil’ cannot be separated from a philosophical discussion.” One has to understand the concepts of a particular culture. Having stated this, he gives no further methodological hints how this should be done. Herold Stern, “The Knowledge of Good and Evil,” *VT* 8 (1958): 405.

¹⁴ Milton, *Paradise Lost*, 9:751–53.

¹⁵ Out of the post-enlightenment historical-critical interpretation history, I quote just a few. A landmark is Julius Wellhausen’s interpretation: The expression of knowledge of good and bad in Gen 2–3 is about if things are useful, beneficial, or harmful for human beings. It is not about their metaphysical value; rather, it stands for the civilization of humankind. Julius Wellhausen, *Prolegomena zur Geschichte Israels*, 5th ed. (Berlin: Reimer, 1899), 305–7. Karl Budde in his lengthy discussion of Wellhausen’s position, comes to the conclusion that is about “sittliche Erkenntnis.” Karl Budde, *Die Biblische Urgeschichte (Gen 1–12,5)* (Giessen: Ricker, 1883), 65–70.

¹⁶ Samuel R. Driver identifies two interwoven meanings of the knowledge of good and bad: as passing from innocence in childhood to knowledge and as acquisition of the moral order. Samuel R. Driver, *The Book of Genesis*, 10th ed. (London: Methuen, 1916), 46, 56.

are naked and feel ashamed.¹⁷ (4) Finally, as I will argue, it stands for the capability of ethical reflection and the possibility to make choices (cf. with number 1).¹⁸ Following the narrative drama, the philosophical question arises: why should this tree of knowledge of good and bad, which was good and attractive to the senses according to the narrator (Gen 2:9), be forbidden to taste? Indeed, it is self-contradictory that usufruct is forbidden.

The scene is set in Gen 2, where we read about the garden and its beautiful trees. All of the trees, we are told, may serve as food (v. 7) except for the tree of knowledge of good and evil, which God forbids (vv. 16–17). It is important to note that the woman had not yet been created when God's prohibition was uttered. This juxtaposition—between the pleasurable trees and the forbidden knowledge—is a portentous prolepsis to the conflict in the following chapter, where a new actor, the snake, enters the narrative. Here, in Gen 3, the serpent and the woman discuss the forbidden tree, and the dialogue quickly leads to the turning point of the narrative, eating the fruit. The outcome of the dialogue between the woman and the serpent reads as follows:

The woman saw that the tree was good for eating, and a delight for the eyes, and that the tree was desirable as a source of insight. And she took of its fruit and ate; she gave also some to her man who was with her, and he ate. (Gen 3:6)

¹⁷ See Robert Gordis, with a decisive rejection of the moral and cognitive interpretation. At the same time, strangely enough, within this interpretation in sexual terms he includes moral categories. Robert Gordis, "The Knowledge of Good and Evil in the Old Testament and the Dead Sea Scrolls," in *Poets, Prophets and Sages: Essays in Biblical Interpretation*, ed. Robert Gordis (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1971), 198–216. Bo Reicke adheres this view. He insists that the sexual knowledge belongs to the broader field of the so-called arts of civilization. Bo Reicke, "The Knowledge Hidden in the Tree of Paradise," *JSS* 1 (1956): 193–201. Malul expands on this: "Thus, sexual knowledge in the case of Adam ... meant for all practical reasons being transformed, as well transferred, into the bounds of civilization, or the specific social group in question, and being accorded the status of a full member with all the privileges (and obligations) that it entails" (*Knowledge, Control and Sex*, 297). According to Michaela Bauks acquiring wisdom has sexual overtones: "Die Semantik von Gen 2–3 (שכל, נחמד, תאוה, ערום, ידע, נגע, טוב-רע) zeige eine Ambivalenz an, die zwischen weisheitlichen Anleihen und libidinösen Deutungen changierend Sexualität als Parabel für die Vernunft deutet." Michaela Bauks "Erkenntnis und Leben in Gen 2–3: Zum Wandel eines ursprünglich weisheitlichen geprägten Lebensbegriffs," *ZAW* 127 (2015): 20–42.

¹⁸ See Rainer Albertz, "Ihr werdet sein wie Gott': Gen 3,1–7 auf dem Hintergrund des alttestamentlichen und des sumerisch-babylonischen Menschenbildes," *WO* 24 (1993): 89–111.

Different senses are addressed: sight (“she saw,” “the eyes”), taste (“good for eating”), and perhaps even smell (implied by the notion of good for tasting). Finally, the story is about touching, as the woman seizes the fruit.¹⁹ The text primarily uses verbal expressions for the sensory perceptions. One sensory organ is explicitly named: the eyes, which is linked to the act of seeing (in Hebrew organs represent the sensory actions they invoke). In other words, multiple sensory experiences are involved in grasping the fruit of knowledge.

There is also a conflation of good (טוב) as attractive for the senses and good (טוב) as morally adequate. The word טוב is used by the narrative voice to describe the gold of the land (Gen 2:12) and by God to declare that is not good for the first human be on its own (Gen 2:18). Finally, it is used twice to describe the tree of knowledge, with dual meaning (Gen 2:9). The narrator describes that “every tree [is] desirable to the sight and good for food ... and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil” (Gen 2:9; cf. 2:17; 3:5, 22).²⁰ The first refers to the aesthetic dimension implying an overall positive notion: the tree is said to be good to eat. The second notion introduces an ambiguity as it is juxtaposed to evil. It is perplexing that out of something good (for eating) can flow evil, or at least the knowledge of it.

The storyline becomes even more complex because the ingestion of its fruit is forbidden. Last but not least, as the narrative moves forward, we discover that the knowledge of good and bad has no beneficial results; in fact, at first glance it is destructive. This entangled setup results in attributing טוב an ambiguous overtone. On the one hand, טוב defines the forbidden tree in ethical and epistemological terms; it is the tree of knowledge of good and evil. On the other hand, as the preposition ל indicates, טוב means that something is adequate for a particular purpose—in this case: eating. The same tree that brings knowledge of good and evil is good for eating, in a context of several sensory experiences. This multifaceted aesthetical and ethical use of טוב makes it a crucial term for the story.²¹ It fits in with the other puns of the narrative, like the wordplay that links the term for the first human being (אדם) to the material from which he is made, the earth (האדמה), or like the notion that knowing (ידע) refers to different acts of insight (ethical, sexual, aesthetical).

¹⁹ Interestingly the woman herself referred to touching earlier when she alluded to the prohibition of God. According to her, God did even forbid to touch the fruit (see Gen 3:3). See Nicole L. Tilford, *Sensing World, Sensing Wisdom: The Cognitive Foundation of Biblical Metaphors* (Atlanta: SBL Press, 2017), 98. Tilford stresses the permanence of touch.

²⁰ A crucial point for the interpretation of the tree of knowledge of good and bad is its juxtaposition to the tree of life (see below).

²¹ See for a similar argument, Wellhausen, *Prolegomena*, 305–7. According to Wellhausen, there is an overlap of sensory and utilitarian aspects in the use of in Gen 2–3. He maintains that the expression has only an ethical stretch insofar the consequences of a value or an act are beneficial or harmful.

The aesthetic aspect of טוב is often articulated through the notion of “seeing” (see Gen 1; 24:16; 26:7; 1 Sam 16:2; 2 Sam 11:2; Esth 1:2–3).²² This makes beauty, according to Ingeborg Höver-Johag, something that resides in the eye of the beholder.²³ Note again the use of the word aesthetics here. An act of perception unites different aspects of the observed object: assessing its physical, sensual, and utilitarian values. The perception of beauty and goodness is also an act of analytical evaluation. This becomes obvious when one considers the parallel use of verbs such as to know (Gen 3:7), the opening of the eyes (Gen 3:7) and insight (Gen 3:6). Humans have been able to see since their creation, yet—after eating of the fruit—their eyes are said to be opened.²⁴

Furthermore, the sensation of the fruit is qualified as pleasant. Although the woman evaluates the tree by sight, the tree also appeals to her through the stimulation of other senses: pleasure and taste. She sees that the fruit is good for eating. Hence there is a link between the sense of sight and taste. Its attractiveness is stressed by the use of נחמד (“desirable”) next to טוב (“good”) (Gen 3:6).²⁵ It is also “a delight [תאוה] to the eyes” (Gen 3:6); תאוה is a sapiential term, which has both negative (Prov 21:25, 26) and positive (Prov 10:24; 11:23; 13:12, 19; 19:22) overtones in Proverbs. It is also used in Ps 10:17 to speak of the destitute’s longing (תאוה) for liberation.

The tree is desirable to the woman because of the promise it makes: to be a source of insight. The meaning of the *hiphil* verb שכל is “to be insightful and, as a result, successful” in accordance with the so-called action-consequence nexus, that is, the idea that wicked deeds will bring disastrous consequences and good deeds will bring good consequences (see Prov 1:3; 10:5, 19).²⁶ שכל is a common verb in wisdom literature and belongs to the semantic field of טוב (“good”).²⁷ The primary meaning of the verb שכל is to look, implying that looking brings about understanding. The sense of sight seems to be implied. The verb שכל expresses cognition and its result and often occurs alongside verbs of sensory perception.²⁸

²² Matthias Augustin speaks of “dynamisch-funktional.” Matthias Augustin, “Schönheit,” *NBL* 3:497.

²³ Ingeborg Höver-Johag, “טוב,” *ThWAT* 3:315–39.

²⁴ See Malul, *Knowledge, Control and Sex*, 103–6, 147, 168: “To see that indicates an evaluation of the situation and not just sight or consciousness, especially with the complement בִּי-טוֹב רָאָה.”

²⁵ Cf. Prov 21:20 and Ps 19:11 חמד.

²⁶ Klaus Koch, “Gibt es ein Vergeltungsdogma im Alten Testament?,” *ZTK* 52 (1955): 1–42.

²⁷ Cf. Prov 1:3; 10:5, 19; 14:35; 15:24; 16:20, 23; 17:2, 8; 19:14; 21:11, 12, 16; Job 22:2; 33:20; 34:27, 35; Sir 17:6–7.

²⁸ See Paul Humbert, *Etudes sur le Récit du Paradis et de la chute dans la Genèse*, Mémoires de l’Université de Neuchâtel 14 (Neuchâtel: Secrétariat de l’Université, 1940), 94–97; and Malul, *Knowledge, Control and Sex*, 103–6, 128–29.

As a result of the stimulus of the different senses, the woman picks the fruit. The prehension of the fruit in turn leads to comprehension. The woman and the man next to her acquire knowledge through eating.²⁹ Taste and ingestion turn into moral understanding; hence, perception turns into action. In this first part, I have outlined how the senses have been involved in the perception, prehension, and acquisition of insight into good and bad. The garden story is about the invention, failure, and success of the senses. From our analyses of the use of the senses in this story—namely, sight, taste (smell may be included), touch, and speech—we shall move to a broader discussion of the semantic field and classification of the senses.

THE CLASSIFICATION OF THE SENSES IN CONTEXTS OF ETHICAL TEACHINGS

In our analysis of Gen 2–3, two salient features of the senses have been identified. First, sensory perception is characterized as pleasure. Second, next to sight, taste plays a prominent role in ethical insight. As we shall see in this section, these are common characteristics of the senses according to wisdom literature. I shall expand our investigation of the role of the senses for ethical discernment to teachings in Proverbs. Earlier research has been focused on ranking the senses. However, our analysis has identified that the senses are commonly used as tools for discernment (see below).

Pleasure, the Senses, and Ethics

The book of Proverbs can be classified as pedagogical literature drawing on embodied experiences and the notion of pleasure. Its cogent sayings stimulate the senses in order to induce certain behaviors. Or to put it in another way: “Sensory pleasure (and displeasure) is closely linked ... to moral judgement.”³⁰ Hence it is a book that treats issues concerning the senses in educational practices.³¹

²⁹ See Frank Crüsemann, “Essen als Akt der Verinnerlichung von Normen und Fähigkeiten,” in *Essen und Trinken in der Bibel: Ein literarisches Festmahl für Rainer Kessler zum 65. Geburtstag*, ed. Michaela Geiger, Christl M. Maier, Uta Schmidt, and Rainer Kessler (Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus, 2009), 85–100. See also Dorothea Erbele-Küster, “Eat this Scroll (Ezekiel 3): Reading as Eating with Special Reference to ‘Niddah’ (Menstruation),” *Canon and Culture 3* (2009): 5–22.

³⁰ Yael Avrahami, *The Senses of Scripture: Sensory Perception in the Hebrew Bible*, LHBOTS 545 (New York: T&T Clark, 2012), 167.

³¹ According to the cultural anthropologists Howes and Classen, “Conclusion,” 269–70, one can identify through the importance of certain senses in childrearing processes and in educational practices the cultural understanding of the senses.

In her recent monograph *Poetic Ethics in Proverbs*, Anne Stewart builds on this idea. She identifies four discrete models of ethical teaching: a model of rebuke, a model of motivation, a model of desire, and a model of imagination.³² Regarding the model of desire, she distinguishes between the desire of the wicked and the fool, on one hand (Prov 13:25; 21:10), and, on the other hand, the desire of the wise (13:5; 21:15). Her argument is that wisdom is gained through sensory appeal. I shall develop this relation between pleasure, the senses, and ethics in the sage's longing for the good.

Wisdom is often depicted as an edible plant and thus associated with a sweet taste. Proverbs 13:12 equates desire with the tree of life: "desire fulfilled is a tree of life." One may read this as a sophisticated allusion to the tree of life that is mentioned in the garden story of Gen 2–3 next to the tree of knowledge of good and bad. However, Prov 13 may likewise be read as an independent literary layer that does not presuppose Gen 2–3.³³ In either case, it is clear from other instances in Proverbs that the book combines the tree of life with the acquisition of wisdom (e.g., Prov 11:30). Personified Wisdom is "a tree of life to them that lay hold upon her, and happy is every one that holds her fast" (Prov 3:18). Furthermore, the sensory experience of touch is referred to by making the point that the sensation of grasping and holding leads to the prehension of happiness and wisdom.

In these and other passages from Proverbs, the role of the senses in the process of acquiring wisdom is assessed positively. Whereas in Gen 3 the desire for the tree of life turns out to be fatal, in Proverbs, the craving converts itself into the source of life. In a similar way Prov 24:13–14 appeals to the sense of taste to foster one's desire toward wisdom:

Eat honey, my son, for it is good, sweet dripping honey on your palate.
 Know this: (such is) wisdom for your throat [שפן].
 If you find it there will be things beyond you and your expectation will not be cut off.

Here, two sensory organs are explicitly mentioned: the palate (תך), as the seat of the taste, and the throat (שפן), as the organ that governs the intake of breath and

³² Anne Stewart, *Poetic Ethics in Proverbs: Wisdom Literature and the Shaping of the Moral Self* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016).

³³ Eckart Otto, "Die Paradieserzählung Genesis 2–3: Eine nachpriesterliche Lehrerzählung in ihrem religionshistorischen Kontext," in "Jedes Ding hat seine Zeit ...": Studien zur israelitischen und altorientalischen Weisheit für Diethelm Michel zum 65. Geburtstag, ed. Anja Angela Diesel, Reinhard G. Lehmann, Eckart Otto, and Andreas Wagner, BZAW 241 (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1996), 174: "Das gilt auch für das Motiv des Lebensbaumes, das in den Proverbien mehrfach belegt ist (s. i. f.), dort aber Gen 2–3 nicht voraussetzt. Erst nachkanonisch in Test. Levi 18,10f; 4 Esra 8,52; 4 Makk 16,18; Apc 2,7; 22,1f.14.19 wird diese Verbindung hergestellt."

food, which can stand for longing and the person as a whole.³⁴ Actually, the text simply refers to the sensory organs, taking them as a signifier for the sensory perception. Through this the embodied notion of the sensory perception is stressed.³⁵ As the organs taste the sweetness and attractiveness of honey, they taste wisdom and long for it. Wisdom is toothsome like fluid honey. “The first line employs a literal directive for the student to savor the sweet substance, the taste of which is embellished in the second half of the line.”³⁶ Interpretations like this one suggest that honey serves as a metaphor for how wisdom is to be appropriated or how abundant and affecting wisdom is.³⁷ Through the parallel use of the organs, the sweet taste of honey is like the pleasure of wisdom and vice versa. The ingested food becomes part of the person. It nourishes and creates the moral self as words do.³⁸

Taste of Ethics

As stated earlier there is no umbrella or epistemological term for the senses in Hebrew. Still, one can identify some general traits. There seems to be a close relation between taste, judgment, and the senses in several texts. As the Latin *sapere* can mean both “to taste” and “to know,” in Hebrew the verb “to taste” may

³⁴ For the embodied concept of the term *חָכְמוֹת*, see Dorothea Erbele-Küster, “Gender in Gesenius Revisited,” in *Biblische Exegese und hebräische Lexikographie: Das “Hebräisch-deutsche Handwörterbuch” von Wilhelm Gesenius als Spiegel und Quelle alttestamentlicher Forschung, 200 Jahre nach seiner ersten Auflage*, ed. Stefan Schorch, and Ernst-Joachim Waschke, BZAW 427 (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2013), 41–55; and Bernd Janowski, “Die lebendige *nəpəš*: Das Alte Testament und die Frage nach der ‘Seele,’” in *Der nahe und der ferne Gott, Beiträge zur Theologie des Alten Testaments 5* (Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchner, 2014), 73–116.

³⁵ For the embodied conception of the senses in the Hebrew Bible in general and in particular for this text, see Greg Schmidt Goering, “Honey and Wormwood: Taste and the Embodiment of Wisdom in the Book of Proverbs,” *HBAI 5* (2016): 23–41.

³⁶ Stewart, *Poetic Ethics in Proverbs*, 148: “The saying [in Prov 24] operates with sensory perception. Identifying wisdom’s desirability by its taste, and the opening description of nature’s honey makes the saying more pressing and tangible.”

³⁷ Yael Avrahami, “The Study of Sensory Perceptions in the Hebrew Bible: Notes on Method,” *HBAI 5* (2016): 4, speaks of “sensory metaphors” or “figurative use” and Tilford, *Sensing World, Sensing Wisdom*, 187 of a “complex metaphor.”

³⁸ See Schmidt Goering, “Honey and Wormwood,” 33.

encompass the act of perception in general.³⁹ Although the root טעם (“taste, perceive”) is not used in Gen 3, the more common verb אכל (“to eat”) plays a prominent role.⁴⁰

The sense of taste often occurs with female figures (Proverbs; Gen 2–3; and 1 Sam 25). Proverbs 11:22 speaks of a woman whose good taste (i.e., sense) has departed her. The woman who is appraised for her wisdom in trade “tastes that her merchandise is good” (Prov 31:18).⁴¹ In his article on taste, Aaron Schart comments on this association and argues that a woman’s special knowledge of taste comes through the preparation of food.⁴² Often interpreters understand the Hebrew lexeme טעם (“taste”) in women as a sense of food (esp. 1 Sam 25). They limit taste in these instances to a physiological process, excluding “common sense” as the meaning of taste. This narrow reading assumes a dualistic view of the embodied sense of taste versus a cognitive common sense. This leads to the view that women are associated with the body, whereas men are equated with reason. Indeed, the Hebrew notion of the senses is embodied, but this holds true for reason (heart) as well. Tasting is discriminating. Therefore, the modern binary notion of body and reason/mind or sensation and cognition are blurred. “Taste works as marker of wisdom, because, like wisdom, taste bridges bodily and cognitive functions.”⁴³ Perception for the sake of knowledge is embodied. Furthermore, the lexeme for taste stands in these instances for discriminating abilities, referring to the sense of wisdom in the woman.⁴⁴

In summary, our analysis of taste in different strands of wisdom literature has shown that this particular sense is an act of cognitive evaluation. Hence sensory perception involves ethical judgment. Physical appreciation, taste, and ingestion lead to understanding. In the garden story, the tree and its fruit coincide with the fruit of wisdom. Something which is טוב (“good”) is worth striving for.⁴⁵ Sensory perception (aesthetics) and ethical perception coincide in this term. Good taste seems to be a virtue belonging to the knowledgeable and is praised in characters who possess it.

³⁹ See Malul, *Knowledge, Control and Sex*, 105, 130–33 on the role of taste in the epistemic process.

⁴⁰ See Avrahami, *Senses of Scripture*, 93: “It is noteworthy that neither a sharp semantic distinction exists between the common verb to eat and the rare verb to taste, nor the tasting process and eating.”

⁴¹ The only other time the root is used in Prov 26:16.

⁴² See Aaron Schart, “Geschmack,” WiBiLex (2009): <https://www.bibelwissenschaft.de/stichwort/66598/>.

⁴³ Schmidt Goering, “Honey and Wormwood,” 27.

⁴⁴ See Schmidt Goering, “Honey and Wormwood,” 25.

⁴⁵ See Höver-Johag, “טוב,” 318.

Classification of Senses as Ethical Tools

In order to describe the epistemological concept of the senses and eventually compare it with concepts from other cultures, a major focus in earlier studies has been to rank and classify the senses.⁴⁶ In this section I shall take up the question of how to classify the senses and assess the implication of the senses for the ethical discernment and hence the interconnectedness between the aesthetical and ethical.

The controversy regarding which mode of perception is granted dominion plays a crucial role in evaluating the bearing of the senses in the garden story of Gen 2–3. In the history of interpretation, two assumptions are common: first, listening is prioritized over sight; second, the senses of taste and touch are regarded as the primary mode of interaction for infants, in contrast to the higher senses of listening or hearing (note that both are regarded as superior to the other senses).⁴⁷ These assumptions have resulted in the aforementioned distrust of the senses and their disregard when it comes to discernment. This holds true even beyond the interpretation history of Gen 2–3.

Yael Avrahami argues for the priority of sight in the Hebrew Bible, as it is a term for witness and first-hand learning.⁴⁸ Yet, this is a minority position. In addition one should note that the aural perception (listening) is often linked with the heart, the sensory organ for understanding.⁴⁹ In her listing of expressions used in the learning and teaching process of wisdom literature, Nili Shupak omits verbs referring to the sensual experiences of sight and taste.⁵⁰ Shupak starts the list with the aural sense, the verb שמע (“to listen”), underlining that at the base of learning lies obedience. One of the influential defenders of this prioritization is Hans Walter Wolff. He claims that hearing generally has supremacy over sight in the

⁴⁶ This is also the case for David Howes and Constance Classen, *Ways of Sensing: Understanding the Senses in Society* (London: Routledge, 2014), as they move from “sensory orders” to “ways of sensing,” the title of their recent book.

⁴⁷ This goes along with the interpretation of Gen 2–3 as a socialization myth. It is about becoming adult.

⁴⁸ See Avrahami, *Senses of Scripture*, 232–276: chapter 5. The Centrality of Sight.

⁴⁹ According to Avrahami, sensory imagery portrays emotional experiences (*Senses of Scripture*, 163). In the Hebrew Bible physical, emotional, and intellectual senses are intertwined.

⁵⁰ Nili Shupak, “Learning Methods in Ancient Israel,” *VT* 53 (2003): 416–26. Towards the end of her article she notes metaphorical expressions linked to the learning process referring to Prov 24:13–14 and stating that wisdom is compared to honey.

Hebrew Bible.⁵¹ Since hearing is linked to speech (e.g., Prov 15:32; 18:21), it is a characteristic of the reasonable nature of human beings.⁵²

Sight and taste, however, are the most prominent senses of Gen 3, and they are allotted the greatest vocabulary. As the story is about humankind's first use of the senses, this may be taken as an argument that sight has priority over other modes of perception, especially hearing. Further, at first glance, the story seems to contain no mention of the aural sense (hearing). Yet, although the woman had not yet been created at the moment of God's utterance, the woman rephrases the speech of God, which presupposes that she has listened to God's command. This may be why interpreters argue that the story is about disobedience, not listening to the command of God. The conclusion one may draw from this for a hierarchy of the senses would be that when sight and taste take priority over listening one is led to misconduct and failure. Yet, each sense is *sine qua non*, and—as explained above—the sense of sight is intrinsically linked with the sense of taste in our story.

While unraveling the role of the senses, there seems to be an inclination to subsume the senses under a third category: understanding. "Of particular importance in this regard is to determine which sense is most associated with knowledge and understanding."⁵³ I have argued that eating in Gen 3 and taste in general is that sense in the Hebrew Bible. Yet, on an epistemological level I ask myself if this is the proper way to describe the role of the senses. According to this classification, understanding would become a super-sense or even be located beyond the senses. However, in wisdom literature understanding is a sense; more precisely, the ways of sensing are interrelated with the ways of knowing. Testing is, truly, knowing.

TRUST IN SENSES REGAINED?⁵⁴

We moved from senses lost to trust in senses regained. A crucial argument has been that sensory perception is indispensable for humankind's initial acquaintance with good and evil. As discussed above, according to the final stretch of the story in Gen 2–3, privileging the senses of sight and taste over the sense of hearing leads to ambivalent knowledge and to expulsion from the garden.

In light of what our study has shown about how sensory experience functions in terms of learning to discern ethically, I have compared Gen 2–3 and Proverbs.

⁵¹ See Hans Walter Wolff, *Anthropology of the Old Testament*, trans. Margaret Kohl (London: SCM, 1974), 74–75.

⁵² Malul argues in favor of a combination of a culture of the eye and a culture of the ear as central for the epistemic process (*Knowledge, Control and Sex*, 144–48, esp. 147).

⁵³ See David Howes and Constance Classen, "Conclusion," 264.

⁵⁴ See John Milton, *Paradise Regain'd: A Poem in IV Books, to Which Is Added Samson Agonistes* (Starkey: London, 1671).

The latter fosters ethical education by aesthetic means and the former is a philosophical reflection on good and bad in a narrative disguise.

In documenting the first involvement of the senses in the acquisition of ethical insight into good and evil, Gen 3 confronts us with both the necessity *and* the ambivalence of the senses. My intention has been to decode the role of the senses regarding ethical discernment. In the history of interpretation, the consumption of the fruit in the creation myth (that is, the desire for it) was equated with forbidden lust, thus, dismissing the role of sense perception in our ethical behavior. However, when one pays attention to the senses in the story, it becomes clear that acquiring comprehension is portrayed as attractive and as an analytical act. In the context of the myth, to reach for the fruit constitutes a violation of a commandment. On the narrative level, nevertheless, this is not seen as irrefutably negative. In fact, it is necessary in order to enable human beings to distinguish between good and evil and, therefore, act in an ethical manner. Genesis 3 builds on the assumption that what is “good” is also “good to eat,” playing with the notion of desire. The narrative is about the ambivalence of human decision-making and the role of sense perception in this process.⁵⁵ Sensory perception is necessary, albeit ambiguous. Our analysis has led to an appraisal of the senses and their contribution to ethical decision-making. Genesis 3 outlines the benefits and pitfalls of using the senses for prehension of insight. In the narrative, the tempting taste of the good is the good itself: to taste implies to assess. The proverbial sayings induce us (how) to use the senses.

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⁵⁵ Annette Schellenberg speaks of “Ambivalenz der menschlichen Erkenntnisfähigkeit.” Annette Schellenberg, *Erkenntnis als Problem: Qohelet und die alttestamentliche Diskussion um das menschliche Erkennen*, OBO 188 (Freiburg, CH: Universitätsverlag; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2002), 240–47. See also Hermann Spieckermann, “Ambivalenzen: Ermöglichte und Verwirklichte Schöpfung in Gen 2f,” in *Verbindungslinien: Festschrift für Werner H. Schmidt zum 65. Geburtstag*, ed. Axel Graupner, Holger Delkurt, Alexander B Ernst, and Lutz Aupperle (Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 2000), 363–76.

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