A Bad Taste in My Mouth: Spirits as Embodied Senses in the Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs

Tom de Bruin
me@tomdebruin.com

ABSTRACT
The Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs contain nuanced discussions of the nature of sin, which is invariably associated with both demonic forces and the human body. The senses are portrayed as human spirits. These senses, when used inappropriately, can allow the spirits of deceit to overcome a person and lead them to sin. Seeing, tasting and hearing can all be distorted by the spirits of deceit. When this happens a part of person’s nature is replaced with that of the forces of evil. The Testaments thus problematise the self and the body as a bonded category.

KEYWORDS
Testaments of the Twelve Partiarchs, embodiment, anthropology, demons, senses, the self, aetiology of evil.

Therefore, guard yourself from fornication; and if you want to be pure of mind, guard the senses from female things. (T. Reu. 6.2)

Introduction
The role of the senses in the Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs is extremely well expressed in the epigraph above. Throughout the Testaments there is a constant fear of men going astray by losing control of their minds, and the author repeatedly warns his

---

1 All translations of the Testaments are mine. The Greek text can be found in De Jonge et. al The Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs: A Critical Edition of the Greek Text, Pseudepigrapha Veteris Testamenti Graece 1 (Leiden: Brill, 1978).

2 This paper began as part of an online symposium in 2020. The 10-minute presentation of this work from that symposium is available on YouTube: https://youtu.be/80Ay4FUvZvU.

3 I’d like to thank the scores of people who contributed to making this research better, to name a few: Those taking part in the What the Body Knows Symposium in 2020 gave wonderful feedback, including Meredith Warren, Chaya Halberstam, Lyndon Webb, Laura Quick, and Bart Bruehler. The two anonymous reviewers of this article made it better, thank you whoever you are! Michelle Fletcher and Sara Parks are always in the background giving mental support in the increasingly difficult world of academia.
audience to remain in control of themselves. The senses form gateways into the mind of man and should be constantly guarded.

In this paper I will analyse the role of the senses in the pseudepigraphal work the Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs. I will analyse how the Testaments repeatedly associate the senses with demonic and other supernatural beings. While there is often a link between the demonic and the senses in ancient Christian texts—for instance through the “disabling” of the senses and body by demons (blindness, deafness, muteness, etc.)—the Testaments make other, less commonly seen connections. Namely, the Testaments

---

4 My male gendered language throughout this article is intentional. The exhortation in the Testaments is androcentric, and the ethical ideal is gendered as a good man (anēr agathos). The Testaments are specifically talking to men, and any implications for female hearers/readers is filtered through patriarchal androcentrism (cf. T. Reu. 4.1–2). In this article, my translations are expressly not inclusive, and I use masculine pronouns and exclusive terms for humanity as these are appropriate for the text. Academic discussion of (female) gender in Testaments are extremely diverse, and in my view the obvious misogyny of the text is overemphasised and misunderstood.

Other opinions on the portrayal of women can be found in Stefan Opferkuch, Der handelnde Mensch: Untersuchungen zum Verhältnis von Ethik und Anthropologie in den Testamenten der Zwölf Patriarchen, Beihefte zur Zeitschrift für die neutestamentliche Wissenschaft und die Kunde der älteren Kirche 232 (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2018), 27–87; Esther Marie Menn, Judah and Tamar (Genesis 38) in Ancient Jewish Exegetics: Studies in Literary Form and Hermeneutics (Leiden: Brill, 1997).
envision the senses as both supremely natural and supernatural. I will analyse how in this ancient conception good and evil spirits form an integral part of the human senses; indeed, these embodied spirits allow sensory experience. This article will consist of three parts: (1) Reuben’s anthropology and the sense of sight; (2) Judah’s exogamy, and the senses of sight and taste; and (3) Dan’s anger and the disabling of the senses. I will argue that the Testaments problematise the concept of the body, both through a redefinition of the concept “body” and self-alienation.

A few words of introduction on the Testaments. The work is a collection of twelve farewell discourses, ostensibly given by the twelve sons of Jacob on their death beds. Though there are twelve testaments, the work is surely intended to be a single document. The work is exhortatory in nature, and focusses on ethics and each person’s struggle between good and evil. Though the work builds on earlier Jewish sources (and scholarship has been divided into a centuries-long debate whether the text is Jewish, or Christian or some mix of the two), the current form of the work is unmistakeably Christian. Any attempts to reconstruct earlier (Jewish) versions of the work—if they

---


7 David deSilva is the most recent to argue for accessing a Jewish version of Testaments. He summarises his argument, basically, as ‘the impossibility of establishing the exact wording of the original, Jewish form of the Testaments with methodological precision at some points has led some scholars only to value reading the Testaments as a Christian document,’ he feels that this is being too cautious and thus that ‘we do not need therefore to abandon Testaments as a witness to pre-Christian Jewish reflection’ deSilva, “Witnesses,” 67. From this we can note that even a proponent of a Jewish vorlage accepts the methodological validity of reading the work as Christian.
even existed—run into a variety of methodological issues.\(^8\) There is thus no hint of a consensus as to which parts of the text may be pre-Christian. Elsewhere, I have argued that the fundamental worldview of the text is inherently Christian,\(^9\) that the work is anti-Jewish,\(^10\) and that it is therefore a composition of nascent Christianity. All in all, the most fruitful, and only methodologically uncompromised, way forward is to read the text as a product of second-century Christ-followers (that may or may not be based on earlier pre-Christian sources).\(^11\)

The Testaments, building biographical episodes from the lives of the patriarchs and letting the patriarchs give prophecies of the future, ultimately discuss ethical issues. These ethics are summarised as “keeping the commandments,” the contents of which is the double command to love God and one’s neighbour. Fundamentally, the ethics are grounded in the battle each person must wage against the forces of darkness. God does not usually intervene in this battle, and humans are not assisted by angels or other spiritual beings sent by God.

Senses in the Testaments do, in general terms, reflect common cultural assumptions, found in both Judaism and the broader Greco-Roman world, of the dominance of the sense of sight and the association of sight with knowledge, thinking, and the mind.\(^12\) This is immediately clear just from statistics: whereas the Testaments refers the sense of sight

---


\(^9\) De Bruin, *Great Controversy*, 235–44.


\(^11\) See for some up-to-date arguments on how to see this text as a product of Christ-followers, before the parting of the ways, Kurowski *Menschliche Gott*; Nicklas, *Jews and Christians?*, 108–12.

more than 100 times, smell and taste are mentioned only a handful of times. Yet senses as embodied spirits in the Testaments are more nuanced than this, and sight is by no means a normative, rational sense. All the senses, even sight, are supremely subjective and based on the anthropology of each person. Two passages in the Testaments discuss anthropology and the senses in detail. The first is Testament of Reuben 2.1–3.8. In these chapters, Reuben describes the spirit of deceit which brings about the works of youthful rebellion. This spirit has tainted humanity’s nature, causing all manner of sin. The second passage is Testament of Naphtali 2.1–10. Here Naphtali discusses the importance of God’s order, and the human body (including the senses) exemplifies that order. While in both of these discussions the senses play a role, I will only examine Reuben, as the anthropology of Naphtali has little to add to this discussion.

Before I examine senses and anthropology in the first testament (Reuben), allow me a short discussion of the senses from the last testament: Benjamin. This last testament “confirms the message proved all along” that the readers should achieve “the status of a ‘good man’.” Part of the description of this ethical ideal is:

He does not delight in pleasure, he does not harm his neighbour, he does not fill himself with delicacies, he is not led astray by lifting up his eyes (T. Benj. 6.3).

As I will argue throughout this article, this sentence summarises the major ways the Testaments engages with the senses, referring to the sense of taste and sight. While uplifting the eyes is often interpreted to mean arrogance (cf. Sirach 23:4, 26:9), in the Testaments it clearly refers to a man looking at women in the context of fornication (cf. T. Iss. 7.2), and is—as will be discussed below—something both Reuben and Judah do.

---

13 Statistics are based on the index in De Jonge et al. Critical Edition.: ὅρασις (sight, 6x), ὅραω (see, 79x), ὑφαίλαμψις (eye, 20x); ἀκοῦω (hear, 42x), ἀκοή (hearing, 5x); γεύμα (taste, 3x), γεῦσις (taste, 2x); ὅφρησις (smell, 2x), –ὀδήμος (~smelling, 1x), –ωδία (~smelling, 2x). Touch is not mentioned at all. Admittedly, hearing is used frequently, but mainly in the sense of “obey,” as would be the case in a verbal exhortation.


Both of them warn their sons that the sight of a beautiful woman causes men to sin. Similarly, the sense of taste is mentioned in the context of eating delicacies, this too plays a role in the Testaments, as almost half of the references to taste refer to avoiding (good) food and drink (cf. T. Reu. 1.10; T. Zeb. 4.2). Though Benjamin does not mention the sense of hearing, it too can lead a person astray: hearing praise is dangerous (T. Dan 4.4). Indulging these senses leads a person to pleasure, which results in breaking the fundamental commandment to love one’s neighbour.

The Nature of Man and the Senses

The Testament of Reuben, the first of the twelve testaments, grounds itself in Reuben’s rape of Bilhah, his father’s concubine. As such the text specifically engages with the vice of fornication (*porneia*). In the first chapter of the testament, Reuben describes the implications of his sin. He suffered physical maladies, fasted, mourned, and repented (T. Reu. 1.7–10). He then outlines what the Lord revealed to him about the nature of man. He lists eight spirits that God gave to mankind at creation (T. Reu. 2.2–3.1), and a further eight that came about when the spirit of deceit mixed with these God-given eight (T. Reu. 3.2–7). The first eight spirits are key to understanding the anthropology underlying Testaments:

2.3 Seven spirits were given to mankind at creation, to bring about every action of man. 4. (1) The spirit of life (*zōē*), with which nature is created. (2) The spirit of sight (*horasis*), with which comes desire. 5. (3) The spirit of hearing (*akoē*), with which teaching is given. (4) The spirit of smell (*osphrēsis*), with which taste is given to inhaled air and breath. 6. (5) The spirit of speech (*lalia*), with which comes knowledge. 7. (6) The spirit of taste (*geusis*), with which comes eating and drinking, and with which his strength is created (in food is the foundation of strength) 8. (7) The spirit of sexual reproduction (*spora* and intercourse (*synousia*), with which sin enters by the love of pleasure. 9. That’s why this spirit is last in creation and first in youth. Because it is filled with ignorance. It leads a young man like a blind person (*typhlon*) to a pit, or like an animal to the precipice. 3.1 Besides these there is an eighth spirit. The spirit of sleep, with which the ecstasy of nature and the image of death is created (T. Reu. 2.3–3.1).

Reuben’s anthropology outlines eight spirits (*pneuma*) that are constituent parts of a person: life, sight, hearing, smell, speech, taste, sexuality, and sleep. This list is unique to this book. Reuben might be indebted to the Stoic octopartite soul,¹⁶ but not to Hellenistic

astronomy and horoscopes.\textsuperscript{17} If he is dependant on Stoicism, the list has been “carefully adapted” to fit the Testaments.\textsuperscript{18} Equally, the list may be dependant on Jewish sources.\textsuperscript{19} Though Reuben gives eight spirits, he promises seven. Yael Avrahami’s list of seven main senses in Hebrew Bible has numerous similarities with Reuben’s list.\textsuperscript{20}

The list is peculiar as it does not refer to the sense of touch (\textit{haphē}), which is not an unimportant sense in ancient world.\textsuperscript{21} Possibly Reuben has replaced this sense with life (\textit{zōē}), as James Wallace suggests, “reflecting the influence of OT tradition.”\textsuperscript{22} Though this would make little sense seeing how prevalent the sense of touch is in the Hebrew Bible.\textsuperscript{23} Most likely, as touch is not a sense that occurs anywhere in the Testaments,\textsuperscript{24} it made place for spirits that are more important to the exhortation.\textsuperscript{25}

The Testaments, if they are “indirectly” borrowing these spirits from Stoicism,\textsuperscript{26} interpret these in a wholly different context. Whereas in Stoicism the \textit{pneuma} is more alike to the matter of the cosmos itself, in the Testaments these spirits take on a life of


\textsuperscript{17} Alexander Toepel, “Planetary Demons in Early Jewish Literature,” \textit{Journal for the Study of the Pseudepigrapha} 14 (2005): 231–38, \texttt{doi:10.1177/0951820705053850}. De Bruin gives three reasons why Reuben’s list is probably not a list of planetary demons: planetary lists usually have six demons, Reuben’s list includes spirits (life, procreation, sleep) not found in these lists, and Reuben links these spirits to more than just body parts; \textit{Great Controversy}, 110.

\textsuperscript{18} Rosen-Zvi, “Bilhah the Temptress,” 83.

\textsuperscript{19} Sirach, for example, mentions God giving humans five faculties, a mind, and reason (Sir. 17.5).


\textsuperscript{22} Wallace, “Sprit(s),” 314.

\textsuperscript{23} Avrahami, \textit{The Senses of Scripture}, 106–9.

\textsuperscript{24} The closest the Testaments gets to referring to touch is the one use of ἀπτοματ to refer to (legitimate) sexual intercourse in T. Reu. 3.15.

\textsuperscript{25} Though smell plays almost no role in the Testaments either, occurring only as \textit{euōdēmos} (T. Iss. 1.5), \textit{euōdia} (T. Levi 3.6), and \textit{dysōdia} (T. Benj. 8.3).

\textsuperscript{26} Hollander and De Jonge, \textit{Commentary}, 93.
their own. In this, the Testaments are probably building on Jewish and Christian conceptions of (unclean) spirits and demons. The independent nature of these spirits is hinted at in the description of the seventh spirit, which actively leads humans astray, and Reuben’s second list of spirits makes this even more clear. Reuben explains how mankind’s nature became distorted:

3.2 The spirit of deceit is mixed with these. 3. (1) The spirit of fornication situated in nature and the senses. (2) The spirit of greed in the stomach. 4. (3) The spirit of battle situated in the liver and the gall. (4) The spirit of flattery and trickery, that through vain effort one may appear beautiful. 5. (5) The spirit of arrogance, that one may be boastful and conceited. (6) The spirit of lying: moulding words and keeping secrets from his house and family through depravity and envy. 6. (7) The spirit of unrighteousness, with which come thefts and double-dealing, so that he may attain his heart’s desire. For, unrighteousness cooperates with the other spirits by means of bribes. 7. Besides these spirits, the spirit of sleep, the eighth spirit, unites deceit and delusion (T. Reu. 3.2–7).

Evil spirits have come into being through the mingling of the spirit of deceit with the spirits of man. The Testament implies that there is a relationship between the first list and the second: the second list is a distortion of the first. But there is little systematic linking between the two lists.27 The link lies elsewhere. The juxtaposition of these lists lies at the heart of the Testaments’ anthropology and, indeed, its exhortation. Though the original eight spirits were ethically neutral, these latter eight are clearly evil. This demonstrates how mankind’s very nature is susceptible to the influences of the forces of darkness. The spirits of deceit can abuse man’s senses and nature to lead him to sin. The vices are “alien and irrational,”28 and are a distortion of the God-given human spirits. Mankind, then, consists of two sets of embodied spirits, with the evil, alien set vying for control.

There is one final, vital part to the Testaments’ anthropology: the mind. Though in Reuben’s list the mind is not mentioned throughout the rest of both the Testament of Reuben and the other Testaments, the mind (usually dianoia or nous)29 plays the most important role.30 Over the next four chapters, Reuben returns to his biography to explain how important the mind is. He tells how he saw Bilhah bathing naked (T. Reu. 3.11), how the female form seized his mind (T. Reu. 3.12), and how he entered her tent, saw her sleeping drunk and naked, and raped her in her sleep (T. Reu. 3.14).31 Reuben specifically

---

27 Cf. De Bruin, Great Controversy, 112; Hollander and De Jonge, Commentary, 95; Opferkuch, Der handelnde Mensch, 34–35.
28 Wallace, “Sprit(s),” 316.
29 In Testament of Judah, the mind is also seen to be a spirit. Judah talks of the spirit of the intelligent mind (to pneuma tēs syneseōs tou noos, T. Jud. 21.2).
30 De Bruin, Great Controversy, 139–51.
31 This narrative of Reuben’s rape of Bilhah has been the topic of much debate and analysis. Interpretations of the culpability of Bilhah vary immensely. Everyone agrees that women are dangerous
blames the spirit of fornication for deceiving and ruining his mind (T. Reu. 4.6) and praises his brother Joseph for keeping his mind pure (T. Reu. 4.8–9). The implications of Reuben’s biography are clear, once the *sight* of a woman enters a man, the spirit of fornication is soon to follow. Which leads us back to the epigraph introducing this article: “Therefore, guard yourself from fornication; and if you want to be pure of mind, guard the senses from female things” (T. Reu. 6.2). The spirit-senses of man, in this case sight, are a gateway for the vice-spirits to gain a foothold in a person. The vice-spirits can abuse the spirit-senses, ultimately seizing a person’s mind and leading him astray.32

Anthropologically, the Testaments portray the senses themselves as embodied spirits: there are spirits of sight, hearing, smell, and taste. Here the nature of human sensory experience is, in essence, superhuman. Each of these supernaturally-endowed senses is associated with a trait or work of man (*ergon anthrōpou*): sight with desire, hearing with learning, smelling with breathing, and tasting with eating and strength. Men embody multiple other spirits: life (linked with being), speech (linked with knowledge), sex (linked with sin), and sleep (linked with dreams and death). All in all, these eight spirits make up the constituent parts of mankind, ruled over by the mind. The opponent has mingled the spirit of deceit with the spirits of man, allowing them to be abused so that they lead a person to sin. In this respect the Testaments fit with Second Temple Jewish traditions about the self, where a physiological dualism arises.33 The body comes to be seen as a place where both the self (e.g. the mind, the heart) and other internal(ised) agents (e.g. organs, spirits or demons) operate.34 In the rest of the article, I will examine two in-depth examples of how the Testaments imagine the interaction between the spirit-
senses and the vice-spirits. I will examine how Judah succumbs to the spirit of fornication upon meeting his Canaanite wife, and how Dan’s anger for Joseph influences his senses. I will examine how this relates to the anthropological self-understanding of the writer.

**Tasting Wine**

The Testament of Judah is the longest of the twelve testaments. About half the testament is biography (T. Jud. 1.3–12.12), where Judah recounts of his manliness in war, his marriage to Bathshua and his fornication with Tamar. It is in his interaction with Bathshua that the senses come to a head. The testament tells the narrative of Judah and Bathshua in a rather disjointed manner: in his biographical narrative Judah tells of his marriage with little detail (T. Jud. 8.1–3) and later we hear about the fate of his sons (T. Jud. 10.1–11.5); in his exhortation to his sons, he reflects on his marriage (T. Jud. 13.1–8) and in the following chapters on the roles of wine, the love of money, the spirits of deceit and the senses. From these passages it becomes clear that the senses are ways for evil spirits to gain an upper hand in and thus control of a person’s body. After seeing beauty and wealth, and tasting wine, Judah’s eyes and mind are led astray.

Judah’s biography functions to establish him as a heroic person. This is so strongly evident in the testament that Esther Menn argues that “in the Hellenistic world readers would have inevitably understood the figure of Judah in Testament of Judah as a parallel to Heracles.”

Judah kills beasts, kings, giants, and thousands of men. Judah’s exhortatory reflection deconstructs Judah’s mighty feats (T. Jud. 13.2), which calls “into question the first seven chapters of his testament, at least as something to be admired.”

In all of this it becomes clear that Judah can easily dominate a man, but struggles to survive battles of the wits with women—losing to both Bathshua and Tamar—and even battles with men when women are involved.

Judah first tells of his loss in a very factual way. He met a king, who “organised a drinking party (potos). He summoned me and gave me his daughter, Bathshua, as a wife” (T. Jud. 8.3). Already in this introductory narrative, the theme of wine and drunkenness becomes clear in the use of potos, a cognate of pinein (to drink). When Judah returns to this biographical episode later in his testament, wine is highlighted again. Judah, discussing the death of his sons, reflects on that potos:

---

35 Menn, *Judah and Tamar*, 179.
36 Loader, *Sexuality*, 404.
37 De Bruin, ‘*Joseph the Good and Delicate Man*’, 6; Menn, *Judah and Tamar*, 144–49.
11.1 And I knew that the Canaanite nation was evil, but the inclination of youth blinded (typhloō) my heart. 2 Seeing her pouring out wine, I was deceived by the drunkenness of wine, and I had sex (sympiptō) with her (T. Jud. 11.1–2).

Though the senses do not play an extremely explicit role here, taking the Testament of Reuben's anthropology into account illuminates the role of the senses that Judah describes. Firstly, Judah knew that he should beware of the Canaanite people: Judah's mind is foregrounded. Yet, just as in Reuben's testament, the mind (lit. heart, kardia)38 is led astray by his youthfulness. Judah invokes disability when he imagines this as a "blinding:" one of his senses has become non-functioning. Within the Testaments the trope of blinding the mind is extremely common and is most fully developed in the Testament of Dan,39 which I will discuss in detail in the following section. For Judah, the importance here is that the inclination of youth disables Judah's rational capabilities.

Judah's blinding happens after seeing. Similar to Reuben, Judah sees a woman, and cannot help himself from having sex with her.40 Because Judah's struggles against the female form are further exacerbated by the presence of wine, he focusses more on the dangers of tasting wine than the dangers of seeing women. He also, unlike Reuben, sees a place for deception in the process. This deceptive process must surely be the spirits of deceit that inhabit each person. When Judah switches to instructing his sons, he explicitly names the spirits that were hassling him:

3 [...] The spirit of jealousy and [the spirit] of fornication drew up for battle inside me, until I had sex (sympiptō) into Bathshua the Canaanite and into Tamar, who married my sons. 4 I said to my father-in-law: "I will discuss this with my father and in this way I will take your daughter." He showed me an uncountable fortune of gold in his daughter's name (for he was a king). 5 He adorned her in gold and pearls, let her pour wine for us at dinner with a woman's beauty. 6 The wine distorted (diastrephō) my eyes and pleasure blinded (amauroō) my heart. 7 I had sex (sympiptō) because I loved (eramai) her and I transgressed the

---


39 De Bruin, Great Controversy, 139–61.

40 In context sympiptō (lit: fall together) clearly has the meaning of having sex, though this is not a usage found in the most common dictionaries, such as LSJ or BDAG; The Brill Dictionary of Ancient Greek does note this usage, referring only to T. Jud. It is used with the same meaning in T. Jud. 13.3, 7, T. Jos. 9.5.
commandment of the Lord and the commandment of my father, and took her as a wife (T. Jud. 13.3–7).

This passage elucidates the role of the spirits of deceit and the spirit-senses in leading Judah to sin. At first, Judah remains rational: he intends to confer with his father and—presumably—to follow his father’s instructions (cf. T. Jud. 1.4). But, he is soon led astray in a number of steps: (1) he sees wealth, (2) he sees female beauty, (3) he tastes wine, which distorts his sense of sight, (4) pleasure weakens his rational capabilities, and (5) he comes to lust after Bathshua. These steps show a deconstruction of Judah’s nature, leading him from obedience to sin. His natural sense of sight allows him to experience wealth and beauty, and from Reuben it is already clear that this in itself can cause someone to sin. Judah, however, has always boasted that he is stronger at resisting temptation than Reuben (T. Jud. 13.3). His downfall comes when wine perverts (diastrephō) his natural spirit-sense of sight and pleasure blinds his heart. His natural sight becomes alien to himself, and this perversion of his sight causes the blinding of his reason. Wine is extremely powerful, and indeed it also contains spirits, “for there are four evil spirits in it: desire, burning desire, debauchery, and greed” (T. Jud. 16.1). The most dangerous spirit in the Testaments, the spirit of fornication,41 uses wine as a servant to bring pleasure to the mind. Once the mind is under control of pleasure, the power of man is annulled (T. Jud. 14.2), and Judah becomes empowered by foreign powers. As with Reuben, once the mind has been weakened, the battle against the spirits is all but lost.

Judah, like Reuben, emphasises the importance of the mind in ruling over the spirit-senses so that the spirits of deceit cannot gain a foothold in a person. Judah, referring to the way that wine can dull a man’s wits, emphasises the dangers of tasting wine. If a man wishes to remain himself, he needs to keep aspects of his own nature under control. Otherwise he will become a stranger to himself. Ultimately, the evil spirits’ disabling powers are the largest danger facing a person, which I will examine in the next section.

**Becoming Blind**

Judah claims his heart was blinded (amauroō) by pleasure, and throughout the Testaments, another term for blindness (typhl–) is used ten times to describe a human losing control of themselves. Six of these times a named part of humanity is blinded. The part varies: the mind (nous, T. Sim. 2.7), the heart (kardia, T. Jud. 11.1), the inclination [of the soul] (diaboulion, T. Jud. 18.3), the soul (psychē, T. Jud. 18.6, T. Gad 3.3), and the natural eyes (physikos ophthalmos, T. Dan 2.4). One could argue that in most of these cases the interior mental capacities of man is intended, and thus the blinding should be seen as

---

metaphorical (as in the Testament of Judah above). If this is the case, the sense of sight stands, as it often does, as shorthand for human understanding (cf. T. Iss. 2.3, 4.6; T. Jos. 10.1, 17.1; T. Benj. 4.1). In this line of reasoning, the blindness is not really physical blindness, but a spiritual blindness. The blinded man can no longer able to distinguish right from wrong. However, this interpretation does not do full justice to the Testaments’ nuance.

One complicating factor in the usage of sight and blinding in the Testaments can be seen in the Testament of Gad. Gad, explaining that he was angry at Joseph for spreading false rumours about him, explains his emotions: “the spirit of anger was in me, and I did not want to see (eidō) Joseph, neither with eyes nor ears” (T. Gad 1.9). This peculiar statement associates the visual verb eidō with the auditory organs. Translators have generally circumvented this issue in translation by adding an auditory verb:

and I did not want either to see Joseph or to hear about him (De Jonge).\(^{42}\)

and I wanted to see or hear nothing of Joseph (Kee).\(^{43}\)

and I wished not either to hear of Joseph with the ears, or see him with the eyes (Charles).\(^{44}\)

and I wished not either to see Joseph or to hear him (ANF 8).

Though it is obvious that this text invokes seeing or hearing Joseph, adding some form of “to hear” here may not be the best solution. Later Gad does use both see (horaō) and hear (akouō, T. Gad 4.5) in the same context, so the omission of to hear stands out.\(^{45}\) Thus, in this case, it makes sense to conclude that Gad is using eidō in the general sense of “to perceive,” “to experience,” or “to sense.”\(^{46}\) This may be more than a simple linguistic interpretation of eidō as “perceive,” it may be “synaesthesia—presenting one sensory experience through images from another sensory field.”\(^{47}\) Avrahami, in her analysis of the senses in the Hebrew Bible, points out that it is common for sight (or hearing) to describe a more general sensory experience, for example when the Israelites at Mount Sinai see the smoke and the lightning, but also the thunder and the trumpets (Exod 20:18). But it must be said that in these cases whether the verb is used “to describe a synaesthetic experience, or merely uses the root ‘to see’ in its broader sense ‘to experience,’ “to

\(^{42}\) De Jonge, “Testaments.”
\(^{43}\) Kee, “Translation and Introduction.”
\(^{44}\) Charles, Pseudepigrapha.
\(^{45}\) Additionally, in T. Benj.’s description of the “good man,” where Benjamin places great emphasis on a good person’s simplicity (as opposed to doubleness), he claims that a good man sees nor hears double (T. Benj. 6.6).
\(^{46}\) Both of these options are given in LSJ and BAGD, s.v. εἰδω and εἶδον respectively.
\(^{47}\) Avrahami, The Senses of Scripture, 59.
perceive,’ is nearly impossible to determine.”\textsuperscript{48} Whatever the case, this implies that there might be more to the way the Testaments uses seeing and blinding than simply the metaphorical interpretation of knowledge and ignorance. Though the mind does play a role, there is a direct, physical sensory aspect that should not be overlooked.

Additionally, blindness in the Testaments is only one of many disabilities that the spirits cause. Throughout the work eight of the patriarchs suffer a disability at least once, and this is always linked to evil thoughts (yet not necessarily deeds!): Reuben has an illness of the loins, after fornicating with Bilhah (T. Reu. 1.7-8); Simeon’s hand withers after contemplating murdering Joseph (T. Sim. 2.12); Gad suffers in his liver for eleven months for bearing ill-well to Joseph (T. Gad 5.9–11); eight of the brothers (and their sons) were sick unto dying for not showing Joseph mercy (T. Zeb. 5.4–5). Thomas Cason has examined the Testaments from the point of view of disability and argues that:

the vision of disability set out in the Testament [sic] of the Twelve Patriarchs is one in which impairment serves as an external marker of moral malignancy. From a rhetorical standpoint, the narrative gives its reader an almost deterministic explanation of disability, in which its divine causation is precipitated by the individual loss of self-control. Disability is not so much a natural occurrence of human existence as it is the consequence of bad behavior.\textsuperscript{49}

Though—as should be clear from the examples just given—the disability is a consequence of bad thoughts, not bad behaviour, Cason’s point is well-made. As a spirit of deceit gains control over a person, that spirit distorts a person’s natural spirit(s): “The spiritual evil manifests itself corporeally.”\textsuperscript{50} This manifestation can be disabling, as in the examples above, or it can simply make one extremely ugly (T. Sim. 4.9–5.1). In no way is this disabling or disfiguring process seen as metaphorical, and thus the question remains whether blindness is a metaphorical disability.

The Testament of Dan makes most clear that the blinding is specifically of the embodied spirit-senses. In it, Dan recounts how angry he was with Joseph, as their father loved Joseph the most. He wanted to murder Joseph, but God prevented him (T. Dan 1.9).

For the benefit of his children, he explains how the spirit of anger works:

2.2 Anger is blinding, my children, and someone who is angry does not truly see (horaō) a face. 3. Even if it is his father or mother, he treats them as enemies; a brother, he does not know; a prophet of the Lord, he disobeys; a righteous man, he does not see (blepō); a friend,

\textsuperscript{48} Avrahami, The Senses of Scripture, 60, see also 187.


he does not know. 4. The spirit of anger wraps nets of deceit around him, blinding his natural eyes \((\textit{physikos ophthalmos})\), darkening his mind with lies, providing him with its own vision \((\textit{idios horasis})\). 5. How does it enwrap his eyes? Through a hateful heart, by giving him its own heart so that he envies his brother (T. Dan 2.2–5).

According to Dan, the blinding force of the spirits of deceit is not true blinding. Anger is said to blind, but in fact it distorts the vision. While the five examples might appear to serve to emphasise that it is the mind that is blinded, the anthropological discussion after the examples demonstrates that there is more to this process. As in Judah and Reuben, the mind can only be led astray after the sense-spirits. Dan explains that the spirit of anger replaced his natural eyes, with \(\textit{idios} \) vision. Meanings of this word run from “one’s own,” to “strange/peculiar.”\(^{51}\) In this sense the word implies that the new sense of sight is strange to Dan, but inherent to the spirit. It is the spirit’s sight that Dan receives. His God-given sense has been replaced by a distorted one from Beliar. Once an angry person’s sight has been replaced, he can no longer see properly \((\textit{en alētheia}, \text{ T. Dan } 2.2)\). The five examples, thus, demonstrate how replacing a someone’s sight significantly influences him. This replacement with an evil doppelgänger is accompanied with a replacement of the mind-heart, ultimately leading to—in the case of Dan, attempted—sin. His sin is exacerbated as the spirit’s power extends to more than simply the sight and mind:

3.1 Anger, my children, is evil. It becomes a soul to the soul itself. It makes the body its own \((\textit{idiopoieō})\) with anger. 2 It exercises dominion over the soul, and grants the body its own \((\textit{idios})\) power in committing all manner of lawlessness \((\text{ T. Dan } 3.1–2)\).

The spirit, having replaced sight and mind, consumes the entire body. The spirit, though on the one hand disabling Dan, at the same times makes him hyper-able. The spirit can give someone three times the strength they usually have through “(1) the power and support of his assistants, (2) his wealth, with which he persuades gradually and conquers in unrighteousness, (3) the physical strength of his body, with which he himself accomplishes evil” \((\text{ T. Dan } 3.4)\). The spirit uses a man’s privilege for evil deeds, and even if he has none “he has double his natural power” \((\text{ T. Dan } 3.5)\). The Testaments is extremely wary of this show of force and abuse of power, it is “something to be feared and not commended” as it “transforms the male body into something other than human.”\(^{52}\)

Indeed, under the influence of anger Dan likens himself to an animal: “the spirit of anger persuaded me to drain Joseph as a leopard drains a kid” \((\text{ T. Dan } 1.8)\). Dan’s self is now completely alien to him.

From Dan’s descriptions of the power of the spirit of anger shows that blinding is, in fact, a misnomer. Blinding, be that of the eyes or the mind, is not the disabling, but the

\(^{51}\) \textit{LSJ, BAGD}, \textit{s.v. \textit{idios}}.

\(^{52}\) Cason, “Textual Cialis,” 616.
mis-abling of the subject. Dan is not blind, he can see perfectly well, but what he sees is not correct. The spirits distort and twist, abusing the senses for their gain. This fits extremely well in the anthropology presented in the Testament of Reuben. God gave mankind eight spirits and the opponent mixed the spirit of deceit with these. The body is not seen as a bonded category, it is an overdetermined self with various spiritual-yet-bodily forces contesting for control. The spirit of deceit does not remove or disempower human spirits, but distorts them. The spirit of anger replaces the sense-spirit of sight. Thus the spirits of deceit function to replace the human spirits, distorting every action of man (T. Reu. 3.2) to lawlessness. He then becomes the devil’s own instrument (idios skeuos, T. Naph. 8.6).

Conclusion

The Testaments engage in a nuanced discussion of the senses and how they relate to sin. They portray man as a vessel for two groups of spirits: God-given natural, sense-spirits and evil distortions of these. The spirits of deceit gain power over a man as the natural spirits are used with evil intent. Gazing at naked or alluring women (T. Reu. 3.11; T. Jud. 11.2; T. Iss. 4.3), activates the spirit of sight which can be abused by the spirit of fornication. Tasting good food (T. Iss. 4.2; T. Benj. 6.3), looking at money (T. Iss. 4.2; T. Jud. 13.4), hearing criticism or praise (T. Dan 4.4), drinking wine (T. Jud. 13.6), any use of the embodied sense-spirits opens the door for the spirits of deceit. The evil spirits have great power over a person. Their evil nature can make him ugly, it can disable parts of his body, and it can “blind” his senses. The Testaments see blinding not as a disabling of the sense, but as replacing. A person’s sense can become distorted, leading him to perceive things according to the spirit’s evil nature: he now uses the spirit’s own senses. The spirit blinds, distorting one’s vision and leading him astray, but it also empowers a person... to do evil deeds.

Let me share some reflections on the body based on these conclusions. When the work describes embodied senses and sees various spirits as inherently part of the human body, the concept of “the body” becomes problematised. This “collapse of the human itself as a bonded category” resonates strongly with critiques of humanism from post-modern and feminist points-of-view. Historically, on the one hand, the Testaments reflect a Jewish or Christian version of Greco-Roman thinking; as Plato saw the body as a

---

microcosm reflecting his cosmology,⁵⁴ the Testaments portray the body as a “Christian” microcosm containing all the cosmic forces of good and evil. At the same time, this is deconstruction of the body is part of a long-term process in Second Temple Judaism of “self-alienation.” That is to say, “certain aspects of the self become ‘other’ to the subject, and not just ‘other,’ but a feared and rejected other.”⁵⁵ In the Testaments, these embodied spirits are inherently alien, yet resolutely part of the self. They are hostile and dangerous, and thus the self too becomes hazardous. The Testaments are thus firmly rooted in the matrix of (hellenised) Second Temple Judaism.

When they theorise the disabling influences of internal evil spirits, the Testaments further problematise the role of the body in early Christian rhetorical discourse and demonology. Corker and French discuss the way discourses are built around “the impaired body,” arguing that it is “both a site of discourse production and a site onto which cultural discourses are projected.”⁵⁶ Demon possession and its associated impairments are surely an example of a body that fits both sides of this discourse: a demonic is both physically impaired and socially stigmatised. Anna Rebecca Solevåg examines the role of demonic possession, arguing that
demon possession seems to have been used rhetorically […] as a label used to vilify a person’s utterances and behavior. The central notion of demon possession in first-century Palestine was that a foreign force entered a person’s body and took control of their behavior as well as their speech.⁵⁷

When the Testaments view evil spirits to be inherently human, the “invasion etiology”⁵⁸ underlying demon-possession becomes undone. From the Testaments’ point of view we are not talking of a “porous” self in the sense Charles Taylor does: the self is not permeable, “vulnerable to spirits, demons, cosmic forces.”⁵⁹ Rather, the self is an over-determined subject, a corpus of selves vying for dominance. As various parts of the body gain control, these and other parts become em/dispowered and en/disabled. Senses, as embodied independent spirits, can be used and abused, as various forces in the self

---

⁵⁵ Newsom, “Introspective Self,” 66. See, for a more details analysis of this theme in the Testaments, De Bruin, “Demons and Vices.”
compete for control. The Testaments’ rhetoric, thus, evidences an alternative view to the demonic, one where all men are—in a sense—constantly demon possessed.

Bibliography


———. “Joseph the Good and Delicate Man: Masculinity in the *Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs*.” *Lectio Difficilior*, no. 1 (2020): 1-25. tinyurl.com/2y6p7acz


