Tasting Death: Sensory Metaphors & Other Worlds

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Introduction

Whether we recognise it or not, taste informs our interactions with the world, filtering information through our cultural lenses and signifying all manner of social meanings. Metaphors of flavours garnish our language: melodies are sweet; memories are bitter; we are left with a bad taste in our mouths; when frustrated, we might use salty language. Eating and tasting, and their constructed meanings, are reflected in the literature we produce and consume. Each morsel is a loaded symbol which is ingested and digested according to expectations we may not even know we have. These connections between emotion and flavours remind us about the ways that emotion is culturally conditioned, and in particular, highlight how taste is an overlooked affective space.

The sensory metaphor I will discuss is the phrase, 'to taste death'. An example which I will examine later in greater detail is Mark 9:1. Jesus says to those around him, "Truly I tell you, there are some standing here who will not taste death until they see that the kingdom of God has come with power." By and large, I imagine that my readers, and indeed the hearers of Mark in ancient settings, understand the basic meaning of the phrase 'taste death'—the theological meaning is a question for another paper! The basic meaning is 'die'. If a person tastes death, that means that they die. But what does death taste like? Why would we taste it rather than hear it? What is it about the sense of taste that makes this metaphor operative?

Since Bruce Chilton's brief (5 pages!) 1978 paper,[1] no dedicated treatment has been attempted of the phrase, to taste death. Most often, scholars are content to provide a linguistic gloss for the turn of phrase rather than investigate why it might be important culturally. This phrase is found in multiple ancient Jewish and Christian texts as a metaphor for dying, including the Targum Pseudo-Jonathan; 4 Ezra; Midrash Rabbah; the canonical Gospels; the Gospel of Thomas, and many more. In these texts, tasting death is a human experience that is avoided by some "quasi-angelic" few or by those who follow Jesus. The fact that this turn of phrase is also used in non-Jewish, non-Christian sources indicates that its use permeates the wider ancient Mediterranean cultural landscape. I want to explore the use of sensory metaphor in communicating culturally-accepted understandings of

[1] Bruce Chilton, " 'Not to Taste Death:' A Jewish, Christian, and Gnostic Usage," in *Studia Biblica 1978* (E. A. Livingstone, ed.; Journal for the Study of the New Testament Supplement Series; Sheffield: University of Sheffield Press, 1980; 3 vols), 2:29–36.

death, demonstrating how the sense of taste functions as a mechanism of transport to other-worldly locations, including Heaven, Hell, Hades, and Sheol. But more, I want to move beyond the linguistic reading of this phrase and turn instead to examine the ways that it relies on bodily ways of knowing and experiencing the world. In a sense, this phrase is only comprehensible because of what we know in our guts.

Metaphor & Embodiment

I will first set out some methodological matters that undergird my approach. For the purpose of this investigation, I am relying on the field of cognitive linguistics, in which "our physical, cognitive, and social embodiment…ground our linguistic conceptualizations."[2] In other words, this approach to language insists that the way we experience being in the world impacts the ways in which we create meaning. By analogy, this can also be claimed of ancient modes of embodiment (social as well as physical) and communication. As Mark Johnson writes, 'the centrality of human embodiment directly influences what and how things can be meaningful for us, the ways in which these meanings can be developed and articulated, the ways we are able to comprehend and reason about our experiences, and the actions we take."[3] While our physical bodies have not changed that much in the past two thousand years, how those bodies are socialized clearly has – this is an important caveat to cognitive linguistics. We therefore must not assume that our own embodied ways of understanding the world map onto ancient ones.

In George Lakoff and Mark Johnson's 1980 work, *Metaphors We Live By*, the authors identified a core set of 'conceptual metaphors' that are so well understood that they often go unnoticed when we use them. For example, the word *digest* is used to refer to the physical process of breaking down ingested food into usable elements within the digestive track. However, it also refers to *digesting* ideas. I do not need to explain what I mean by *digesting ideas*; the latter word has developed such a literal meaning in this use as to functionally exist as a homonym for the former.[4] For Lakoff and Johnson, this kind of core meaning to the word *digest* signals that the metaphor is located at the level of cognition and of conceptual structure rather than at the level of language; in other words, (and to use another set of metaphors) the *core* element of meaning is *deeper* than at the level of words. Instead, it reflects the embodiedness of conceptual meaning; that bodies and bodily experience map abstract human concepts.[5] According to Lakoff and Johnson, this is not only true for a few metaphors here and there; rather bodily experience (and other

[2] Tim Rohrer, "Embodiment and Experientialism," *Oxford Handbook of Cognitive Linguistics*, 27.
[3] Mark Johnson, *The Body in the Mind: The Bodily Basis of Meaning* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1987), xix.
[4] George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2nd ed. 2003), 211-212.
[5] Roher, "Embodiment," 32.

‘natural’ experiences[6]) undergirds “the vast majority of the work of structuring more abstract human concepts.”[7] Eating, and by proximity tasting, is one of these natural bodily experiences that shapes how we conceptualise meaning and how we express it.

Taste is therefore a structural metaphor: TASTING is EXPERIENCING. Taste is not equivalent to food, but is the mechanism by which one experiences it. The metaphor ‘tasting death’ relies on the equivalence between tasting and experiencing.[8] It does so by way of another underlying assumption, which is that tastes are transformative.[9] Importantly, these similarities are not objective; rather, as Lakoff and Johnson suggest, “the only similarities relevant to metaphor are *similarities as experienced by people*.”[10] This is why I contextualize my discussion of tasting death within existing modes of sensory experience in antiquity.

Sensory Theory

If we accept that TASTING is EXPERIENCING is one of these conceptual or primary metaphors, emerging from embodied experience and shaping our conceptual relationship with the way the world is set up, then we must ask why taste in particular operates in this way. What is it about the act of putting something in your mouth and experiencing its flavours, texture, and scent that makes it an effective metaphor to communicate what death means? The way in which taste transforms the foreign to something internal to the body should inform how we understand this kind of symbolic ingestion. Mouths are a gateway into the body, into which we insert items of food or communicate in the most intimate way. They mark a boundary point between what is inside and what is outside—what is part of us and what is external. The boundary point is breached in the ingestion and digestion of food, a process which

[6] They list three types: “Our bodies (perceptual and motor apparatus, mental capacities, emotional makeup, etc.; Our interactions with our physical environment (moving, manipulating objects, eating, etc.); Our interactions with other people within our culture (in terms of social, political, economic, and religious institutions.) (*Metaphors We Live By*, 117).

[7] Roher, “Embodiment,” 32-3. This is true not just for English but for a diverse array of languages across the globe. Lakoff and Johnson are clear that ‘natural’ kinds of experience are at times universal and at times culturally bounded; they are not positing a universal embodied experience (*Metaphors We Live By*, 118).

[8] Lakoff and Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By*, 147.

[9] Lakoff and Johnson outline the following conclusions: “1. Metaphor is primarily a matter of thought and action and only derivatively a matter of language. 2.a. Metaphors can be based on similarities, though in many cases these similarities are themselves based on conventional metaphors that are not based on similarities. Similarities based on conventional metaphors are nonetheless *real in our culture,* since conventional metaphors partly define what we find real. 2.b. Though the metaphor may be based partly on isolated similarities, we see the important similarities as those created by the metaphor, as described above. 3. The primary function of metaphor is to provide a partial understanding of one kind of experience in terms of another kind of experience. This may involve preexisting isolated similarities, the creation of new similarities, and more” (*Metaphors We Live By* 153-4)

[10] Lakoff and Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By*, 154.

makes internal that which had been external.[11] This binary of external and internal which the mouth and its enzymes literally breaks down is mirrored in the binary constructed between life and afterlife.[12]

Part of my argument builds on the understanding that taste and eating can be transformative. In my recent book, *Food and Transformation in Ancient Mediterranean Literature*,[13] I articulate a genre of transformational eating called hierophagy by which eaters in literature gain access to otherworldly realms, including heaven. In other words, hierophagy is a mechanism by which characters in narrative cross boundaries from one realm to another through tasting some item from that other realm. In very quick summary, hierophagy results in three specific types of transformations: (A) the binding of the eater to the place of origin of the food; (B) the transformation of the eater either in terms of behaviour or physical appearance; and (C) the transmission of new knowledge.[14] This recognition of the transformative effects of tasting and ingesting items from another realm are important for understanding how the metaphor of tasting death functions, in particular the translocation of the eater in the examples Warren outlines. In the Persephone myths, in 4 Ezra, in Perpetua and Felicitas, the characters who internalize food from another world are made members of that other realm; Ezra is taken up to heaven, Perpetua is relocated to a heavenly garden and loses interest in her earthly family, and Persephone is locked in the underworld for a portion of the year. Even Aseneth, when she tastes the heavenly honeycomb, has her name written in the Book of the Living in Heaven, indicating her new location.

I argue that hierophagy is a culturally assumed genre[15] of transformation, since none of the textual examples take pains to explain its function to their readers, which is important for understanding how taste as metaphor functions in ‘to taste death.’ In other words, as a genre, hierophagy is a symbolic way of expressing meaning within a culture that holds certain expectations around category hierarchy and order, such as the division of heaven and earth, the implications of taste and eating, and the accessibility of the former by way of the latter. Hierophagy provides a way of entering the discussion about the metaphor of tasting death, since hierophagy also operates in a way that assumes some fundamental aspects of tasting. These fundamental aspects—for example, that taste is intimate, that it collapses

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[11] See Kilgour, *From Communion to Cannibalism*, 239.

[12] As Maggie Kilgour has demonstrated, ingestion even aside from taste is transformative in that it collapses the distinction between the body and what is outside of it; the opposition dissolves as the external object is dissolved into the ingesting body. Maggie Kilgour, *From Communion to Cannibalism: An Anatomy of Metaphors of Incorporation* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990), esp. 239.

[13] Meredith J C Warren, *Food and Transformation in Ancient Mediterranean Literature* (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2019).

[14] Warren, *Food and Transformation*, 3.

[15] Here I use of the terminology of genre studies, which is somewhat more specialized and distinct from common uses of the word genre. In this context, genre implies a social interaction beyond a literary category. See Warren, *Food and Transformation*, 4-8.

external and internal—are those that also undergird the use of taste as metaphor in 'tasting death.' That is, the presence in literature of so many examples of both kinds of transformational eating suggests that this primary understanding of taste as concept is foundational for understanding why taste allows the concept of death to be communicated across this range of texts. As I will demonstrate in the following examples, this is exactly what I argue is taking place behind the multiples uses of this metaphor.

Case Studies

Many of the texts refer to human figures with extraordinary, quasi-angelic qualities. However, the idea of tasting death at all first appears as a euphemism for ordinary human mortality, and this use persists; *not* tasting death is remarkable, associated with divine intervention, but tasting death as a phrase represents an ordinary, if poignant, end of life.

<u>Non-Jewish / Non-Christian Sources</u>

The earliest example I have found of this metaphor is from the third century BCE.[16] Theocritus's *Epigram* 16 use "tasting death" to describe ordinary humans;[17] Theocritus uses the phrase more plainly to refer to a child who has died and who awaits his sister in Hades. The text reads,

> This girl went to Hades untimely in her seventh year, before she had lived out most of her life; poor child, she was pining for her brother, who tasted cruel death (γευσάμενον θανάτου) as an infant aged twenty months. Ah, Peristere, your suffering is pitiful. How near to mortals god has placed the most grievous unhappiness![18]

Here, Theocritus describes two deaths as well as the grief of the children's mother, Peristere. The first death in the epigram is described as going 'to Hades' while in the second the infant is described as having tasted death. In this example, the two cases are parallel: one dead child is relocated to Hades, while the other tastes death, but the actions are the same. A parallel is established between movement across cosmic boundaries and the sense of taste.

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[16] An older example, from Euripides, uses taste to describe a number of aspects related to death, such as grief, in *Alcestis* 1068: "Take this woman out of my sight, by the gods, do not slay again one who is dead! For when I see her I think I see my wife. She makes my heart pound, and tears stream from my eyes. Oh luckless me! It is but now that I taste the full bitterness of this grief! (... ὦ τλήμων ἐγώ, ὡς ἄρτι πένθους τοῦδε γεύομαι πικροῦ.)" Such examples—selected from the many ancient Greek texts that make use of this metaphor, such as *Hecuba* 375f and *Heracles* 1353—do not contain direct references to "tasting death," but rather demonstrate the early use of the terminology in the context of death, whether to refer to grief as the result of the death of a loved one, to hardships that make a character consider death a preferable option, or to hardships which have been withstood that might have been equivalent to death.

[17] The only commentary on Theocritus' Epigrams appears not to address the use of this phrase. Laura Rossi, *The Epigrams Ascribed to Theocritus: A Method of Approach* (Hellenistica Groningana 5; Leuven: Peeters, 2001).

[18] Theocritus, *Epigrams* (LCL)

Pre-Rabbinic Early Jewish Sources

The word 'taste' is used metaphorically in the Septuagint (e.g Job 20:18, Ps 33:9, Prov 24:13) but not in conjunction with death.[19] Indeed, the metaphor of 'tasting death' does not occur in the Hebrew Bible at all; it is only later Jewish literature that initiates the use of the phrase. Apart from the Gospels in the New Testament, which will be discussed shortly, the earliest Jewish use is found in 4 Ezra, composed in the first century after the destruction of the Second Temple in 70CE.

4 Ezra 6:26 refers to certain humans from a previous generation who were "taken up" without having tasted death, presumably Enoch and Elijah. This comes in the context of Ezra's second vision; Ezra cannot understand his experience and asks for clarification from his *angelus interpres*, Uriel. Uriel responds to Ezra's request for understanding of God's actions in the world, explaining the order of the world, the organization of time, and signs of the eschaton. In typical apocalyptic fashion, Uriel lists a series of natural inversions that these signs consist of: infants being able to speak, fields sown with seed appearing unsown, friends making war on friends, etc. After these signs, Uriel says, whoever remains "shall see the men who were taken up, who from their birth have not tasted death." Death is an ordinary consequence of mortality, the result, according to the text, of Adam's sin (3.7). Here, the language of tasting death is combined with language of being taken up.[20] 'Taken up' language is reminiscent of Enoch (Gen 5: 24) and of Elijah (2 Kings 2:11), interpreted to mean that it was possible for extraordinary humans who enjoyed extreme levels of divine favour to avoid the normal process of death and instead to proceed directly to the heavenly realm. The language of taste here provides clarifying information about Elijah and Enoch, who not only were taken up, but further did not experience death. Taste operates in this text to signal the process of death, by which an individual crosses from the realm of the living into the realm of the dead; since Enoch and Elijah did not enter the realm of the dead, but rather entered into the heavenly realm, they can be said not to have *tasted* death. Given that Ezra is himself transformed through ingestion in chapter 14, it seems clear that the transformative aspects of taste and eating are operational in 4 Ezra and that taste is a mechanism by which its author and assumed audience understand their cosmic locations.

Pseudo Philo preserves another example of this kind of use. *Biblical Antiquities* 48.1 describes how Phineas, a high priest in Aaron's lineage, was about to die; God keeps him alive until an appointed time, at which point God says Phineas will taste death. It is worth noting that early Jewish tradition

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[19] CS Mann, *Mark* (Anchor Bible 27; New York: Doubleday, 1986), 350.

[20] Ezra is told that he will also be taken up in 14.9.

associates Phineas with Elijah,[21] and that Phineas served as a kind of immortal High Priest during his many years of life. He is also associated as the Angel of the Lord in Judges 2:1. Phineas' long life is miraculous and divinely ordained, as is his eventual taste of death. This text, and its associated traditions, establish the connection between extraordinary mortals and the postponement or avoidance of death, communicated through the metaphor of taste.

New Testament & Early Christian Sources[22]

The phrase 'to taste death' occurs five times in the New Testament. Three of these, Matthew 16:28, Mark 9:1, and Luke 9:27, are from the triple tradition, rather than independent examples of the phrase. The other two occur in Hebrews 2:9 and John 8:52.

In the synoptic gospels, the over-all sense is not one of immortality, but rather of eschatological expectation.

> Mark 9:1
>
> And he said to them, "Truly I tell you, there are some standing here who will not taste death until they see that the kingdom of God has come with power."[23]
>
> Matthew 16:28
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> Truly I tell you, there are some standing here who will not taste death before they see the Son of Man coming in his kingdom.[24]
>
> Luke 9:27
>
> But truly I tell you, there are some standing here who will not taste death before they see the kingdom of God.[25]

The three texts have slightly different ideas about how and in what manner the *basileia*[26] will arrive, and whether or not a Son of Man is involved in its establishment.[27] But all three are agreed in how they employ the phrase 'taste

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[21] See Targum Pseudo Jonathan, for example.

[22] The metaphor of tasting death might have implications for the use of cup imagery found in the passion narratives of Mark 14:36; Matthew 20:22, 26:39; Luke 22:42; and John 18:11, where the cup is used in the words of Jesus to symbolize his impending crucifixion, and later on in martyrdom accounts as a symbol of impending death (e.g. Passio Sanctorum Mariani et Iacobi 6.6–15)

[23] καὶ ἔλεγεν αὐτοϊς· ἀμὴν λέγω ὑμϊν ὅτι εἰσίν τινες ὧδε τω+ν ἑστηκότων οἵτινες οὐ μὴ γεύσωνται θανάτου ἕως ἂν ἴδωσιν τὴν βασιλείαν τοῦ θεοϋ ἐληλυθυῖαν ἐν δυνάμει.

[24] ἀμὴν λέγω ὑμῖν ὅτι ἐσιν τινες τῶν ὧδε ἑστώτων οἵτινες οὐ μὴ γεύσωνται θανάτου ἕως ἂν ἴδωσιν τὸν υἱὸν τοῦ ἀνθρώπου ἐρχόμενον ἐν τῇ βασιλείᾳ αὐτοῦ.

[25] λέγω δὲ ὑμῖν ἀληθῶς, εἰσίν τινες τῶν αὐτοῦ ἑστηκότων οἵ οὐ μὴ γεύσωνται θανάτου ἕως ἂν ἴδωσιν τὴν βασιλείαν τοῦ θεοῦ.

[26] As has become increasingly common, I leave the Greek term *basileia* untranslated in order to maintain the fullest range of meanings. The common translation "kingdom" does not allow for the associated meaning of "reign" or "kingship" to remain intact in translation.

[27] Many scholars view the 'some standing here' as referring to the subsequent transfiguration (see, e.g. David Wehnham and A. D. A. Moses, " 'There Are Some Standing Here…': Did They Become the Reputed Pillars of the Jerusalem Church? Some Reflections on Mark 9:1, Galations 2:9, and the Transfiguration," *Novum Testamentum* 36.2 (1994), 146-163, esp.

death.' There are several options for interpretation of these verses, but what remains (and what is important for the discussion at hand) is that 'tasting death' is employed as a way of pointing to the act of dying, and implies that some extraordinary mortals are exempt from death. In the first option, Jesus in these texts uses 'not tasting death' as a way of expressing just how soon the reign of God is to be expected – so soon, in fact, that some of his audience might still be alive. That they are still expected to be alive when the time comes does not say anything about extraordinary measures in which God prolongs life or prevents death, but rather speaks to the proximity of the *basileia*.[28] Chilton suggests that Jesus' statement in the gospels functions as an oath referring to immortals, rather than a promise to the actual hearers of his saying; he views the subsequent transfiguration scene (Mark 9:2-1//Matt 17:1-9//Luke 9:28-36) as confirmation of Jesus' promise that the *basileia* is imminent, since Elijah and Moses might be counted among those who did not 'taste death'.[29] In either case, taste is an operative verb in this metaphor, one which expresses a certain way of experiencing death that is expected of all ordinary people, but which some manage to escape, because of how soon The End will come.

As is often the case, the Gospel of John provides a different point of view. In John 8:50-52, it is not the end of the world that will allow some standing before Jesus to avoid ordinary death. Rather, the text implies that those who follow Jesus are exempt from "tasting death." The verses in question read:

> Very truly, I tell you, whoever keeps my word will never see death." οἱ ἰουδαίοι said to him, "Now we know that you have a demon. Abraham died, and so did the prophets; yet you say, 'Whoever keeps my word will never taste death.[30]

In this discussion between Jesus and those whom the Gospel calls οἱ ἰουδαίοι,[31] Jesus seems to imply that those who follows Jesus will not die; his

148). There is also, of course, debate about when this basileia is to arrive – is Jesus in Mark 9:1, for example, indicating that those standing will not taste death before they *realize that the kingdom is already here* or is he indicating that they will not taste death before it arrives, which at the time Jesus is speaking in 9:1 it has not (see Mann, 351)? A third possibility is that Jesus speaks of himself when he says "some among you" will not taste death, and that he was mistaken about the timing of his own death. For the purpose of examining the metaphor, this debate is moot; in either case the phrase 'tasting death' has to do with whether or not the hearers will or will not be dead.

[28] Most scholarship on these verses in the gospels does not explain or address the 'taste death' phraseology or metaphor; Perrin, however, does make the connection to the same use of the phrase in 4 Ezra ("The Composition of Mark," 69).

[29] Chilton, "Not to Taste Death," 30.

[30] ἀμὴν ἀμὴν λέγω ὑμῖν, ἐάν τις τὸν ἐμὸν λόγον τηρήσῃ, θάνατον οὐ μὴ θεωρήσῃ εἰς τὸν αἰῶνα. Εἶπον οὖν αὐτῷ οἱ ἰουδαῖοι· νῦν ἐγνώκαμεν οἵτι δαιμόνιον ἔχεις. ἀβραὰμ ἀπέθανεν καὶ οἱ προφῆται, καὶ σὺ λέγεις· ἐάν τις τὸν λόγον μου τηρήσῃ, οὐ μὴ γεύσεται θανάτου εἰς τὸν αἰῶνα.

[31] "Hoi Ioudaioi" -- literally either "the Jews" or "the Judeans." For the implications of either translation, see "Jew and Judean: A Forum on Politics and Historiography in the Translation of Ancient Texts," 26 August 2014; https://marginalia.lareviewofbooks.org/jew-judean-forum/.

interlocutors are depicted as not understanding Jesus' implied meaning, and rather compare his statement to the real deaths of righteous men of scripture, such as Abraham. A crucial difference occurs in how Jesus and his conversation partners report this expectation. Whereas Jesus says that his followers will not *see* death,[32] his debate partners change the phrasing to imply that Jesus actually said his followers will not *taste* death.[33] Clearly in the mind of οἰ ἰουδαίοι these two statements amount to the same thing; they understand Jesus to be intimating that those who follow Jesus' teachings will not die, whether this is through tasting or seeing. Their line of debate suggests incredulity that Jesus would suggest immortality for his followers when even Abraham faced death like a mortal.[34] It is possible that Jesus in John refers not to ordinary life and death but to the kind of eternal life that this Jesus alludes to elsewhere. Still, the use of the word 'taste' signals the use of a conceptual metaphor, and in fact the misunderstanding of his interlocutors relies on the commonly understood meaning of the phrase.

Hebrews 2:9 is a curious further example. In this text, it is Jesus himself who has tasted death on behalf of those whom he saves:

> but we do see Jesus, who for a little while was made lower than the angels, now crowned with glory and honor because of the suffering of death, so that by the grace of God he might taste death for everyone.[35]

The author implies that because Jesus has 'tasted death' his followers will no longer have to. The statement that Jesus has tasted death is put in the context of Jesus' incarnation—since he was 'for a little while made lower than the angels'—and his suffering death (2:9). So Jesus' humanity and therefore his ability to die are in some way connected with him removing those aspects from those who follow him. In other words, mortality and the tendency to die are encompassed in the phrase, tasting death.[36]

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[32] Brown states that this is a "Hebraism for 'die'" and cites Ps 89.48 and Luke 2:26 as comparators. Brown continues to discuss the equivalence of seeing vs tasting death (Brown, *The Gospel According to John* Anchor Bible vol 1, 359).

[33] Chilton calls this a 'parody' of Jesus' words ("Not to Taste Death" 31). For Chilton, this implies that Jesus does not mean that some of his disciples will not die; he understands the misunderstanding by οἱ ἰουδαίοι to parodic to the extent that the text in the end implies the opposite. However, to me this does not adequately explain Jesus' original statement, nor is Chilton in the majority in his interpretation.

[34] In Testament of Abraham, Abraham is less than willing to face his own death. It is possible this is implied in Jesus' response that Abraham was able to see "my day" (8:56), since in T Abr the patriarch is given a tour of heaven and of final judgment. (See Adele Reinhartz, "The Gospel of John," *Fortress Commentary on the Bible: the New Testament* [Aymer, Margaret P, Cynthia Briggs Kittredge, and Sánchez David A, eds.; Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2014]; Reinhartz, "The Gospel According to John," *The Jewish Annotated New Testament* [Amy-Jill Levine and Marc Zvi Brettler, eds.; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017]).

[35] Τὸν δὲ βραχύ τι παρ/ ἀγγελους ἠλαττωμένον βλέπομεν ἰησοῦν διὰ τὸ παθημα τοῦ θανάτου δόξῃ καὶ τιμῇ ἐστεφανωμένον, ὅπως χάριτι θεοῦ ὑπὲρ παντὸς γεύσηται θανάτου.

[36] George Wesley Buchanan (*To the Hebrews* [Anchor Bible 36; New York: Doubleday, 1972], 28) states that this phrasing was probably "understood in atonement theology" but does not offer any explanation as to why.

The Gospel of Thomas logia 1, 18, & 19 uses the phrase similarly. Logion 1 opens the collection as a whole, coming just after the prologue introducing the collection as the "hidden sayings that the living Jesus spoke and Didymus Judas Thomas wrote down." The logion indicates that Jesus said, "Whoever finds the interpretation of these sayings will not taste death."[37] On its surface, this logion appears to use similar logic to the saying of Jesus and his opponents in John 8:51-53.[38] Both texts imply that followers of Jesus' words will avoid death. Logia 18-19 read as follows:

> 18. The disciples said to Jesus, "Tell us how our end will come about." Jesus said, "Have you uncovered the beginning, then, that you are now seeking the end? For where the beginning is the end will come to be. Blessed is the one who stands at the beginning: that one will know the end and will not taste death."
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> 19. Jesus said, "Blessed is the one who existed before coming to exist. If you exist as my disciples and listen to my sayings, these stones will serve you. For you have five trees in paradise that do not move in summer or winter, and whose leaves do not fall. Whoever knows them will not taste death."[39]

Logia 18 and 19 echo the sentiments in Matthew, Mark, and Luke as well as those in John. Logion 18 describes an eschatological context, with the disciples asking about the end times, and Jesus pointing them to the beginning, calling to mind Revelation 21:6 and 22:13;[40] Jesus' statement about the beginning works as a transition to the next saying. Logion 19 echoes creation, the prologue of John, and the New Jerusalem in Revelation, with its flowering and fruit-producing trees. Somehow knowing these trees—perhaps a reference to Eve's taste of fruit in Genesis 3—will allow one to bypass death. In Genesis 3:22 God expels the humans to prevent them from eating the fruit of the Tree of Life, which would have made them immortal, living forever. In invoking creation and paradise, Thomas connects the taste of death with the fruit of Eden; just as the first taste of fruit brought about death ('you shall surely die') the second taste, the eschatological taste, prevents death. These three sayings indicate that Gospel of Thomas is comfortable operating this metaphor, and indeed is doing additional conceptual work connecting the disparate ideas of 'taste' and 'death' through use of scripture.

There is also a single use of this metaphor in the 3rd century CE Acts of Thomas, originally composed in Syriac. There the phrase is uttered in the context of a prayer:

> Lo, I sleep and awake, and I shall no more go to sleep; lo, I die and live again, and I shall no more taste of death; lo, they rejoice and expect me,

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[37] This saying occurs in both the Coptic and Greek manuscripts.

[38] See Raymond Brown, "The Gospel of Thomas and St John's Gospel," *New Testament Studies* 9 (1963), 155-177.

[39] These sayings are extant only in the Coptic manuscript.

[40] Brown, "Gospel of Thomas," 163.

> that I may come and be with their kindred and be set as a flower in their crown…

In this prayer, the speaker, Judas Thomas, cries out words of hope after having been thrown in prison. Since the arrest is a precursor to the eventual martyrdom of Judas Thomas, the references to death and the expectation of eternal life make sense. Here, the hope of no longer tasting death appears to refer not to actual physical death in this realm but to eternal life. In the context of a long prayer filled with other metaphors (sleep is death, festive rejoicing is a welcome into heaven, etc.) it is easy to overlook what seems to be merely one more poetic way of expressing hope in eternal life. However, what is significant for our purposes is precisely the ordinariness of this metaphor; as in the other texts, there is no question of it not being understood. While here the target is slightly different – a spiritual death rather than physical death – the way the metaphor functions persists: tasting is a way of comprehending the transformation rendered by death.

Rabbinic Sources[41]

The phrase 'taste death' occurs relatively frequently in Talmudic literature; however, I will only go through a few examples here.[42] In Talmudic literature, it is used in the negative, 'did not taste death', to refer to extraordinary mortals whose righteousness allowed them to avoid death, similarly to how it is used in 4 Ezra, but other rabbinic texts use the phrase positively to point to the ordinary end of mortal life. In each of these cases, the metaphor functions to express the mechanism by which human beings do (or do not) die, which is through the language of taste.

There are two sections in Genesis Rabbah that make use of taste as a metaphor for death. Both deal with the biblical figure of Adam and how it is he came to taste death. Gensis Rabbah 9:5 reads, "Adam the first person was deserving to not taste the taste of death."[43] The text is discussing the wickedness of two kings, Hiram and Nebuchadnezzar, and explains that even though Adam did not *deserve* death, God had to establish death so that these wicked kings, Hiram and Nebuchadnezzar, deserving of death, could die. Tasting death in this instance is again used to imply the act of dying in an ordinary sense; however, it is used within the context of constraining the potential for immortality.

[41] Chilton's article positions rabbinic examples of the phrase as preserving a tradition earlier than the New Testament Gospels and the Gospel of Thomas. Since his article was published (1978) the idea that rabbinic texts written and compiled well after the gospels are reliable indicators of views prior to Jesus has been roundly criticized. As such, my trajectory is very different from Chiton's.

[42] Herbert B Basser and Marsha Cohen, *The Gospel of Matthew and Judaic Traditions*, 429. According to Basser and Cohenn, it occurs about 30 times. Examples not discussed here include much later texts, including the Zohar (1.7b:4); Shukchan Arukh (Orach Chayim 4:16); Siftei Chakhamim (Genesis 49:33.1), etc.

[43] לְטְעֹם טַעַם מִיתָה

Later, in Genesis Rabbah 21.5, Adam comes up again, in comparison to Elijah. Since Elijah was taken up by God without having to taste death, the rabbinic interlocutors ponder how it is that Adam nevertheless died. The text is discussing Genesis 3:22, "the man has become like one of us," and posits that Adam was given a choice between life and death. In the end, they conclude that the removal of Adam's rib is what results in him "tasting death," a precursor to his knowledge of good and evil. This text is significant for a few reasons. First, it employs 'tasting death' in both a negative and a positive sense: Elijah did not taste death, but Adam did. Second, this comparison between the two biblical figures further articulates how tasting death can, on the one hand, be an ordinary human experience, but on the other hand, how *not* tasting death indicates some divine protection against mortality. Of further note is the initial discussion of Gabriel's relevance to the question of Adam's potential for immortality. This indicates that there is a sliding scale of those who may or may not taste death in some way, and that angelic beings are also known not to taste death.[44]

Targum Pseudo-Jonathan also participates in this understanding of the phrase, using it in Deut. 32:1 to refer to inanimate, immortal features of creation, namely the heavens and the earth. As explanation for the biblical verse in which Moses declares, "Give ear, O heavens, let me speak; Let the earth hear the words I utter!" (Deut 32:1), the Targum gives the reader some background information about Moses' internal thought process: he wants his oration to have appropriate witnesses. These witnesses, according to the Targum, should not be mortal beings, subject to death, but rather entities that would never 'taste death' – the heavens and the earth. On the other hand, Leviticus Rabbah 18.1 uses the idiom to suggest that "tasting death" is inevitable, something that every human one day experiences. The text uses the idiom to indicate that regardless of rank, all mortal beings die, and that the righteous might have a different experience after that death than others.

Although in a very different context, the universality of death is also expressed in Pirkei DeRabbi Eliezer. In that text, the discussion centres on what the world will be like in the eschaton, when God brings about a new heaven and a new earth. Section 51:2 reads, "All its inhabitants shall taste the taste of death for two days, when there will be no soul of man or beast upon the earth, as it is said, "And they that dwell therein shall die in like manner"." Curiously, this text implies a limit to the length of death; it is not permanent, but lasts for two days. As the text continues its discussion it becomes clear that while tasting death might be unique to humans (and the text is not clear that it is), heavenly beings such as angels will also pass away and be made new, but this is not explicitly expressed using the taste metaphor.

[44] A slightly later text, Midrash Tanchuma Buber Appendix to Sh'lach 2:1 (5th-8th CE), describes angels in terms of tasting death: "You are like the ministering angels who never taste death. Yet after this greatness you wanted to die: indeed, you shall die like a human."

Church Fathers

Most examples of 'tasting death' found in Patristic literature are either commentary on or referring to the examples found in the New Testament, rather than original uses by the authors. However, there are a few exceptions that are worth exploring in order to see the full range of the metaphor and its implications. For the purpose of this article, my examples are all from John Chrysostom; there are far too many examples from early Christian writers to do them all justice, so I offer three examples from a single author in order to demonstrate a single author's range of use.

First, John Chrysostom, in his *Commentary on Psalm 75*, indicates that it was not Adam who first tasted death. Where as several of the rabbinic texts we just looked at use the phrase in the context of Adam's expulsion from Eden, Chrysostom here associates the phrase more directly with Cain's murder of his brother Abel. In his logic, while Adam may have facilitated the transition from immortality to mortality through his disobedience to God, Cain is responsible for the first example of death. He writes, "For it was not until Cain, through jealousy, brought forth murder, that humanity tasted death."[45] Chrysostom also uses the phrase eschatologically; in his homily on Penance (346.60) he offers the fiery condemnation of sinners, warning that the Judge is coming to sit in court, and the Creator to strike down his creation. In this context, Chrysostom uses the curious phrase, 'life will taste death." This might suggest that, in the context of divine judgement, life itself will cease. This gives wider scope to the metaphor, indicating not just its association with human mortals but also, potentially with the concept of created life in general.

A final example from Chrysostom illustrates a similar use to that which we find in Hebrews: in his sermon on the ascension, Chrysostom describes how Jesus "was nailed to the cross, and tasted death; he, who is from the beginning immortal, stripped Hades of its spoils; and the proven winner rose from death."[46] Again, Jesus' deathlessness, an innate quality, is juxtaposed with his taste of death. In this example, that taste is not permanent; rather in a show of force, and using militaristic language, Chrysostom indicates how Jesus conquered death as a victorious warrior, liberating Death's captors from Hades.

Conclusions

To conclude, I will summarize the contributions these examples make to our understanding of the metaphor 'to taste death' and outline some of the implications for better comprehending the sense of taste's roll in meaning creation in antiquity *vis a vis* embodied experience. First, this phrase is very prevalent in the literature of antiquity. It appears in the third century BCE and

[45] My translation. He makes this same claim in *De remissione Peccatorum* 60.764.8

[46] My translation.

does not drop out of use even in late antiquity and beyond.[47] The prevalence of 'tasting death' in antiquity, across a range of sources and languages, from Greek to Coptic to Aramaic to Syriac, matches what cognitive linguists have noted about primary metaphors and their location in bodily experience: much of the time, these primary metaphors occur across a range of cultures, in a range of languages. Second, there is no effort on the part of any of these texts, nor any example I've found so far, to explain the metaphor. There is no need, since taste is such a primary experience and since it is generally accepted within the context of antiquity that taste functions transformatively.

I will therefore return to answer the question with which I opened this paper, which is why does the word taste help these authors (and their audiences) understand the concept of death? As I've outlined above, the embodiedness of metaphors emerges from the human experience of being in the world. As Jennifer Glancy has argued, corporal knowing is an important way of creating and expressing cultural meaning: "bodies know the world in ways that exceed our disciplinary ways of knowing."[48] Primary or 'natural' activities such as eating are shared across cultures, ancient and modern. The concept of making internal what was once external is an operative concept in understanding what eating does to a body; food is not only brought into the body, but made a part of the body.[49] Taste is one way that we recognize that process of transformation, as elements of the ingested item are brought in through receptors, not just on tongues, but in antiquity, on lips, in stomachs, and even in eyes. That tasting is a metaphor for experiencing undergirds the operation of the metaphor. But instead of food, the tasted element is death. Thus death becomes *part* of the eater, just as food is internalized and absorbed. To ingest death, to dissolve it into one's body, makes death internal to the taster rather than external. In the same way that Persephone is bound to live in Hades for a portion of the year as a result of tasting the honey-sweet pomegranate seeds, to taste death means to bring it about and to experience its transformative power. Not to taste death is reserved for immortal beings or select righteous individuals; taste is so fundamental to human experience that, like death, it is almost inevitable. It is my intention in neglecting to provide any specific exegetical analyses of the examples in question that I have whetted your appetites to look more closely at 'tasting death' and its meanings.

Bibliography

[47] I stopped looking after the seventh century, but it even pops up again in Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar*.

[48] Jennifer A. Glancy, *Corporal Knowledge: Early Christian Bodies* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 4.

[49] The transformative effects of eating are metanymic: the ingested item is transformed by the mouth, and likewise the eater is transformed by the act of ingesting.

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