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Tasting the Little Scroll:
A Sensory Analysis of Divine Interaction in Revelation 10:8–10[1]

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Abstract
The ingestion of the scroll in Rev. 10:8–10 is a key element of how John experiences God's revelation and transmits it to others. Using sensory analysis, I propose that the scroll's ingestion represents a shared understanding of how the consumption of otherworldly food in narrative grants access to the divine realm and thereby transmits divine knowledge. The privacy of taste (as opposed to the shared senses of sight or hearing) suggests that participants in this kind of eating experience God in the most intimate way. The special way that John accesses these divine revelations—through consuming the little scroll—shows that he is granted privileged access to God's knowledge, which, when translated into visions, allows others to participate in this intimacy.

Keywords
Apocalypse, eating, John, Revelation, scroll, senses, sweetness, taste

Introduction

The Book of Revelation contains many curious scenes in which the seer, John of Patmos, receives divine revelations.[2] In a scene towards the middle of the text, an angel presents John of Patmos with an unrolled scroll and directs him to eat it:

> 10 And I saw another mighty angel coming down from heaven, wrapped in a cloud, with a rainbow over his head; his face was like the sun, and his legs like pillars of fire. 2 He held a little scroll open in his hand. Setting his right foot on the sea and his left foot on the land, 3 he gave a great shout, like a lion roaring. And when he shouted, the seven thunders sounded. 4 And when the seven thunders had sounded, I was about to write, but I heard a voice from heaven saying, 'Seal up what the seven thunders have said, and do not write it down'. 5 Then

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[2] I agree with the general consensus that the author of Revelation was not John the apostle, but rather a late-first-century writer, familiar with a variety of Christian modes of expression, but not particularly with the Johannine epistles or gospel. The author of the text calls himself John and I see no reason to attribute a different name to that author. See discussion in Collins 1984: 27–44 and Koester 2014: 65–68.

> the angel whom I saw standing on the sea and the land raised his right hand to heaven [6] and swore by him who lives forever and ever, who created heaven and what is in it, the earth and what is in it, and the sea and what is in it: 'There will be no more delay, [7] but in the days when the seventh angel is to blow his trumpet, the mystery of God will be fulfilled, as he announced to his servants the prophets'. [8] Then the voice that I had heard from heaven spoke to me again, saying, 'Go, take the scroll that is open in the hand of the angel who is standing on the sea and on the land'. [9] So I went to the angel and told him to give me the little scroll; and he said to me, 'Take it, and eat; it will be bitter to your stomach, but sweet as honey in your mouth'. [10] So I took the little scroll from the hand of the angel and ate it; it was sweet as honey in my mouth, but when I had eaten it, my stomach was made bitter. [11] Then they said to me, 'You must prophesy again about many peoples and nations and languages and kings'.[3]

In a text rich with somatic imagery, the language of taste in this episode is a rhetorical tool that expresses a specific meaning. I argue that the author uses the image of ingesting a scroll to communicate the legitimacy of John's revelatory experiences, and indeed, the authority of the Book of Revelation as a whole. This analysis will shed light on the role of taste in the transmission of divine knowledge as well as the specific ramifications of ingesting sweet- and bitter-tasting substances.

This short episode in Revelation 10:8–10 has received less scholarly attention than many other aspects of this complex apocalypse. Scholars seem not to have considered how strange it is for John to eat a heavenly scroll. Comparing Revelation with two texts in which similar ingestion takes place, I argue that Revelation 10:8–10 makes use of a common trope I call hierophagy—the eating of otherworldly things—in which the eater undergoes a change that renders him/her uniquely capable of understanding divine knowledge as a result of the eating. This category of eating can be called a literary trope in that it is a recurring pattern of language that expresses both shared and particular meanings across numerous ancient texts. Hierophagy, I suggest, is part of the literary toolbox used by

[3] Unless otherwise indicated, English translation is from the NRSV.

ancient authors to transmit a certain understanding of the relationship between God and mortals, heaven and earth.

Ancient pagan, Jewish, and Christian texts present hierophagy as a mechanism by which characters within narratives gain access to the divine realm by consuming some otherworldly item. Certain patterns emerge in terms of what kinds of things are consumed, but the item is not always food.[4] While some examples of the trope involve items edible under ordinary circumstances,[5] the Book of Revelation portrays its protagonist ingesting a scroll, an ingredient that does not figure prominently—or at all—in the recipe books of antiquity. Indeed, Revelation's use of a non-food item highlights that it is the *act of ingesting* the otherworldly item, and not the nature of the item itself, that is a core element of hierophagy in general.

The act of eating a divine substance precipitates a change in John that brings him closer to the heavenly realm. In some comparable cases, such as *Joseph and Aseneth* and Apuleius's *Metamorphoses*, one function of eating otherworldly food is the transformation of the consumer's physical appearance—Aseneth emerges from her hierophagic experience with a radiant beauty that renders her unrecognizable to her foster-father, and Lucius is no longer an ass but a human. Hierophagy can also function to translocate the eater to another

[4] I merely use the word 'food' here and throughout as a general term indicating that something is ingested, whether or not that item is liquid or solid, or even edible in an ordinary context.

[5] Some Greco-Roman texts do present the hierophagic item as food: Perpetua consumes cheese to receive the divinely-given knowledge of her impending death in *The Martyrdom of Perpetua and Felicitas* 4.10; Persephone eats pomegranate in Ovid's *Metamorphosis* 5.534–37, which prevents her from fully returning from the underworld; and Aseneth consumes honeycomb in *Joseph and Aseneth* 16.15–16, a food which not only gives her divine knowledge, but also transforms her appearance. The food item in *4 Ezra* 14:38 might be recognizable but for one factor: the cup is full of liquid, making it identifiable as something to ingest, but it has the appearance of fire, marking it as extraordinary. The roses that Lucius-as-donkey eats in the *Metamorphoses* of Apuleius 11.13 are also a borderline example, since roses were used in ancient Mediterranean cuisine, but not in the raw format eaten by Lucius.

realm, as we see when Ezra is taken up into heaven in *4 Ezra* (Warren 2015) and when Persephone is unable to return from the underworld in Ovid (Warren 2017). In Revelation, however, the emphasis is placed on how hierophagy transmits divine knowledge from the one who provides the heavenly substance—the angel—to the one who eats the substance—John.[6]

I employ two intersecting approaches in reading Revelation 10. The first is reading the Apocalypse through the lens of ingestion, the physiological and metaphorical process of internalising an object into the body. As Maggie Kilgour has demonstrated, the lens of ingestion exposes the metaphor of opposition between what is inside the body and what is outside of it, an opposition that itself dissolves as soon as the external object is made internal to the body (Kilgour 1990). In other words, ingestion transforms a foreign object into a component of the body of the one who has ingested it. In terms of Revelation, this lens illuminates how the relationship between the divine realm and the mortal realm is transformed through the eating of the scroll; the divine realm is made internal to John so that it is no longer external or alien. The second approach is sensory analysis. Sensory analysis has become an increasingly prominent methodological tool, especially in fields such as anthropology, where scholars such as David Howes have recognized the importance of non-visual, non-aural sensory experience in Western and non-Western cultures alike (Howes 2003). In antiquity studies, sensory analysis is still in the process of gaining more mainstream scholarly attention, with several recent publications (Harvey 2006; Green 2011; Rudolph 2017). Combining a literary analysis with anthropological

[6] For a discussion of the widespread metaphor of being nourished by literature, see Kleinig 1983; Muir & Tappenden (forthcoming).

sensory analysis showcases the literary techniques by which the author expresses meaning. Sensory and somatic imagery is woven into Revelation's message in a way that makes it impossible to understand the text without investigating the historical and rhetorical meaning behind the imagery.

In contrast with visual or auditory experiences, the sense of taste is experienced privately. The translation of John's taste experience of the scroll in 10:8–10 into his visions, written down to be heard by an audience, allows a community to partake collectively in the sharing of this intimacy with the divine. I suggest that the special way that John accesses these divine revelations—through consuming the little scroll—shows that he is granted privileged access to God's knowledge, which, when translated into visions, allows others to participate in this intimacy. To establish a hierophagic pattern in Revelation, I will first analyse the text itself and outline the scene's relationship to other parts of the Book of Revelation. Secondly, I will explore how the consumption of otherworldly food works to dissolve the boundaries between this world and the heavenly realm. Thirdly, I will examine how the sense of taste functions in antiquity in order to shed light on how it is used in Revelation. Finally, I will point out the ramifications of my findings for the Book of Revelation.

The Scroll in Revelation 5

My argument about the consumption of the little scroll in chapter 10 supports the current consensus that the recommissioning in 10:11, where John is told to prophesy again, demarcates a new section of the entire Book of Revelation (Collins 1984: 28; Smith 1994; Hall 2002). Many scholars agree that this recommissioning hinges on this episode of the

little scroll. The ingestion of the little scroll marks a shift in the content of the book as a whole.

The rhetorical force of John consuming the scroll in chapter 10 is highlighted by the inclusion of a scroll earlier in the text. The scroll in Revelation 5 does not express the same somatic connotations that the scroll in Revelation 10 does, and as such, emphasizes the significance of ingesting the scroll, as opposed to simply viewing it. In Revelation 5:2-3 we read:

> And I saw in the right hand of him who was seated on the throne a scroll written within and on the back, sealed with seven seals; and I saw a strong angel proclaiming with a loud voice, 'Who is worthy to open the scroll and break its seals?' And no one in heaven or on earth or under the earth was able to open the scroll or to look into it, and I wept much that no one was found worthy to open the scroll or to look into it.

The scroll is opened by the Lamb, Jesus, and the opening of each of the seven seals sets off a series of visions of calamity for earth. Scholars debate whether the scroll in Rev. 5:1 is the same as that in chapter 10.[7] For my present argument, whether or not the scrolls are identical has little impact, although I tend to the view that they are the same and treat them as such in this article. Regardless, even if they are different scrolls, comparing them still emphasizes the significance of eating as opposed to merely viewing a scroll, whereas if they are the same scroll, the escalation of God's message is clearly visible in the progression from vision to consumption. In either case, the scroll in Revelation 5 provides information about how to interpret the scroll in chapter 10.

The scroll in chapter 5 is sealed with seven seals, which are opened one by one, but the contents of the scroll are apparently not revealed to the audience: the opening of the

[7] Bauckham 1993: 243–66; Koester 2014: 372–73, 384; but see Baynes 2010; Baynes 2014: 149–62; Gradl 2014: 309–14.

seals prepares readers for what the scroll contains, but the text says that no one is able to open the scroll or to look into it (5:3) (Koester 2014: 405). Its message is not thus made explicit until it is given to John to consume in chapter 10, after which he reveals the message of the scroll in the prophecies that follow the eating; 11:1–13 is a summary of these contents, but the full message is laid out in the second half of the book (Bauckham 1993: 243–57; Koester 2014: 405). This is observable through a few thematic shifts that the consumption of the scroll precipitates, namely the specificity with which the chronology of the end times is described, and the shift in concern from the sealing of God's chosen to the marking of God's enemies. Theses shifts indicate significant differences in the functions of the scroll in chapter 5 versus in chapter 10.

First, prior to chapter 10, questions of 'when' are answered vaguely. In 6:10, after the opening of the sealed scroll, the martyrs ask, 'How long, Sovereign Lord, holy and true, until you judge the inhabitants of the earth and avenge our blood?' The answer is non-specific: 'a little longer, until the number of their fellow servants and brothers who were to be killed as they had been was completed' (6:11). After John eats the scroll, however, specific time units are used, such as 'time, times, and half a time' (12:14); 42 months (13:5); or 1260 days (12:6), each adding up to about three and half years. These specific time units are used seven times after 10:8.[8] These three-and-a-half years refer to the time it will take from Satan's removal from heaven and Christ's ascension to when Christ will return at the end of the age for the final victory (Koester 2014: 498). Indeed, the mighty angel suggests that time is part of what John will receive in the little scroll, when he says in 10:6–7 that 'the time of waiting will end when the seventh angel blows his trumpet. That is

[8] Collins 1984: 67–68; Smith 1994: 388; Maier 2002: 157; Koester 2014: 486–87, 498.

when the mysterious purpose of God will be complete' (Koester 2014: 490). This shift, from vague language to specific language, illustrates that consuming the scroll results in a deeper, more thorough understanding of the divine plan. The sealed scroll of chapter 5 does not yield the particular knowledge conveyed by the ingested scroll in chapter 10.

Secondly, the scrolls in chapter 5 and chapter 10 play different roles in identifying those who are with God and those who are against God. Before John consumes the scroll in Revelation 10, the text repeatedly refers to those whom God has sealed on their foreheads: 'Do not harm the earth or the sea or the trees, till we have sealed the servants of our God upon their foreheads' (7:3).[9] This sealing represents the protection of these servants but also their belonging to the people of God (Koester 2014: 416, 458, 425–27).[10] This is in contrast to those who are signified as enemies of God with the mark of the beast; people who have the mark of the beast are mentioned only after John consumes the scroll.[11] Just as those who are set apart by the seal of God belong to God, so too those who are marked with the sign of the beast belong to the beast. There is a shift, then, in the focus of identifying groups of people before and after the little scroll. Before chapter 10, those who are marked are exclusively marked positively, with the seal of the divine. After chapter 10, those who are marked are overwhelmingly marked negatively, with the mark of the beast—this

[9] In Revelation 9:4, the phrase is used similarly.

[10] Cf. Ezekiel 9:4 for a biblical example of sealing used as protection. Those who are marked with God's sign are also mentioned after the ingestion of the scroll in chapter 10 but the terminology of the 'seal' is not used in those examples (e.g., 14:1; 22:4).

[11] For example, Rev. 13:16–17: '...it causes all … to be marked … so that no one can buy or sell unless he has the mark, that is the name of the beast or the number of its name'; 14:9: 'If any one worships the beast and its image, and receives a mark on his forehead or on his hand, he also shall drink the wine of God's wrath, poured unmixed into the cup of his anger…'; 16:2: 'So the first angel went and poured his bowl on the earth, and foul and evil sores came upon the men who bore the mark of the beast and worshipped its image'. Perhaps the inversion of tastes that John experiences in 10:10, when the flavour of the scroll changes from sweet to bitter, is paralleled in the inversion of focus from the positive/sealed people to the negative/marked.

symbol only occurs after the little scroll turns John's stomach 'bitter' (Smith 1994: 388).

Thus, the scroll John is shown in chapter 5 certainly provides him with visions as the seals are opened; however, it is only when John consumes the open scroll in chapter 10 that its contents are revealed. In eating the scroll, John literally internalizes its contents, which he can then visualize for his readers. The scroll with the seven seals is rendered open but still incomprehensible until John consumes it.[12] Investigating how the scroll in Revelation 5 is used in the text to yield information makes it clear that the scroll in Revelation 10 works in a different way, not because it is a heavenly scroll, since the scroll in Revelation 5 is also from heaven, but because the scroll in Revelation 10 is consumed. That is, it is the act of ingesting the heavenly substance that allows it to operate in this special way. Hierophagy is not simply the reception of divine materials, but is the incorporation of them into the recipient in a way that simply viewing a scroll's contents does not accomplish.

Sensory Imagery in Revelation

John's use of sensory rhetoric in chapter 10 participates in the somatic imagery used in the text as a whole. The apocalypse is replete, in almost every line, with imagery that evokes a sensory response, from thunderous angelic voices to dazzling visions of heavenly beings, to the painful woes visited on the people of earth by God. The poetics of John's visual and auditory experiences include the consistent use of verbs of seeing and hearing, which

[12] The chain of possession of the scroll, from heaven to Jesus to angel to John, may reflect the same chain of command articulated in Rev. 1:1: 'The revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave him to show his servants what must soon take place. He made it known by sending his angel to his servant John…'—i.e. God → Jesus → angel → John.

several scholars have observed (e.g., Korner 2000). The use of verbs of seeing therefore punctuates the overall vision narrative in a way that creates episodic units of divine experience. Auditory episodes are sometimes attached to the visual marker 'and I saw', such as a divine pronouncement (6:1–4) or the sounding of a trumpet (e.g., 9:1). Studies on visions in apocalypses are right to focus on this important trope in divine-human communication, but have neglected to analyse the rhetorical force of sensory imagery, including visions, on an audience. The somatic language used throughout Revelation, and in particular, I argue, the key scene where John ingests the scroll, exploits cultural knowledge of sensory experience in order to promote the authority of John's message.

Examining chapter 10's scroll scene from a sensory perspective is in line with how Revelation expresses meaning, since rich sensory language is used throughout the apocalypse. For instance, the one who sits on the throne in Revelation 4:2 is described as having 'the appearance of jasper and carnelian', and the throne as encircled by a rainbow that looks like an emerald. Emerging from around the throne are 'flashes of lightning, and voices and peals of thunder, and before the throne burn seven torches of fire, which are the seven spirits of God'. This opening scene represents just one of many examples of the overwhelming descriptive use of heat, light, noise and other sensory elements. Persistent use of the colour white occurs in numerous places in the apocalypse. At times the sun, moon, and stars are made dark, and at one point even the sky itself is rolled away (6:11–14). In terms of auditory imagery, John often includes angelic or other voices calling out or singing. Singing is particularly prominent. The living creatures that surround the throne of God continually singing praise (4:8), and a thunderous multitude of angels sings while surrounding the throne (5:12), who are joined by every creature in heaven and on earth and

on the sea. The noise created by such a chorus is palpable. The language of revelation experienced by John through sight and hearing is surrounded, however, by countless other instances of bodily and sensory imagery. Earthquakes, incense, and broken bodies permeate the text.

Revelation 8 is particularly rich in its use of this kind of rhetoric. The opening of the seventh seal first yields silence. But soon the episode is crowded with sensory language. Seven angels are given trumpets, and another angel takes a censer of incense to the altar. We read how the smoke of the incense rises up, along with prayers, to God. When the angel takes his censer and fills it with fire from the altar, and throws it down onto the earth, there are lightning, voices, thunder, and an earthquake. The array of smells, sounds, visions, and even the bodily sensation of being shaken by the earthquake creates an overwhelming sensory cacophony, juxtaposed with the silence with which the scene commences. The author uses this rhetorical language to lend force to his argument; he uses the body not only to create the sensation of reality to his audience, but also to legitimate his account of God's message, as I will demonstrate in the next section.

Analysis: Revelation 10:8–10

At the start of chapter 10, the seer, John, witnesses the descent of 'another mighty angel' (ἄλλον ἄγγελον ἰσχυρὸν) from heaven. The angel is enveloped in cloud and surrounded by elements of radiant light, including a rainbow over his head, a face like the sun, and legs like pillars of fire. The visual language used to describe the angel make it clear that the angel is associated directly with the divine realm, and when compared with Ezekiel, the

angel's role in revelation emphasizes the transcendence of the event, which must be mediated first by the angel (Gradl 2014: 317) and then by the ingestion of the scroll.[13]

This angel holds a little scroll (βιβλαρίδιον) in his hand, which, unlike the sealed scroll in 5:1, is open. This angel stands in a way that bridges three cosmological-geographical zones: his right foot is on the sea, his left foot is on the land, and his right hand is lifted up to heaven (10:2, 5). A voice from heaven tells John to take the scroll (here βιβλίον) from the hand of the angel; when the seer obeys, the angel tells him to eat the scroll (βιβλαρίδιον again) and warns that even though it will taste sweet, it will be bitter in his stomach (10:9). This warning is borne out in the following verse. John then receives the commission to prophesy 'again' against/about[14] 'many peoples and nations and tongues and kings'.

Commentators on this short episode have generally read the consumption of the scroll symbolically and metaphorically while recognizing the importance of the event in the context of the vision narrative (e.g., Collins 1976: 20; Roloff 1993: 126; Beale 1999: 550–51; Gradl 2014: 318).[15] This much is clear from the text: John receives the scroll from an angelic being, one whose presence crosses earthly and heavenly boundaries and, as such, represents a bridge by which God-to-mortal communication can take place directly. However illuminating previous scholarship has been in terms of the symbolism of the book vis-a-vis the role of the prophet and the content of John's prophecy, re-examining Rev. 10

[13] The angel's might links him to other angels described as ἰσχυρόν in 5:2 and 18:21.
[14] ἐπί with the dative can be translated either as 'about' or 'against' (Aune 1997: 573–74).
[15] Gradl writes that eating the scroll anchors this vision sequence (2014: 315) and highlights the importance of eating the scroll (rather than simply receiving it) by pointing out the chiastic structure of the event (2014: 317): the angel begins by mentioning the stomach and then the sweet taste, pointing towards eating (10:9), and once John eats, he inverts the order, noticing the taste in his mouth and then the sensation in his belly (10:10).

through the lens of hierophagy explains how and why the consumption of something heavenly might express such an idea. This approach illuminates certain features that make clear how Revelation uses this trope to its own ends. I have defined hierophagy as a type of performative eating in which a being from a more elevated cosmic category feeds otherworldly food to a being of a lower category; the act of eating associates the eater with the other realm—in John's case, the heavenly realm. Hierophagy brings about certain changes in the eater, especially, and, most prominently for Revelation, the direct transmission of divine knowledge to the eater.

Otherworldly Food

The significance of hierophagy hinges on the porous-but-present boundary between worlds in the cultural expectation of the ancient Mediterranean cultures. A culturally-understood division between human and divine food can be observed in the ways in which human beings prepared for contact with the divine. In fasting, for example, humans separate themselves from ordinary life, creating space for the divine realm to punctuate the earthly realm (Dozeman 1989: 34; Schulzbach 2010: 183–84).[16] Hierophagy, however, involves eating food from heaven. Consuming heavenly food yields different results than abstaining from human food, and in a literary context, the eating of food from a different realm is depicted as dangerous, but also efficacious in permeating the boundary between worlds.

Consuming the food of a different realm breaches the boundaries between worlds, and in doing so creates anxiety. This anxiety is evident, for example, when angels disguised

[16] Cultic systems also display anxiety about what food belongs to the gods and what to the mortals who make the offerings.

as mortals are faced with the prospect of eating human food. In *Testament of Abraham*, the angel Michael visits Abraham to give him the news of his impending death. As a thoughtful host, Abraham presents the angel with a table of food for the two to share, upon which Michael returns to heaven to ask God for advice. Michael argues, 'Lord, all the heavenly spirits are incorporeal, and they neither drink nor eat, and he has set a table with an abundance of good things that are earthly and corruptible' (*Test. Abr.* 4). Michael is incapable or unwilling to eat the same food as Abraham—it is corruptible, just as Abraham is susceptible to the death that Michael is about to pronounce upon him. This division between heavenly and mortal creatures seems to be articulated in what each category of beings consumes. This division between heavenly and earthly realms helps to explain the role of the ingested scroll in Revelation 10. In consuming the scroll, John, a mere mortal, is partaking of heavenly food, and in doing so crosses the boundary between heaven and earth. There are two other literary texts that make use of the trope of hierophagy that illuminate the significance of hierophagy for understanding the ramifications of the scroll's ingestion in Revelation. While Ezekiel is in direct literary relationship with Revelation, and can in that way demonstrate the implications of the alterations that Revelation has made to Ezekiel's pattern of ingestion, *4 Ezra* instead shares a cultural understanding of the implications of ingesting heavenly food, and therefore illustrates how pervasive character of this motif.

The first example is found in Ezekiel. There is no doubt that Ezekiel 2:8–3:4 is reflected in Revelation 10:8–10; most, if not all, scholars who have written on the scroll in

Revelation 10 have made the connection between the two scenes of scroll ingestion.[17] The passage in Ezekiel has striking similarities with our passage in Revelation. At the start of a vision, Ezekiel hears a voice that tells him,

> 'open your mouth, and eat what I give you'. And when I looked, behold, a hand was stretched out to me, and, lo, a written scroll was in it; and he spread it before me; and it had writing on the front and on the back, and there were written on it words of lamentation and mourning and woe. And he said to me, 'Son of man, eat what is offered to you; eat this scroll, and go, speak to the house of Israel'. So I opened my mouth, and he gave me the scroll to eat. And he said to me, 'Son of man, eat this scroll that I give you and fill your stomach with it'. Then I ate it; and it was in my mouth as sweet as honey. And he said to me, 'Son of man, go, get you to the house of Israel, and speak with my words to them' (Ezekiel 2:8–3:4).

Several commonalities between Ezekiel and Revelation are immediately visible; most obvious is the fact that both figures consume scrolls handed down from heaven. Ezekiel also receives a prophetic commission to 'go… and speak with my words to [the house of Israel]', which is echoed by John having to prophesy 'again' in Rev. 10:11. In the case of Ezekiel, it is clear that the hierophagic pattern of ingestion is followed: a heavenly item is given to a special mortal to consume. By consuming the scroll, the eater gains new abilities (to prophesy, or in the case of John, to prophesy again) and new knowledge (the contents of that prophecy). However, although Ezekiel is clearly reflected in structure and theme in Revelation's scroll event, it is not the only relevant hierophagic parallel for interpreting Rev. 10:8–10.

4 Ezra, an apocalypse of Revelation's era, offers a second comparator that also uses the hierophagic motif. Towards the end of the book, after Ezra has received six revelations from God in both auditory and visual forms, he experiences one final revelation through

[17] E.g., Collins 1976: 20; Aune 1997: 558; Beale 1999: 550–53; Koester 2014: 482.

taste. In his previous revelatory episodes, Ezra has had difficulty comprehending what he has been told or shown and needs interpretation through his angelic mediator (Reynolds 2013). In this final example, however, Ezra receives the revelation directly from God, and through the tasting the heavenly food, is granted understanding since he has at last literally internalised God's message.

> A voice called me, saying, 'Ezra, open your mouth and drink what I give you to drink'. Then I opened my mouth and behold, a full cup was offered to me; it was full of something like water, but its colour was like fire. And I took it and drank; and when I had drunk it, my heart poured forth understanding, and wisdom increased in my breast, for my spirit retained its memory; and my mouth was opened, and was no longer closed (*4 Ezra* 14:38–41).

After drinking the fiery liquid, Ezra is able to dictate to his five scribes the contents of ninety-four books—24 being the Jewish scripture in some formation, and the rest to be kept for only the Wise to read. Ezra's cup has enabled him fully to access the divine realm. Like John, he is now able to transmit the divine content of that revelation, in Ezra's case, as books (Warren 2015). This second example highlights some core elements and effects of hierophagy through an analysis of its differences with Revelation and Ezekiel. Internalising the cup's fiery liquid effects similar consequences to John's, and Ezekiel's, scroll. The core event of hierophagy is clearly visible when this text is added as a comparator.

On the basis of these texts, we can discern a pattern that helps in understanding Revelation's scroll scene. By consuming the scroll, John gains new abilities (to prophesy again) and new knowledge (the contents of that prophecy). The core event of the hierophagic eating in Revelation can be outlined as follows: 1) a heavenly being offers 2) something heavenly 3) for a mortal 4) to eat 5) which brings about the internalization of divine revelation 6) which is later made accessible to non-eaters in a different form.

Hierophagy in Revelation 10:8–10

Revelation both participates in and innovates on the core template of hierophagic eating. John's consumption of the scroll not only builds upon a similar scroll event in Ezekiel, but also participates in the wider literary milieu that includes texts like *4 Ezra*, where the trope is used to express the same kind of meaning. For this reason, the full ramifications of this type of eating emerge when this passage is examined in the context of the wider ancient Mediterranean. This kind of examination requires asking *why* eating is used in this way—what does taste accomplish that vision cannot? For the answer, I turn now to an analysis of the sense of taste.

Revelation makes use of earlier and contemporary narrative events of heavenly ingestion, but at the same time it transforms them in describing the scroll in Revelation 10 as both sweet and bitter.[18] A sensory approach therefore illuminates how the scroll event functions. Other scholars have understood the scroll and its flavours simply as metaphors pointing to the tone of the revelation John reveals (Aune 1997: 572-73; Holwerda 1999: 154-55; Beale 1999: 550–51; Koester 2014: 482-83) or of the seer's personal experience performing the responsibilities of prophecy (Giesen 1997: 237; Gradl 2014: 321), but I propose that the flavours evoke the efficacy of his message. There are two components of this analysis: first is the fact that the intimacy of the sense of taste has ramifications for creating bonds between those who share tastes with the divine realm; second is the cultural expectations around sweet and bitter foods.

[18] Beale (1999: 552) does not consider the bitter taste to be an addition to Revelation in comparing it to Ezekiel since he sees the bitterness in Ezek. 3:14 as connected to the earlier ingestion of the scroll.

The intersection of ingestion and taste has implications for how the sense of taste signifies and effects community formation (Korsmeyer 2002: 187). Sharing tastes with other eaters creates a bond between them. The important role of communal tasting and ingestion in community formation in ancient communities is well established; Dennis Smith goes so far as to declare that 'the idea that sharing a meal together creates a sense of social bonding appears to be a universal symbol' (Smith 2003: 14).[19] Meals were shared among members of a group that was already established, for example a family or a guild, but it could also create new associations among co-eaters. Ancient writers, like modern scholars, were conscious of how meals established and reinforced community. Plutarch considers the common meal a place where friendship is forged: 'A guest comes to share not only meat, wine, and dessert, but conversation, fun, and the amiability that leads to friendship' (*Table Talk*, 660b). Sharing a meal forges relationships among diners. Paul likewise recognises this quality of sharing food. As he explains to the Corinthians, 'because there is one bread, we who are many are one body, for we all partake of the one bread' (1 Cor. 10:17). Paul also believes that a bond can be created not only between people but also between divine forces and those who share ritually marked food. He famously warns the Corinthians that they might find themselves 'partners with demons' (1 Cor. 10:20) if they share in food offered to Roman gods. In ingesting food, the eater brings into him or herself the qualities imbued in the food, including the social (or ontological) stratification implied in the meal, the culturally loaded symbolism of the food itself, and the memory of previous meals consumed in similar or different ways (Douglas 1972; Farb and Armelagos 1980: 4;

[19] It is not just sharing food at the same table which produces this community, but also *sharing tastes with a community even at a great distance* (Lalonde 1992).

Kilgour 1990; Weichart and van Eeuwijk 2007: 3). In other words, even though the angel in Revelation does not share John's scroll meal, the fact that John consumes the heavenly item means that some aspect of the heavenly realm is made internal to John; he thereby associates himself with that divine community of eaters even when they do not share that specific meal. The special status granted to the eater does not make him or her a deity, but it does grant special access to the divine realm, access which is out of reach for ordinary mortals.

The intimacy of the sense of taste, compared with other senses (Korsmeyer 2002), plays a role in the bonding function of heavenly ingestion. The sense-object is internalised by the eater when it is tasted; as such, interacting with the divine realm through taste is more profound than auditory discourse or visual interactions with a heavenly being.[20] The eater of heavenly food is therefore closely associated with the origin world of the consumed item. While visions and auditory revelations might be equally viewed by others nearby, taste is experienced privately; in this way, the divine is experienced most intimately. It may be for this reason that apocalyptic texts tend to include hierophagic events more frequently compared with texts outside of the genre; a certain intimacy with the divine facilitates the acquisition of specialised, hidden, privileged knowledge. In Revelation 10 John of Patmos internalises the open scroll; its contents are thereby rendered inaccessible to every other being. Only John, then, is in possession of both the contents of God's message and of the ability necessary to 'prophesy again'. In consuming the scroll, John is uniquely situated as the mouthpiece of the divine realm, since its ingestion has given him access to God in a way that no other human in Revelation has.

[20] Indeed, Gradl hints at this personal link symbolised by the eating of the scroll (Gradl 2014: 318).

Given that taste plays such a role in John's experience with the divine, the specific flavour of the scroll is significant. John experiences the scroll as bitter when it leaves his mouth and enters his stomach even though it was sweet, like Ezekiel's, at first. This sweet taste operates as a symbol by which the eater interprets his experience.[21] That divine food tastes sweet is a prominent trope in ancient literature, for example, nectar and ambrosia. In the Septuagint, *Wisdom of Solomon* describes the manna, food from heaven, as ἀμβροσίας τροφῆς (19:21), and *History of the Rechabites* (7:2; 11:4; 12:5) recounts how the inhabitants of the Isles of the Blessed consume water that comes from the ground tasting like honey, i.e. nectar. God's words are described as sweet, as is wisdom, throughout the Psalms and Proverbs (e.g., Pss 19:10; 119:103; Prov. 16:24; 24:13–14).

Whereas Ezekiel's taste experience is unambiguously sweet, John of Patmos is forced to reinterpret his taste experience with the scroll, whose sweetness turns bitter once ingested. Most scholars of Revelation interpret the tastes metaphorically, so that the sweetness corresponds to the salvation to be expected by the Christian community while the bitterness indicates the necessary suffering to be experienced in order for salvation to be accomplished.[22] However, I propose that the bitter taste, in light of contemporary medical knowledge, represents the efficacy of God's message in John's mouth. While it might seem odd to initiate a conversation between a literary apocalyptic text and a technical medical one, I do so not assuming that John had any medical training or that he had read such texts.

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[21] Sweetness is tasted by other participants in hierophagic events, such as Aseneth (*Joseph and Aseneth* 16.15-16), Persephone (*Homeric Hymn to Demeter* 360–69); Ovid, *Metamorphoses* 5.534-37, and Perpetua (*The Martyrdom of Perpetua and Felicitas* 4.8–10).

[22] Koester (2014: 482) provides three alternative interpretations of the use of sweetness in Revelation. The one to which he subscribes proposes that the sweetness corresponds to the salvation to be expected by the Christian community while the bitterness indicates the necessary suffering to be experienced in order for salvation to be accomplished (2014: 483).

Rather, I understand these texts as preserving, in a different genre, their culture's assumptions about senses and specifically about taste. Medical texts from antiquity are clear that bad-tasting remedies are more effective in delivering cures (Totelin 2017), and more informal texts, such as letters, confirm that this was also an understanding held by those outside the medical community.[23] This excerpt from a letter supposedly sent from Emperor Julian the Apostate (but likely falsely attributed)[24] indeed suggests that bitterness is inherent in medicinal substances:

> Indeed Hippocrates says that honey, though it is sweet to the taste, is quite bitter to the digestion, and I can believe this statement; for all agree that it produces bile and turns the juices to the very opposite of its original flavour, which face even more surely convicts it of being in its origin naturally bitter. For it would not change to this bitterness if in the beginning this quality had not belonged to it, from which it changed the reverse. (Pseudo-Julian, *Epistle 24*).

Honey, according to this text, tastes sweet, but it must be inherently bitter. This reaffirms the earlier understanding of honey, preserved by the first-century CE physician and botanist Dioscorides, who believes that honey's 'properties are purgative, opening, stimulating of the humours, and for that reason it is helpful to rinse for dirty wounds and ulcers' (*Mat. Med.* 2.82.1). Julian and Dioscorides know this because honey is very effective medicine and because the most effective medicine is bitter in flavour; therefore, honey must actually be bitter to digest. This logic lays bare the reasoning behind the sensory imagery in Revelation. In other words, the bitter taste that John experiences marks this hierophagic experience as the most effective, even over that of Ezekiel, who only experiences the

[23] It is worth noting that the leaves from the Tree of Life in Rev. 22:2 are to be used for healing, although whether the abundant fruit that the tree produces is to be consumed is unclear.

[24] This letter might instead be the work of the early fourth-century CE orator Julian of Caesarea (Sharples 1995: 143–44).

sweetness of divine interaction. John's charge to prophesy again therefore carries authority through this sensory description.

Conclusions

Hierophagy, I argue, is the rhetorical mechanism by which John expresses the divine origins of the message that the angel gives to the seer. As such, examining Revelation 10:8–10 in the context of hierophagy illustrates how this text fits within the framework of this category of culturally understood narrative consumption; this study of Revelation, however, also showcases an important aspect of how hierophagy functions, which is through taste. The widespread use of this trope, not only in apocalyptic texts such as Revelation, but across multiple genres in antiquity also illustrates the importance of carrying out this kind of analysis on other texts that include this type of sensory experience. Examining the trope of hierophagy allows us to understand more fully how ancients thought about interactions between human beings and the divine realm, and, specifically, how taste is used in narrative to mediate or breach the boundary between these two realms. Further, hierophagy highlights the importance of analysing taste as a means of internalizing and absorbing knowledge. The prevalence of this mechanism of gaining divine knowledge in ancient texts indicates that hierophagy played a role in how ancients thought about their relationship to divine realms.

Revelation makes use of the literary trope of hierophagy to express how John gains access to the divine realm and shares an intimate relationship with the divine—in this way, the text legitimates the divine origins and contents of the revelations that John has written down in the Book of Revelation. The ingestion of the scroll participates in a culturally

understood way of interacting with the divine realm, one which grants the eater both direct transmission of divine knowledge and also the means of transmitting the knowledge to a community. The revelation that John puts into words, and indeed, puts into visions, is identifiable as the contents of the open scroll that he consumes. The message of God has changed form, from being edible to being visible, and from visible to audible in the form of the text of Revelation. John first ingests the scroll, and then visualises its contents, the rest of Revelation. He likewise writes down what he sees and transmits this to his audience. This change of form—from edible to readable—is significant.

John shares his intimate access to the divine when he transforms his taste experience into the visions that make up Revelation. The fact that Revelation is written to 'the seven assemblies' confirms that the contents of the book (i.e. John's revelatory experiences) are to be shared with an audience. But John alone experiences God's message directly. When he consumes the scroll it allows him to ingest, digest, and internalise the divine revelation; that he is asked to prophesy 'again' indicates that the rest of the book, with its specific details about the timeline for the end times, emerges from the consumption of the little scroll (Koester 2014: 483).

John's ingestion of the scroll signifies his special access to the divine realm in a way that his audience cannot participate in directly, although they understand its rhetorical force. They are put at arm's length from God, and access God's revelation through John, their mediator, just as John has accessed God's revelation through the mediator of the angel who feeds him the little scroll. That the content of John's revelation is the result of hierophagy, that it has been imparted from the divine realm and internalised by John, lends authority to its message. Examining this scroll event as hierophagy demonstrates how

John's ability to understand and communicate the divine message is closely tied to his ingestion of heavenly food.

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