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Looking at the *Shepherd of Hermas* through the experience of lived religion

Abstract: This essay examines the first four visions in the *Book of Visions* found in the early Christian work known as the *Shepherd of Hermas* wherein Hermas reports having had a visionary experience happen to him. These are highly mediated and thoroughly edited literary reports that draw upon the emotional contours of foundational narratives and myths. Despite their highly constructed elements, literary features of the visionary reports can nevertheless give some insight into how flesh and blood readers may have experienced the reading or hearing of these texts. With the help of the integrative approaches associated with the cognitive literary theory, this essay considers how the process of imagining the scenes in the *Book of Visions* participates in the formation of the self.

1 Introduction

Modern scholars rely heavily on texts when investigating religion (Geertz 2000, 49–73, esp. 70–71). The tendency can be to assume that texts were the only voices and conduits for cultural exchange in the ancient world and to forget that there were other non-textualized performative mechanisms by which individuals were formed and transformed. Scholarly assumptions about texts often impute characteristics about people and families onto manuscripts, reflecting sensibilities about lineage and purity that befit the bourgeois class-consciousness of text criticism's origins. The point has already been made by scholars of the “New Philology” that scholars typically seek to find a pure lineage by establishing the paternity of a textual tradition from one manuscript generation to the next (Nichols 1990, 1–10; Cerquiglini 1989). While our experience of ancient texts is often mediated through bound critical editions, we do well not to imagine texts with characteristics of people, but rather to imagine how texts were experienced and performed by people – what kind of affective response was had by the way a text was written? What kind of sensory perceptions influenced how a text was experienced when it was read or heard? How did the physical apparatus of a scroll or a codex influence how a text might be experienced (Harkins 2012)? More and more scholars have sought to expand how we understand the embodied experience of texts by introducing integrative bio-cultural approaches associated with the broad study of religion both past and present (Geertz 2010).

This reorientation to the past asks how texts were experienced in the body by the ancient reader and hearer. It is an investigation of the complexities of individual experiences – complexities that we know are a part of life as lived.¹ Attention to the body and embodied experiences of the individual highlight how comfortable scholars have become with assumptions about community/communities in antiquity that simply lack complexity (Stowers 2011; Rüpke 2016), as if groups in the past were like a stick of butter, solid and consistent all the way through, no matter how you slice it. The recent turn to the self and individual experiences recognizes that the ancient self was not pre-determined to conform to the large systematic ritual experiences often constructed by scholars. It goes without saying that reading texts may cultivate predispositions, but it does not pre-determine any individual to have any single particular experience.

The early Christian text known as the *Shepherd of Hermas* written in the first-person voice, offers an especially rich way of examining how visionary texts might expand how scholars imagine the role that texts played in the cultivation of individual experiences of religious phenomena in antiquity. The narrator recounts a series of five Visions, twelve Mandates, and ten Similitudes, all of which amount to a lengthy and complex text that is surely the result of a long process of growth.² Here I will treat only the first section known as the Book of Visions, focusing especially on the first four Visions, which scholars believe to constitute the oldest portion of the book (Osiek 1999, 10). These can be set apart from the fifth Vision, which is understood to be an introduction to the remainder of the book. The first four Visions are distinguished from the rest of the work by the presence of the Lady and explicit reference to the name of the protagonist Hermas. These opening Visions convey many details about Hermas, who is never named in the remainder of the work. In this section, there is a total absence of the Shepherd, the figure by which the work was known in antiquity. He is introduced to the reader only at the beginning of the fifth Vision, when he appears to Hermas as he lay in bed (Vis. v.1). Furthermore, from the fifth Vision onward, the Lady and the name of Hermas never appear again.

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¹ The shift to the individual and to the phenomenological experiences of the body which has happened steadily in the social sciences during the last 40 years, has emerged more recently in the study of religion through approaches like feminist studies and material studies of religion. These changes in the social sciences in the last thirty years are described well by Desjarlais and Throop 2011, 87–102.

² The three sections of the *Shepherd of Hermas* differ markedly in vocabulary and tone, thus leading some scholars to assume multiple authorship. See Coleborne 1970, 65–70; many scholars today consider the possibility that this work is the product of a single author with complex layers of redaction, Henne 1992; Young 1994, 237–255; Osiek 1999, 13–15; Maier 1991, 56.

According to Jörg Rüpke, “Hermas’ text(s) aim(s) at the practice of fashioning the self” (2013, 51). This study engages the question of how this is done. We will look at the literary style and cognitive processes involved in reading and consider how they contribute to the formation of the self and experiences of transformation. The question of the self and identity construction is especially relevant for the opening Book of Visions which has a strong moralizing tone which indicates that the work sought to make a lasting impact on its readers. We will take a special interest in the ways that late Second Temple Jewish visionary and apocalyptic traditions may have influenced the religious imaginal world that stands behind this early Christian text.³ With the help of the integrative approaches associated with the cognitive science of religion, this study aims to investigate how the process of reading a text like the *Shepherd of Hermas* may be understood to participate in the formation and transformation of its readers and hearers (Batovici 2015; Tagliabue 2017).

2 Experiencing the world of the *Shepherd of Hermas* through Hermas

The *Shepherd of Hermas* is dated to sometime in the 2nd century CE largely based on a reference to it in the Muratorian Canon which expressly forbids its use in liturgy, but which permitted the private reading of the book (Osiek 1999, 6). The book was read by Christians during the first few centuries of the Church and was well-known during this time. While ritual is often the desired context for investigating questions of experiencing and transformation, the contemplative practice of reading and hearing texts written in the first-person voice can be a fruitful way of thinking about how religious practices worked to form and transform the ancient self. The earliest manuscript of this book has markings for oral reading, thus requiring that we also expand our focus beyond the activity of reading to the experience of listening.⁴ While the activity of reading or hearing is often imagined passively today, they have the capacity to be deeply embodied experiences in which various sensorimotor areas of the mind are engaged (Kuzmičová 2012). Performative elements and the embodied experiencing of narrative can be

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3 On the use of Second Temple traditions see Snyder 1968, 8–9; Joly 1958; 1968, 47; Verheyden 2007, 69–70.

4 The oldest text of the *Shepherd of Hermas* is “written on the back of a local government register from the Fayûm, probably a copy made locally for the church in Arsinoe, the capital of the Fayûm; it has been specially marked for reading aloud”, Roberts 1970, 62.

examined through emotions and other ways in which we understand reading to happen cognitively and imaginatively.

Our study of the *Shepherd of Hermas* will rely on integrative studies of how mental imagery takes place at the cognitive level from practices of reading and or hearing – what cognitive literary theorists refer to as “enactive reading” (Kuzmičová 2014; 2016; Speer et al. 2009). Immersive experiences of reading are also greatly assisted by the first-person voice or language about the body (Kuzmičová 2012, 25; Gillmayr-Bucher 2004), which can allow the text to be experienced as an affective script as a reader takes on the point of view of the protagonist (Harkins 2012). Arresting narrative scenes such as the opening image of Hermas helping a beautiful woman emerge from the Tiber are recognizable ones that function as an experiential frame that allows for the reconstruction of memories of similar affect, either from the reader’s own personal experience or recalled from other texts (Barsalou 2005; Boyer 2009; Lee 2009; Schacter 2007). All of this allows the Book of Visions to be perceived more vividly and personally by the reader.

A second way in which we will consider the experiences of the reader is called “enactive perception.” Aldo Tagliabue describes “enactive perception” as a way of perceiving “as the world makes itself available to the perceiver through his physical movement and interaction with a given object in a precise environment. In other words, the perception of any object is made possible if one gets close to and moves around it” (Tagliabue 2016, 214). In such instances, the reader is guided by the descriptions of visual perception and physical locomotion that dominate visionary texts, all of which contribute to achieving a cumulative embodied experience. One does not simply perceive a vision with the eyes, but, just as in lived experience, one moves closer to inspect the object that is being viewed or moves around the object to get a better look. Visionary texts’ emphasis on visual experiences come along with other wide-ranging details about the body’s comprehensive experiences of physical perception, including senses, such as sound, touch, smell, taste, or movement toward, around, or away.⁵ Both enactive reading and enactive perception speak to the ways that referential descriptions of bodily experiences within a literary context can be accessed with varying degrees of vividness by a reader’s or hearer’s cognitive processes in ways that imitate the lived experiences of the body.

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5 Tagliabue 2016, 214. The visual perception is enhanced by the convergence of other bodily senses in the narrated experience, an important one being that of motion. For a description of the enactive mental imaging of a scene, see the detailed description of breakfast in Hemmingway’s novel the *Garden of Eden* in which a wide range of sensory imagery achieves the state of experiencing the breakfast (taste, smell, touch, movement), Kuzmičová 2016, 223.

Our study is not a diagnostic inquiry into any specific individual's experience – something which could not be recovered. Instead, it is a consideration of lived experience of religion that does not presume that ritual and ceremonial practices are the sole mechanism by which spiritual and religious experiences were generated. Integrative approaches that consider the embodied experience of the individual engaged in practices that are not strictly ceremonial, such as enactive reading and perception, offer a potentially rich way to conceptualize how traditions moved from region to region, from the past to the future, between individuals and groups in larger social networks (Eidinow 2011). The performative practice of enactive reading could be imagined as an effective means by which texts participated in a social mechanism for the formation of identity. This means that the narratives that are instrumental in shaping and forming the self are compelling because their literary style is persuasive in drawing in the reader and hearer – not because they are “historical” (Todd 2013; Johnston 2016). While the *Shepherd of Hermas* may be only loosely tethered to a named historical figure from the 2nd century, the vividness of his visions and the first-person perspective allow readers to gain entry to these experiences. Our attention will be to the details and the various rhetorical and compositional techniques of these Visions which amount to an effective means by which an ancient reader and hearer might access the experiences that are described. Consideration of embodied experiences of texts, both enactive reading and enactive perception, can offer a way of supplementing modern imaginations about how people reconstituted foundational narrative experiences in ways that allowed for their possible access to a heavily constructed narrative world.

2.1 Enactive reading: an arresting narrative frame

The vividness and concreteness of visionary texts can be understood to have a notably strong effect on the readers and hearers of these writings because the literary style assists in drawing the reader into the text and heightening the possibility of an emotional response. Enactive reading offers a model for understanding how reading could be experienced in the body. Our own metaphors for reading speak to the highly embodied way in which we imagine the process (e.g. “devouring” a book; being “absorbed” or “consumed” by a novel). Cognitive science of religion can help us to understand how embodied practices of reading and visualization can generate experiences that resemble the immediacy of first-hand perception.

The activity of reading and the mental imaging that takes place is also a generative process whereby a sensory representation is produced in a malleable way within the individual mind, a process that is guided by the scripted emotions

and scenes in the narrative. The resulting experiential frame could then be updated or changed as a reader merges or blends details from other remembered traditions or his or her own personal experiences, thus allowing for a deeper intensification of the experience (Barsalou et al. 2005). Even if natural variation in sensory experiences which can be expected over any given population is allowed, embodied engagement of a text is generally recognized to involve the sensory and motor faculties of the brain. “Enactive reading” is a way of referring to the cognitive processes by which texts can be experienced with the perceptions of sensorimotor movement (Kuzmičová 2012, 2014; Starr 2013; Esrock 1994). When we read texts about figures who are engaged kinesthetically, our minds “also imagine the sensations of movement for ourselves – what it would be like *if we actually were to do what we are thinking*. Instead of using solely or primarily parts of the brain that correspond to vision and imagined vision, we use areas normally employed in planning our own movements” (italics original; Starr 2013, 82). References to the body and its experiences can give strong cues for how a reader should respond to a text, especially a text presented in the first-person voice (e.g. Gillmayr-Bucher 2004).

Since individuals seldom had private copies of texts in the early Christian period, the hearing of texts would have allowed for greater movement of the eyes, a scenario in which the physical space could serve to intensify the process of mental imaging thus strengthening an individual’s emotional response (Connelly 2011, 314; Stökl Ben Ezra 2014). The role that the physical environment plays during reading is thought to contribute to a stronger emotional response within the listener (Kuzmičová 2016). The naturally associative aspects of emotion can also allow a hearer to actualize a text by allowing him/her the opportunity to reinvigorate memories of similar emotional experiences (Harkins 2012). It is this complicated embodied process by which we might imagine how actualization allows for the affective re-experiencing of foundational narratives with first hand intensity and the generative process of updating that narrative in light of changing circumstances.

The arresting scene that begins the book between Hermas and Rhoda calls to mind a common trope familiar in various tales from Jewish and Christian scriptures and also Roman literature: David spying on the beautiful wife of Uriah as she bathed (2 Sam 11:2); the lascivious elders spying on the beautiful and vulnerable Susanna as she washed in her private garden (*Susanna and the Elders*). Later pseudepigraphic works speak in great detail about the lust of the patriarch Reuben which was said to have been sparked when he saw his father’s concubine Bilhah bathing. While this detail is not preserved in the book of Genesis, which gives only a fleeting mention of Reuben’s sexual relations with his father’s concubine Bilhah (Gen. 35:22; 49:4; 1 Chron. 5:1), an expanded tale of Reuben’s

voyeuristic watching of the bathing Bilhah comes to be attached to several Second Temple texts like the *Book of Jubilees* (*Jub.*) 33:15 and the *Testament of Reuben* (*T. Reu.*) 3:10–15.⁶ It is these retellings of Reuben and Bilhah that bear the most resemblance to the opening scene with Hermas and Rhoda because it too shares the narrative frame of a bathing woman who is being watched. The illicit detail that the man is related as a child of or subordinate-to-the-other serves to heighten the impropriety and scandal of the event.

While the expansions in the book of *Jub.* and the *T. Reu.* are often compared to one another, each gives a distinctly different understanding of the two parties who are involved (Rosen-Zvi 2006; Kugel 1995; Shinan and Zakovitch 1983). *Jubilees* goes to great lengths to exculpate Bilhah who cries out loudly as a raped woman is supposed to do according to the laws of Deuteronomy (22:24, 27). In this retelling, Bilhah responds to the violation in a manner similar to Tamar when she is raped by her half-brother Amnon in 2 Sam 13:12 (*Jub.* 33:4). In the case of Bilhah, however, her disclosure of the violation to Jacob is key, since he would not otherwise know of the offense since she was not a virgin. This differs from the case of Tamar, whose virginal state also made disclosure of the rape obligatory. *Jubilees* roundly presents Bilhah as acting with propriety and lays blame squarely on Reuben the aggressor.

The *T. Reu.* retells the story of Reuben and Bilhah differently from *Jub.* It is this pseudepigraphic tale that bears the strongest resemblance to the opening scene in the *Shepherd of Hermas*. It must be said that both stories have a clear moralizing tone admonishing the sexual act and condemning the very act of forbidden desire (*epithumia*) altogether. According to the *T. Reu.*, the responsibility for moral behavior lies with the man. Bilhah is presented in a completely passive way; she is incapacitated from drinking and sleeping naked in bed. Reuben comes to her bedroom when she is alone. These details are unique to the *T. Reu.* and also dramatically increase Reuben's responsibility, expressing the view that the burden of morality falls on the man. The pseudepigraphic

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⁶ The passage from the *T. Reu.* reads as follows: "For if I had not seen Bilhah bathing in a sheltered place, I would not have fallen into this great lawless act. For so absorbed were my senses by her naked femininity that I was not able to sleep until I had performed this revolting act. While our father, Jacob, had gone off to visit his father, Isaac, and we were at Gader near Ephratha in Bethlehem, Bilhah became drunk and was sound asleep, naked in her bedchamber. So when I came in and saw her nakedness, I performed the impious deed without her being aware of it. Leaving her sleeping soundly, I went out. And immediately a messenger from God revealed it to my father. He came and made lamentation over me, and never again touched her." (3:11–15); Kee trans. 1983, 1, 783. The *T. Reu.* (2nd c. BCE) resembles the account preserved in *Jub.* 33:2–9 but has significant differences. Both are dated to approximately the same period.

retelling aligns with a conceptualization of a “gender economy” which Ishay Rosen-Zvi describes as designating the male gender as the desirer and the female as a completely passive temptress (2006, 73–74). The instructive lesson gained from the Testament’s retelling of Reuben and Bilhah is one that is shared with the *Shepherd of Hermas*, namely that there is a dynamic interior struggle that takes place within the moral agent. According to the *Shepherd of Hermas*, the offense is the desire (*epithumia*) that arose in Hermas’ heart (Vis. 1.1.8). So too, the crime in the *T. Reu.* is desire (*epithumia*, 1:10), a sin that is born from “the spirit of seeing” (2:4; cf. 4:9); viz., seeing something that should not be seen. It is precisely this desire (*epithumia*), rooted in the act of seeing that is recounted later on in the *T. Reu.* when it describes the watchers, a class of angels who had looked at human women, saw their beauty (“goodness”) and were thus overcome by a desire for possession (*T. Reu.* 5:6; 6:4; also Gen 6:2). The consequences of this desire (*epithumia*) is the ill-fated birth of giants. It is here where the *T. Reu.* is most similar in its moral outlook with the *Shepherd of Hermas* because both understand illicit desire (*epithumia*) to be planted by the act of seeing and symptomatic of sin in general.

The consideration of the embodied cognitive processes involved in moving from text to experience can illuminate why compositional techniques in visionary texts reuse established literary elements (viz., imagery, vocabulary and scenarios) known from older narratives. Both Second Temple Jewish and early Christian texts reused known literary forms from scripture for their new compositions. *How* a text is told (e.g. its literary style, its first-person voice, its concreteness, its references to the body and its narrative pace, the way it reuses language and imagery from well-known highly-charged narratives), can exert considerable impact on a reader’s and hearer’s imagination, resulting in a deeper experiencing of that which is being described. These literary aspects of a text exert a greater force on a reader’s experience than whether or not the text reports events that modern readers would consider to be “historical” (Todd 2013). I make this point because scholars have long questioned our ability to discern the historicity of the speaker, Hermas, a fairly common name for this period. According to the 2nd-century Muratorian Canon, the work was described as a fairly recent writing by the brother of Pope Pius, a detail that ostensibly points to an historical author in the 2nd century (Muratorian Fragment II.77–78). It is thought by some that this is a gratuitous remark intended to impugn the work as one that stood clearly outside the apostolic period, and thus relegating it to a position of lesser authority than the other scriptures.

Even though the certain identification of the historical Hermas has been frustrated by the absence of information, the protagonist of the Book of Visions is described with complex personality traits that give his character vividness and

attribute to him the characteristics of life as lived. He expresses insecurity and worry, and he repeatedly agonizes over his state of sinfulness (e.g. Vis. I.2.1). We read about him openly expressing emotions of regret and weeping (Vis. I.2.2.). The initial scene of Hermas assisting the beautiful, much older – and naked – patroness Rhoda from the Tiber River by lending her a hand offers a scintillating image of doing something that could be potentially embarrassing or misunderstood. While the precise staging of the scene (assisting someone from bathing waters) may not be an all too common experience, the emotional coding of the scene calls to mind other situations of potentially embarrassing or inappropriate moments – episodes from lived experience that certainly everyone has had. Egocentric memories of past events are not recalled with precision – human minds are just not wired to have photographic memories. Even so, emotional memories of past events are long-lasting and can be rather accurate, calling to mind similar scenes from both personal experience or similarly related scenarios from the literary imagination (Boyer 2009, 20; Lee 2009). The arresting scene at the river bank which opens the *Book of Visions* effectively provides an experiential emotional frame for the reader to re-experience in the act of remembering (Barsalou 2005). It is in the emotional remembering of these scriptural and pseudepigraphic narratives, or if you will, the mimetic process, that individual experiencing takes place; this is when the egocentric remembering of personal memories could take place.

Regardless of whether scholars today can recover certain details about the historical figure of Hermas, ancient readers would have interacted with this text as it presents itself – namely as the first-person account of a series of revelatory experiences had by a Christian named Hermas. Most of the autobiographical details about Hermas found in these four Visions provide the gateway to the larger work. These referential details to Hermas' past, his first-person perspective, and his emotive responses help to give him the depth of a lived person, someone with whom readers can empathize. These Visions could be understood as arresting the attention of the readers and hearers, drawing them into the narrative world of the text. As anyone who has found themselves engrossed in a novel and desolate when it ends, whether or not any or all of the details found there are historical does not alter the emotional impact of the language and the rhetorical effect of that narrative on the reader. It is through Hermas' emotional and embodied experiences that readers and hearers gain entry to the world of the text.

According to Kuzmičová, enactive reading generates perceptions of phenomenal presence and relies on literary cues of first-person voice, spatial descriptions, and bodily movement (2014, 280). The scene that is described in the opening of the first Vision is one in which the reader is brought into the subjectivity of the protagonist, Hermas, through the use of the first-person voice. Compositional techniques that imitate scripture or redeploy scriptural language

and biblical forms can be understood to function purposefully in the generation of diverse expressions of religion during the Second Temple period. The Visions reuse Second Temple apocalyptic traditions.⁷ Features such as the pious self-diminishing practices that Hermas regularly takes part in prior to his visionary experiences are well-known visionary practices described in other late Second Temple apocalyptic texts (e.g. Daniel and 4 Ezra) (Merkur 1989). Prior to his dramatic encounters with the woman in the first Vision, Hermas is said to cross the river, kneel down, pray, and confess his sins (Vis. I.i.3). After his distressing exchange with this woman, Hermas, in a state of grief-filled agitation, begins to worry about the sins of desire (*epithumia*) that have been revealed to him (Vis. I.ii.1–2). He encounters the second woman, seated in a white chair, while distressed and in a weeping state of grief. In this second Vision, the Lady instructs him to copy a book. Prior to this moment, Hermas was engaged in similar behaviors: walking alone, thinking about the previous year's vision, kneeling down, praying to the LORD, and contemplating God's greatness and also his own sinful state (Vis. II.i.1–2; cf. Vis. III.i.4–5). In the second Vision, Hermas copies the book, but we also read that he is said to ruminate over the contents of the writing while fasting and praying for fifteen days (Vis. II.ii.1). In the third Vision, there are multiple encounters with the Lady. The third Vision begins with Hermas fasting for a long time and praying a great deal (Vis. III.i.2). His encounters with the Lady happen at night which could suggest either that he was engaged in sleep deprivation or that the vision resembled a dream experience.⁸

Rumination is the naturally occurring cognitive state, often associated with grief, in which the mind naturally mulls over and continually returns to an idea or thought. Martin and Tesser write that it is possible to define rumination generically as a reference “to several varieties of recurrent thinking, including making sense, problem solving, reminiscence, and anticipation” (1996, 192). The ritualized experience of grief can bring about a state of rumination and longing by which the mind naturally makes presence from absence. The self-

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7 Scholars have gone back and forth over whether to categorize the *Shepherd* as an apocalypse because it does not contain features such as an apocalyptic eschatology; however these genre expectations are etic categories imposed on the text. There are good reasons to recognize it as revelatory literature; for some of this debate, see Batovici 2015, 151–70; Collins 1979, 74.

8 The second Vision begins as a revelation that comes to Hermas in his sleep. He is asked who the old Lady who has appeared to him is, and he identifies her (incorrectly) as the Sybil. Both female figures are said to be of old age, sitting, holding a book, and identified as revealing knowledge. The Sibyl was probably well known in Rome during this time; Osiek 1999, 58 nn. 2, 3.

diminishing practices which Hermas engages in (viz. weeping, praying, confessing sins, kneeling) highlight the highly ritualized and performative dimension of grief in the ancient world, it was not solely an outpouring of interior anguish (Harkins 2017, 2016; Olyan 2004; Anderson 1991). The repetitive elements in the *Shepherd of Hermas* speak to ruminative practices and also suggest that similar ruminative experiences are intended to take place within the reader as well.

Writing that is intended to be read for communicating propositional content is generally more direct; but writing that is intended to evoke an emotional response in the reader is intentionally shaped by literary devices to slow down the pace of reading so that mental faculties of visualization and emotional response can take place (Miall and Kuiken 1994). When texts are written in imitation of older forms and employ a highly-stylized manner through alliteration, assonance, and other literary devices, or written in a deliberate structured format, the speed of reading is altered and slowed down creating the effect that Miall and Kuiken refer to as defamiliarization. For the Christian who reads or hears the visions, the familiar and arresting scenario of the protagonist and the bathing woman, the repetition of the penitential behaviors and emotional responses that Hermas gives, as well as the painstaking pace of the visionary scenes (viz. Vis. III) all allow for the intensification of attention, allowing the mind to generate a more vivid mental image of the text.

Hermas's dramatic and strong emotional responses to the visions and his own introspection of his moral state are openly displayed in his body through his posture (kneeling), his tears, and through the anguished voice of the reader. These embodied details could arouse similar responses within the individuals who read and hear the work,⁹ thereby providing them some access to a participatory re-experiencing of narrative events. Questions about the facticity of these foundational events, as they are described, are quickly overshadowed by the experience of the vividness of the imagery, the concreteness with which action is described, and the ruminative and multisensory experience of reading these texts. Hermas's behaviors are ritualized self-diminishing practices found in other Second Temple writings (viz. weeping, praying, confessing sins, kneeling). They are performative behaviors that generate emotional states that could be imagined concretely by the hearers and listeners of the text. These experiential aspects of the Visions offer a gateway for accessing foundational events in an embodied way, such that emotional engagement can take place in the mind of the reader and hearer.

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⁹ Although these effects are not pre-determined to happen.

If we return for a moment to the opening Vision when Hermas recounts his encounter with Rhoda, the woman who had raised him. Hermas describes his thoughts as he saw her bathing in the river Tiber. “When I saw her beauty I reflected in my heart and said: ‘I should be happy if I had a wife of such beauty and character.’ *This was my only thought, and no other, no, not one*” (Vis. I.i.2). Next, we are told that Hermas has a vision of an old Lady who confronts him with his immoral desire (*epithumia*), precisely the very desire that he had ostensibly and preemptively denied ever having. This opening scene describes through a narrative frame how Hermas’ interior state becomes subject to scrutiny by a moral standard external to him in the form of an embodied figure who originates unexpectedly from elsewhere – the figure of the Lady. Like an actual encounter, the Lady in the first Vision confronts Hermas with his sin of inordinate desire in a conversation that both challenges and surprises him (Mittermaier 2012; Eidinow 2013). If we allow that the episode provides a dynamic experiential frame, the hearer of this story would also remember details about what happens to the person who inappropriately sees the bathing woman. According to the popular Second Temple pseudepigrapha known as the *T. Reu.*, seeing leads to transgression – the protagonist, Reuben, becomes emblematic of guilt and thoroughly shamed. That an individual might spontaneously remember the similar episodic event of Reuben and Bilhah may be part of the undetermined aspects of this process for an ancient reader.

The opening Visions of the *Shepherd of Hermas* can be understood to cultivate dispositions (formation) and also participate in various unexpected encounters that ultimately transform Hermas. According to Esther Eidinow, an ancient understanding of a figure like Hermas would have followed “a relational model of the self included a sense of interdependence not only with other mortals, but also with supernatural forces” (Eidinow 2013, 22). Eidinow’s understanding of the self in the ancient Greek world is one that could be extended to other pre-modern cultures, and some might say, also to modern non-Western cultures. Michael Lambek has also shown how the individual is deeply inter-relational and actively entwined with spirits and beings who not only exceed the limits of our temporal experience by interacting with figures from a long ago past but also transcend the limits of this world (Lambek 2003 [2015]; Mittermaier 2012, 254). Such understandings of the self conceptualize the self as one that is “acted upon” in ways that resemble lived encounters with this-worldly beings who similarly act as reminders or ethical constraints on an individual’s thoughts. In the context of our discussion of the *Shepherd of Hermas*, Hermas the protagonist is acted upon, “seized” by a spirit and carried away (Vis I.i.3.; II.i.1.; cf. Rev. 4:2). Such scenarios were more like actual encounters with this worldly beings. According to Patricia Cox Miller, “dreams and visions

were not subjective fantasies of the psyche but rather autonomous messengers speaking divine words directly to the soul of the dreamer” (Miller 1988, 327; Koet 2012). In the narrative world of the *Shepherd of Hermas*, the encounter with the Lady is vividly described with all of the features found in the lived experience of an interaction between a human man and woman.

2.2 On the solidity of stones: the enactive perception of the tower (Vis. III)

The Book of Visions offers an opportunity to consider the ways in which the reader’s enactive perception is cultivated by the text’s painstaking details about Hermas’ bodily experiences. While much has been discussed about the Tower and its significance, the tedious details about Hermas’ journey through the field and the mundane things that he both encounters and interacts with in Vision III effectively slows down the pace of the narrative and primes the reader to an even greater attentiveness to what will happen next – namely the tower scene. In this instance of enactive perception, the reader is able, through the bodily experiences of the protagonist, to achieve some degree of familiarity with the environment which further heightens the anticipation about what will come next. Hermas’ bodily experiences of locomotion and of the physical space serves to prepare the reader for the vision of the Tower which becomes part of the landscape in the field.

The third Vision takes place after Hermas has been fasting for a long time. He is pondering and puzzling over the words of the Lady. Hermas is instructed to go into the field, to a place of his choosing and that the Lady will appear there. Upon going into the field, he sees an ivory bench with a finely woven linen covering. After becoming agitated, he takes up his usual practice of praying and confessing his sins on his knees. Hermas and the Lady are also with six youths who are identified as “holy messengers of God, the first to be created, to whom the Lord delivered all of his creation to make it increase and to be building it up” (Vis. 3.24).

The opening scene to this third Vision unfolds extremely slowly, with much attention given to the kinesthetic movement of the protagonist and his changing emotional state. Hermas is instructed to *walk* to the field (cf. 4 Ezra 9:26; 10:53), and upon doing so, he is promised *visual* information:

‘... Go into the field where you linger, and at about the fifth hour I will appear to you and show you what you must see.’ I asked her. ‘Lady, to what part of the field?’ ‘Wherever you want,’ she answered.
(italics mine; Vis. III.1.2–3)

As Hermas moves through the field, the reader is made aware of the various things that he encounters as he comes upon them:

So I *went*, brothers and sisters, into the field and *watched* the time and *went* to the place I had determined for her to come. I *saw* an ivory couch set up, on the couch a linen pillow, and a piece of good linen covering it. When I *saw* all this set out, but no one there, I was seized with terror and began trembling and my hair stood on end. I was panic-stricken because I was alone. (italics mine; Vis. III.4–5)

There is also a noticeable interlude prior to the vision of the Tower that recounts in painstaking detail where Hermas should sit:

8/ And after the young men had gone away and we were alone, she said to me: ‘Sit here’.
9/ Yet when I wished to sit on the right hand she would not let me, but signed to me with her hand to sit on the left. When therefore I thought about this, and was grieved because she did not let me sit on the right hand, she said to me: ‘are you sorry, Hermas? The seat on the right is for others, who have already been found well-pleasing to God and have suffered for the Name. But you fall far short of sitting with them. But remain in your simplicity as you are doing, and you shall sit with them, and so shall all who do their deeds and bear what they also bore’.
(Vis. III.i.8–9)

These details about Hermas’s locomotion and also the report of his interaction with the various objects that he encounters in the field are instrumental in assisting the reader in perceiving the narrative space as a virtual reality to enter. The discussion of seating continues through Vis. III.ii.1–4 and culminates with Hermas who cannot see anything at first. It is only later that he is able to gradually perceive the Tower being built (Vis. III.ii.5). What might otherwise be understood as tedious details about Hermas’ walking itinerary could easily be recognized as a strategy for preparing a reader for the vision of the Tower. Not only does Hermas’ walk through the field slow down the pace of the crucial Vision of the Tower, thus effectively building momentum towards its revelation, the reader is able to practice visualizing the space and imagining the events that are being recounted. We also gain important information about Hermas in Vis. III, that he falls “far short” of sitting on the right with the martyrs. This suggests that Hermas was a figure whose moral state was such that he was relatable to the ordinary reader; thus suggesting something about the implied reader of these visions.

The lengthy prelude to the vision of the Tower describes Hermas engaged in locomotion and changing postures (sitting, standing). These physical experiences are accompanied by detailed reports of his sensory perceptions: he sees the couch and he moves closer to it. According to Yael Avrahami, there is a correlation between kinaesthetic and visual apprehension in the Hebrew Bible;

two sensory experiences that are associated with the acquisition of personal knowledge (Avrahami 2012, 75–84). In the biblical imagination, the joining of the two express the idea of understanding gained by investigation.¹⁰ This feature of imagined locomotion and visual apprehension (“navigation” or sometimes referred to as “wayfinding”) is the cognitive capacity to perceive the self as it journeys with vividness, “especially in relation to foot travel through unpredictable environments, calculating times (such as sunrise and sunset) along with routes” taken (Richardson 2015, 236). Some have suggested that the human mind is predisposed to visualizing paths and journeys (Mithen 2001, 50; Easterlin 2010). The opening of the third vision painstakingly provides a narrativized travel itinerary, Hermas’s steps taken in the field, the things seen along on the journey, and the individuals encountered along the way. Such images could be experienced in the mind as egocentric episodes in which the first-person perspective of Hermas become the reader’s guide of the landscape which he/she is expected to visualize in great detail. The ivory couch, the linen pillow, and the fine linen covering, as well as the Tower, all become landmarks of a journey by foot that the reader is expected to follow and remember.

The Tower, the crucial component of this third Vision, is not revealed until well into Vis. III, after Hermas has situated himself and has fully taken in his new surroundings. The slowing down of the pace of events gives the reader the opportunity to engage the details of the narrative and to re-enact them in the mind’s imagination (Kuzmičová 2014). The Tower itself is given special kinaesthetic quality in the Vision which describes it as “*being built* in a square by the six youths” (italics mine, Vis. III.2.5). The movement and activity of building lends a three-dimensional vivacious quality to the vision. Elaine Scarry speaks about the way writing is able to express perceptual qualities of solidity, or what she calls “perceptual mimesis” (1999). Scarry writes: “[W]riters known for their sensory vivacity explicitly build objects within their pages, with the result that we are shown a discrete path along which to build them in our own minds” (1999, 20). This scaffolding of perceptual experiences takes place through the careful attention given to the constituent elements of the spatial details. The Tower is not inert but possesses qualities of lived experience as the mind carefully contemplates handling, rotating, inspecting each stone for cracks and flaws. Feeling the dust and hearing the noise of the construction become additional aspects of the enactive perception that can be supplied by the readers’ and hearers’ imaginations. One might imagine

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¹⁰ Avrahami gives a number of examples: “Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path” (Ps 119:105); “you have kept my feet from falling so that I may walk before God in the light of life” (Ps 56:14); “come and see what God has done” (Ps 66:5); 2012, 76–77.

the smooth and cool feel of the stones that click together and fit tightly into the Tower. So too the sounds of the stones being smashed, the color, shape, and roughness of the stones are described for the hearer.

5/The tower was being built in a square by the six young men who had come with her. But about ten thousand other men were carrying stones, some from the depth of the sea, some from land, which they were delivering to the six young men who were taking and building with them. 6/ All the stones that were dragged from the depths they placed in the building, for they were shaped to fit right into joint with the other stones, so they adhered to one another so well that the joints did not show. The building of the tower seemed to be of one stone. 7/ Of the other stones brought from dry ground, some they threw away and some they put in the building. Still others they broke up and threw away far from the tower. 8/ But there were many other stones lying around the tower that they did not use for the building. Some were scaly, others had cracks, others were broken off, others were white and round, and did not fit into the building. 9/ I saw other stones cast far away from the tower that fell on the road and did not stay there, but rolled off onto rough ground. Others were falling into fire and burning up; others were falling near water and could not roll into the water even though they wished to keep rolling into the water.

(Vis. III. 2.5–9)

In this painstaking passage that describes how the stones are chosen and rejected, the scene achieves a vivid state of solidity by the interactive quality of the description – the image is neither inert nor static. Each type of stone is accounted for in excruciating detail here and will be recounted at length in the following interpretation of the vision in Vis. III.3–7.

The detailed description uses *enargeia* to draw the reader into a deeper state of contemplation about the experiences that Hermas is having in the vision itself. *Enargeia* uses language to create a vivid perception of the things that are described, words that “represented what was actually not there in a way that made it seem so vivid, so clear, so animated or immediate that it appeared to be practically perceptible to the senses” (Heath 2009, 4–5). The details that some stones are rolling, with a few falling into the fire, and others coming perilously close to the edge of the water, draw the mind’s eye to a dynamic experience of the objects, one that has the perceptual qualities of first-hand experience of these objects. Such sensory complexities are recognized as also true of the experience of sight in life as lived.

We can imagine that the hearers of this third Vision about the Tower were also stimulated by their own eyes moving in their environment, their own sight path crossing common objects that resemble the stones that are described in the Vision. When we imagine such a scenario, it becomes possible to recognize how the activity of listening to a visionary text could generate mental imagery that is also highly individualized according to the hearer’s own memory of these objects that are being described and brought to mind, and also the

hearer's own experience of the environment at the moment of the reading. According to Kuzmičová, listening to a text can potentially be more stimulating and more generative of mental imagery than reading a text in solitude since in the latter, one's eyes are tethered to the written page and thus subject to less stimulation from the environment (2016, 221–222). Because it is also not possible for the hearer to pace the rate at which a text is read to him or her, the reader has the ability to slow down, amplify, to intone key descriptions, and use their posture to mark those scenes that are important to experience with enactive perception, all of which can further stimulate the listener's imagination. The Vision of the Tower can have a quality of elasticity in that the details of its perception becomes shaped by the hearer's own lived experience of the objects; the unique environment of the hearer and the sight path of his/her eyes become incorporated into the individual's mental image of the Tower and its stones.

Through *enargeia* and enactive perception, a reader or hearer could acquire an egocentric experience of the highly contoured space in which the visions occur. The terrain marked by the ivory couch, pillows, Tower, and stones, becomes more concrete and thus more vivid to the reader. The practices of enactive reading and perceiving assist in the cultivation of a disposition in which the visionary world of the *Shepherd of Hermas* can become accessible in an experiential way to the readers and listeners of this text, with the qualities of embodied first-hand experience.

In the opening of the third Vision we read how Hermas is overcome with emotion just before the vision of the Tower:

When I saw these things lying there, and no one in the place, I was greatly amazed, and, as it were, trembling seized me and my hair stood on end. And, as it were, panic came to me because I was alone. When therefore I came to myself, and remembered the glory of God and took courage, I knelt down and confessed my sins again to the Lord, as I had done before. (Vis. III.1.5)

Seers and visionaries in the Second Temple period are frequently described as engaging in various decentering practices of self-diminishment which in turn heightens receptivity to other cognitive states that may precipitate the onset of visionary experiences (Merkur 1989; Harkins 2017). The re-use of familiar practices and scenarios associated with visionary experience such as the practices of prayer and weeping that Hermas repeatedly engages in can be understood as a way of cultivating visionary experiences.

The resemblances between the Visions and other apocalyptic visionary texts (Daniel, 4 Ezra) also intentionally draw on the emotional impact of narrative experiences that reside in a scripturalized past and reconstitutes them in the present moment. It is here where psychologists observe the plasticity of

memory reconstruction; the mind's ability to remember is characterized by an adaptive strategy where mis-remembering is surprisingly the goal.¹¹ These highly detailed egocentric imaginings involve the same cognitive faculties that are at work in the imagining of future possibilities, including the ability to vividly imagine potential constraints or consequences to moral behavior – a cognitive process that is thought to be crucial for guiding decision-making processes (Boyer 2009; Schacter et al. 2007). Pascal Boyer calls the general cognitive processes that allow for the vivid perceptions of someone who is not there to express the evolutionary adaptiveness of imagination which allows for the construction of an ethical constraint (2009, 16). The ability to imagine vivid egocentric emotional memories (such as the ones that are generated from the highly descriptive accounts of an anxious Hermas or of his weeping) involves the same imaginative processes that are used when the mind vividly imagines the consequences for not performing the right behavior, guiding moral decision-making even though no one may be watching (Boyer 2009, 18–20).

These observations from integrative understandings of embodied cognitive processes that take place during reading can broaden and deepen our own understanding of how paraenetic literature, especially that which strongly arouses emotions and contains highly detailed visionary elements, participates in decision-making processes. In this way, the mind's cognitive capacity to make presence from absence is an adaptive function that well-suits visionary phenomena and also the paraenetic purpose of the *Shepherd of Hermas*.

3 Conclusion

The Book of Visions in the *Shepherd of Hermas* gives a narrative account of Hermas' visionary experiences. Oftentimes these visions include the appearance of figures like the Lady or the apprehension of the tower of stones. Perhaps the study of these texts can give us a glimpse of how the reading and hearing of such writings could be imagined in the ancient world. While visionary experiences could be cultivated through practices, they remain undetermined because they simply happen to the individual (Mittermaier 2012, 254; Miller 1988). In the case of both dreams and visions, the self is "acted upon" in ways that resemble lived encounters with this-worldly beings who can similarly bring unexpected challenges to an individual. Emotion allows narrated

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¹¹ Lee 2009. Memory is not simply an automated retrieval system, but rather, "a special process that presents an opportunity for adaptive modification" (p. 413).

visionary events to be re-experienced by different groups through time with first-hand intensity. In the process, vivid memories of narratives can be updated in their details to meet the needs of new circumstances while retaining their emotionally compelling contours. How the Visions in the *Shepherd of Hermas* reuse familiar dramatic language and imagery may thus be important cues for how a reader should feel.

This discussion of the cognitive processes of enactive reading and enactive perception has focused on the importance of the style and imagery of the opening Visions in the *Shepherd of Hermas*. The text scripts responses and cultivates certain “readerly” or “hearerly” predispositions such as regret, longing, grief, and awe. By inhabiting the role of Hermas, a listener might achieve a vivid state of immersive experiencing. The cultivation of the self through these enactive reading practices involves imaginative egocentric cognitive processes that participate in the construction of ethical constraints on behavior. The visionary encounter of the Lady is perceived as a real encounter with a moral standard external to the self, one in which the self is “acted upon” in ways that generate unexpected discomfort and unease in our protagonist Hermas (Mittermaier 2012). Hermas’ visionary encounters possess the complexities of lived experience and exert a force upon his decision-making processes – experiences that can be accessed by ancient readers and hearers through enactive reading and perception.

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