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Thinking about Feelings: The Study of Emotions in the New Testament Writings

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Abstract: Growing attention has been directed towards affects and emotions in the New Testament texts within recent scholarship over the course of the past two decades. Although biblical exegesis of the 20th century suspected psychological interpretations of New Testament texts of being highly subjective and hence frail, recent research has developed a number of approaches that allow for addressing the subject in a methodologically controlled way. The aim of the present article is to review important monographs from the field of New Testament emotion research with special attention to their particular focuses and research methods. Despite some degree of overlap between these perspectives, six major areas of scholarly work can be identified: (1) "text psychology" that explains New Testament findings against the backdrop of modern psychological theories; (2) historical psychology that explores ancient notions of the affects; (3) narratology that observes recurring a narrative pattern in ancient descriptions of the affects; (4) rhetorical criticism that traces the rhetorical presentation of affects as well as the capability of rhetorical language to evoke affects in the addressees; (5) philosophy of the body that examines the bodily aspects of psychological dynamics; and finally (6) social history that identifies social functions of collective affects, e.g., in the formation and stabilization of social groups. After introducing each of these approaches briefly, the affect of desire (gr. ἐπιθυμία) will serve as a test case to demonstrate the possibilities and usefulness that the different perspectives offer. This way, it becomes clear that affects are by no means a by-product of theological teaching in the New Testament, but in fact indicators of true relevance.

Keywords: emotions; affects; New Testament; body; anthropology; social history; ancient rhetoric; philosophy

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1. Introduction

How many books does it take to make a "turn"?[1] The landscape of recent scholarship in New Testament studies displays an increased interest in research on affects and emotions in the biblical texts and early Christian communities. Several scholars interpret this rise of scholarly attention as signaling an "emotional turn" or "affective turn" in contemporary biblical exegesis (Spencer 2017, pp. 19–28; Dannenmann 2019, pp. 16–20; Eisen 2020, p. 426; Melzer 2021, p. 10). Formulations like these underscore the importance of the topic by assuming that the interest in emotion forms a major branch of current research. Unfortunately, this is not—or at least not yet—the case.

The number of publications on emotions in the New Testament has in fact increased over the past two decades. In the past, before the beginning of the 21st century, hardly any monographs existed that gave attention to the psychological aspects of early Christianity.[2] Now, over the course of the past 20 years, a considerable number of monographs and volumes of collected essays have been published that are dedicated to the study of emotions in early Christian texts and in the New Testament in particular, as well as numerous articles in journals. The database of the Index Biblicus[3] lists a total of about 2.000–3.000 publications per year that it groups within the area of New Testament studies. In this database, a query of the search terms "affect*" or "emotion*" gives an overview on how many of these

publications have the words "affect", "emotion" or their derivatives in their titles or among their key words. Results range from 0 in the early 1990s up to the peak of 40 hits in 2021 (see Table 1).[4]

Table 1. Publications on affects and emotions in New Testament studies, 1990–2023.

Year	1990	1991	1992	1993	1994	1995	1996	1997	1998	1999	2000	2001
a	0	0	0	1	0	3	3	1	4	7	4	6
N	1356	1360	1455	1508	1753	2358	2424	2719	2990	2934	2760	2568
h	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.66	0.00	1.27	1.24	0.37	1.34	2.39	1.45	2.34
Year	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013
a	3	7	8	7	9	2	7	3	11	17	30	12
N	2699	3035	2978	3070	2897	3196	3292	3153	3030	2863	2505	2528
h	1.11	2.31	2.69	2.28	3.11	0.63	2.13	0.95	3.36	5.94	11.98	4.75
Year	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023		
a	14	18	33	36	32	24	27	40	33	17		
N	2418	2740	2786	2631	2655	1976	2047	1747	1613	1077		
h	5.79	6.57	11.84	13.68	12.05	12.15	13.19	22.90	20.46	15.78		

Of course, these absolute values (a) must be seen in relation to the total number of publications included in the database for each year (N). For this reason, the following diagram (see Figure 1) makes use of relative numbers, giving the frequency of occurrences in per mill, i.e., 1/1.000 (h).

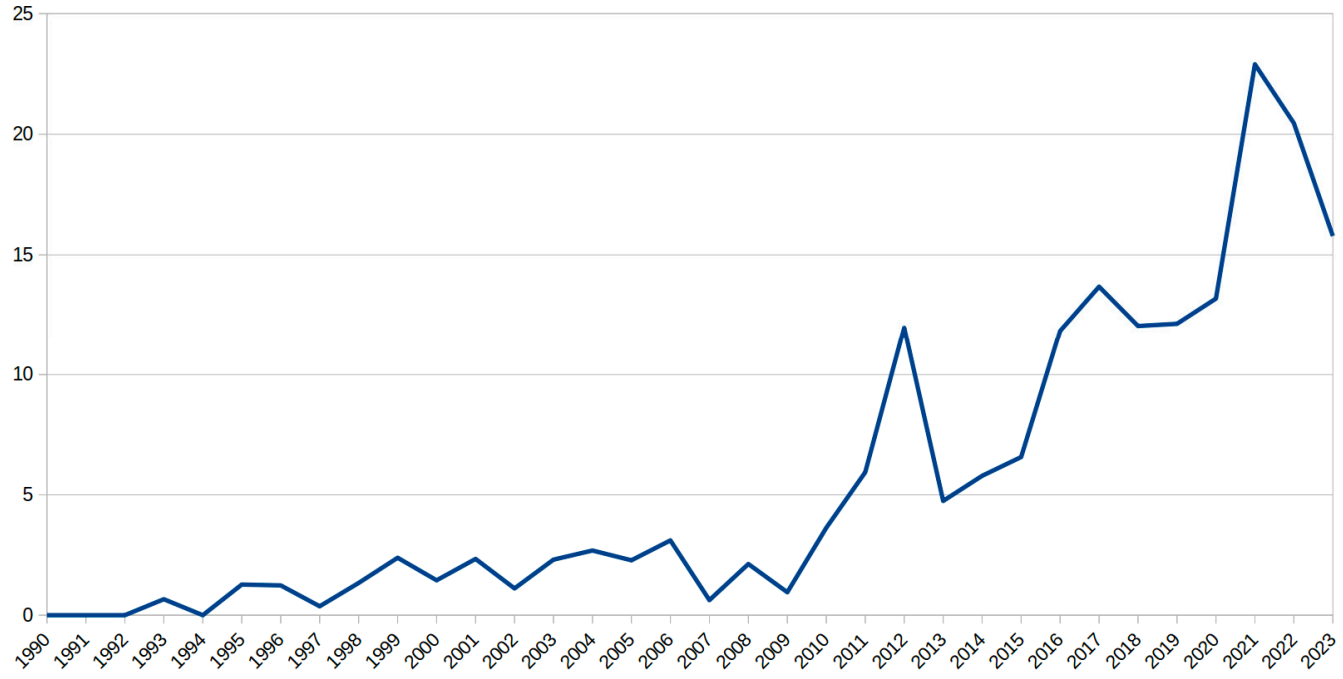


Figure 1. Relative frequency of publications over time.

The chart shows that, although an upward trend is clearly visible, the relative frequency of publications on affects and emotions in the New Testament still lies below 25 per mill, which means that, out of 1.000 scholarly works in the field of the New Testament, less than 25 are dedicated to emotion research. One might expect a larger portion of attention to focus on affects before diagnosing an "affective turn", but still, the statistic illustrates the growing relevance that scholars discover in affects and emotions.

In fact, emotion language occurs frequently within the New Testament writings,[5] some portions of which mention concrete sentiments or describe emotional dynamics that impact human interactions. Except for pleasure (ἡδονή), which appears in four places only,[6] the other basic emotions of the Stoic system can be found more or less frequently in the New Testament. Pain (λύπη), fear (φόβος), and desire (ἐπιθυμία)[7], as well as joy (χαρά), are just as present in these texts as other important key words of anthropological reflection, such as body (σῶμα), conscience (συνείδησις), heart (καρδία), or flesh (σάρξ).[8] The below chart shows the word frequencies in occurrences per mill (see Figure 2).

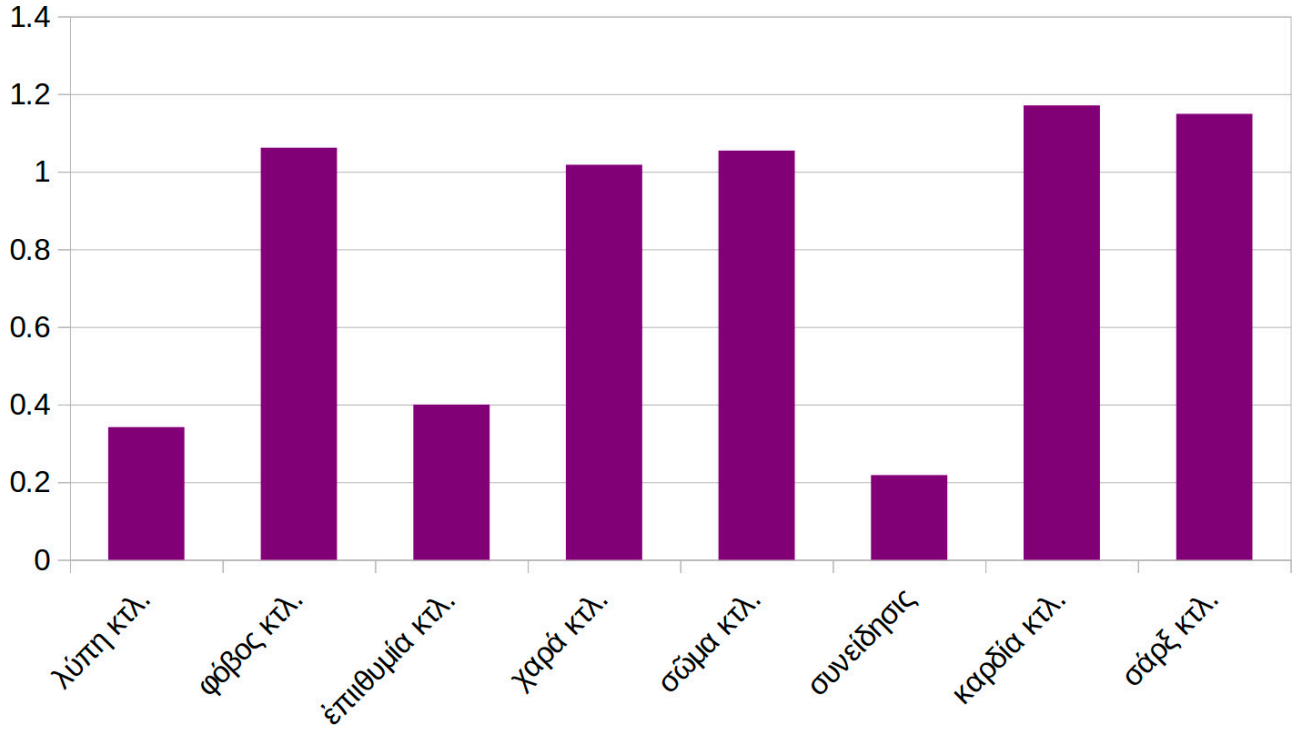


Figure 2. Affects and other anthropological key words in the New Testament.

Thus, not only is research on affects and emotions a growing area in New Testament exegesis, but affect language is also widely present in the New Testament texts. In order to evaluate the importance of the overall topic, the following review will give an overview of recent publications that concentrates on monographs. Special attention will be dedicated to the question of how recent contributions approach the topic. This way, the literature report will demonstrate the possibilities of emotion research within New Testament studies and assess the usefulness and relevance of the subject. In order to apply the particular perspectives to a concrete context of the New Testament writings, the affect of desire (ἐπιθυμία) will serve as an example at the end of each paragraph.

2. Results

Until the early 1990s, the topic of affects and emotions was largely absent from New Testament exegesis. In an essay on Christology, Rudolf Bultmann wrote some 100 years ago: "How things looked in the heart of Jesus I do not know and do not want to know".[9] The statement is of paradigmatic significance for the major part of scholarship during the 20th century, for it displays the vast skepticism against psychological explanations in biblical exegesis. Scholars like Bultmann want to avoid speculation. One cannot look into the heads or hearts of early Christian writers or the protagonists of their works and whoever tries to do so is suspected of subjectivity. New Testament studies have to reason objectively; they cannot look behind the scenes but need to rely on the given source texts alone.[10] Because of this consensus, scholarly works that did explain certain traits of New

Testament texts with reference to the psychological dynamics underlying their statements were all too easily accused of "psychologizing", i.e., applying psychological explanations in a subjective manner.

It took long until an approach was developed that was capable of addressing the topic of emotions in the New Testament in a way that was based on the study of sources and accordingly immune to the accusation of subjectivity. In 1983, Gerd Theißen published his book on "Psychological Aspects in Pauline Theology", and his pupil Martin Leiner explored the possibilities of New Testament emotion research on a wider basis in 1995. These works clearly concentrate on the wording of New Testament texts in the first place. By exploring the ways that emotion language is interwoven with argumentation or narration in the early Christian sources, Theißen and Leiner contribute to the exegesis of the biblical writings. Instead of attempting to speculate about the emotional life of New Testament authors or of the characters within New Testament narrations, this branch of scholarship analyzes the sources and explains its findings within a larger context.

Before turning to more recent publications, a word must be said about the terminology related to the subject. Many scholars use the term "emotion" when referring to an individual experience of inner movement.[11] This makes good sense, because the word "emotion" predominates in modern psychology. "Feeling", on the contrary, refers to the inner sensory perception within the body that goes along with emotional movement. Although the words "emotion" and "feeling" are widely present in modern everyday language, Anke Inselmann and others use a different term when analyzing emotional phenomena and events in ancient contexts, namely "affect" or even "passion". These terms come closest to the language of the relevant ancient sources that describe an inner movement by the words *adfectus* in Latin or πάθος in Greek.[12] In the ancient Greco-Roman world, an affect or passion is an event that somebody suffers from (gr. πάσχειν). Generally, the term underscores the experience of passivity with respect to the affective impulse that an individual can hardly or impossibly control. As will be shown below, this notion is closely connected to the problem of affective impulses leading to irrational behavior that Stoic philosophy most prominently discusses (cf. Buch-Hansen 2010, p. 105).

The following overview will differentiate between the major aspects of recent publications in New Testament emotion research, although these approaches do display some degree of overlap. However, in order to structure the overall field, it still proves helpful to draw certain distinctions.

2.1. Biblical Exegesis and Modern Psychology

Theißen's work on Pauline psychology forms the starting point for a first wave of critical emotion research in New Testament scholarship during the 1990s and early 2000s.[13] Leiner coins the label of "text psychology" referring to the Heidelberg approach that interprets New Testament texts closely and explains the findings against the backdrop of modern psychological theories. A number of Theißen's pupils take up this overall perspective and publish works on different affective aspects in early Christianity.[14] The range of methodological options in this branch of scholarship is as wide as modern psychology on the whole and thus makes a detailed presentation impossible.[15]

For the interpretation of ἐπιθυμία in Romans 7, Theißen draws on the psychology of learning and emphasizes desire's function within Paul's overall argument. In this framework, desire serves as proof for the point that sin is a threat, because everybody knows the everyday experience of temptation. According to Rom 7, Torah is a stimulus of sin. Without this stimulus, sin would be harmless, but since the stimulus exists, desire rises within the person. In Theißen's view, sin on its own behalf does not possess power over human flesh, but its power is a product of socio-cultural factors, in other words, a product of learned behavior that encourages desire. Paul's argument is based on the common ancient belief that an interdiction of certain behavior leads to an all the worse urge to behave in this certain way. Romans 7 aims at initiating a learning process that separates

sinful behavior from Torah and refers to Christ as a role model that helps early Christians to overcome their fear of the threatening aspects of Torah (cf. Theißen 1983, pp. 224–30).

In an exegetical discussion of the New Testament text that is informed by modern psychological theories, scholars necessarily give priority to the ancient texts (similarly Leiner 2007, pp. 51–52). To read something into the sources that is not covered by the textual findings to a reasonable degree would be hermeneutically problematic. But a careful approach that critically reflects on the scholar's own possible scholarly biases can use the chance to find a descriptive terminology in modern psychology that enables New Testament scholarship to identify and describe features of the source texts under consideration in a differentiated manner. Early Christian writings as well as their authors and original readers are rooted in a cultural world where emotional phenomena play a prominent role in human thinking and interactions. The Stoic effort to keep the affects from corrupting logical reasoning in a way also illustrates how big the influence of the emotions actually is. Text psychology accepts the challenge to deal with this overall subject in a honest, scholarly fashion.

2.2. Historical Psychology

The approach of "text psychology" differs from the work of scholars who explain affective dynamics in New Testament contexts by consulting ancient treatises on psychological issues without ever studying modern psychology. Most prominently, Klaus Berger promotes this approach in his small book, emphasizing the fact that he never specialized in modern psychology in order to remain neutral and study the ancient sources objectively without psychological bias (see Berger 1991, p. 35).

In fact, numerous sources from the ancient world provide helpful insights with respect to the question of how ancient communities experience and conceptualize affects like love or hatred, pity or envy, joy or grief. Using these materials in order to understand New Testament texts properly means, in other words, to focus the history of religions method on the narrow area of the affects. The study of affects has also gained some attention in ancient philology and social history (see, e.g., Braund and Gill 1997; Konstan 2001, 2006; Kaster 2005; Chaniotis 2012), so that New Testament scholars can refer to and learn from the research conducted in the sibling disciplines. Ancient textbooks of rhetoric as well as several works on philosophy or medicine deal with affective phenomena at length. By evaluating these writings closely, historical psychology can gain insights into common knowledge within ancient communities and demonstrate which notions of anthropology, sociology, or psychology exert an influence upon the formation of New Testament books. It is important to notice both, where a New Testament conception agrees with common knowledge of the ancient world, and where it differs from an overall consensus.

For the study of concrete New Testament affects like desire, it is helpful to start from the definitions that ancient philosophers or rhetoricians give. The treatise "On the Passions" by Pseudo-Andronicus shares the Stoic teaching that "an affect is an irrational movement of the soul" (πάθος ἐστὶν ἄλογος ψυχῆς κίνησις; Ps-Andronicus, Pass. 1; cf. Diogenes Laertios 7.110). Accordingly, the individual affective conditions are different shapes of this one basic process. Pseudo-Andronicus continues by giving short definitions of the four basic emotions, among which "desire is an irrational appetite or pursuit that expects something good" (ἐπιθυμία δὲ ἄλογος ὄρεξις ἢ δίωξις προσδοκωμένου ἀγαθοῦ). In the Stoic view, the main issue about the passions is their tendency to corrupt a person's ability to think and act rationally (also see Hutchinson 2022, p. 207). Under the influence of this conviction, 4 Maccabees argues that all passions should be controlled by the power of reason. This also applies to desire: "Of the desires some are of the soul, others of the body, and it seems that rational thought is to govern both kinds of them" (4 Macc 1:32: τῶν δὲ ἐπιθυμιῶν αἱ μέν εἰσιν ψυχικαί, αἱ δὲ σωματικαί, καὶ τούτων ἀμφοτέρων ἐπικρατεῖν ὁ λογισμὸς φαίνεται).[16]

When Paul exhorts his Roman readers not to obey desire, i.e., not to allow sin to govern the body (Rom 6:12), his notion is in line with the overall Stoic view in this respect: desire

causes immoral behavior because of its power to override rational thought. The amount of sources emphasizing the necessity to control desire shows how dangerous ancient thinkers considered this affect to be.[17] But unlike other Hellenistic authors, Paul accuses Torah of causing desire (Rom 7). On the whole, affects play an important role within different rhetorical and ethical contexts in antiquity (see below, Section 2.4).

2.3. Narrative Patterns of Affects in Antiquity

Of course, descriptions of affects not only occur in ancient theoretical treatises, but they are also an essential ingredient of narrative texts. Karl Allen Kuhn underscores the crucial role of emotions in the shape and perception of narration (see Kuhn 2009, esp. pp. 1–3). For research on the psychological dynamics within early Christianity, all kinds of narrative works accordingly offer valuable sources that help to describe how affects work, or—to put it more precisely—how affects happen. Philologist Robert A. Kaster discovers in his work on emotions in ancient Roman texts that it is possible to identify a characteristic pattern of a series of events that is typical for a particular affect (see Kaster 2005, esp. p. 8). Elements of these patterns that Kaster calls "emotional scripts" include, e.g., perception, inner movement, sensation, rational evaluation, and consequent action.[18] These and other factors appear in a specific constellation and form with every affect and can be discovered through a comparison of various sources. The analysis of such deep structures underlying the individual narrations also offers an insight into the social conventions that the experience of an affect is based on within ancient societies (also cf. Inselmann 2016, pp. 543–44).

Within the field of New Testament exegesis, most notably, Tanja Dannenmann deals at length with the narratological analysis of early Christian emotion texts, but directs her main focus on their pragmatic function (cf. Dannenmann 2019). Richard James Hicks proposes an overall pattern that is characteristic of every affect in ancient literature, consisting of (a) a stimulus, (b) an affective inner impulse resulting from this stimulus, (c) a cognitive evaluation that can control human behavior and handling of the affective impulse but does not always succeed, and (d) consequent action (cf. Hicks 2021). In their works on Lukan joy, Anke Inselmann and Julie Newberry also identify specific traits in the way the third gospel conceptualizes this affect.[19] Their monographs put great effort into the task of demonstrating how joy texts are interwoven with the overall narration, contextualizing joy within the larger framework of Lukan theological thought.

Analyzing New Testament "desire scripts", it is most striking that many texts—especially in the New Testament letters—share a pattern that mainly consists of three elements, namely (a) the affective impulse of desire that (b) evokes sinful behavior and (c) should hence be avoided (see, e.g., Rom 6:12; Titus 2:12; Jas 1:14–15). Now, interestingly, the Matthean Jesus connects desire to a visual stimulus in the Sermon on the Mount (Matt 5:28): "Everybody who looks at a woman in order to desire her has already committed adultery with her in his heart" (πᾶς ὁ βλέπων γυναῖκα πρὸς τὸ ἐπιθυμῆσαι αὐτὴν ἤδη ἐμοίχευσεν αὐτὴν ἐν τῇ καρδίᾳ αὐτοῦ). Visual sense perception that the male[20] individual can control by his will can cause desire, which the individual may not be able to control anymore. Similarly, 1 John 2:17 knows of the "desire of the eyes" (ἐπιθυμία τῶν ὀφθαλμῶν) and draws a close connection between desire and sense perception as well.[21] Philo of Alexandria also discusses the interconnection between perception and desire in his work on the Special Laws where he explains why Torah prohibits the consumption of pork. Of course, Philo has never tried pork himself but refers to people who can do so and have reported to him that pork has the best taste of all sorts of meat among land animals. He explains the commandment to restrain from the consumption of pork—although it smells immensely good—not only by the information that it is healthier for the body, but according to Philo, it also serves as training for a person's self-restraint and self-sufficiency, i.e., Stoic core virtues (Philo, Spec. Leg. 4.100–102).

The gospel of Matthew and Philo thus represent a more complex emotional script of desire: Visual or olfactory perception fuel ἐπιθυμία. The affective impulse of desire urges the person to satisfy the bodily appetite, even if it includes immoral behavior. Because

of this inner urge that goes along with desire, Matthew and Philo agree with their larger social context in the conviction that desire is directed against rational thought and must be governed by the force of the person's cognitive will.

2.4. Rhetorical Functions and Dynamics of Emotions

Emotion is a crucial factor for human behavior (cf. also Hicks 2021, p. 94), and since this is the case, ancient textbooks of rhetoric teach their readers how to utilize affects for their specific rhetorical goals. Since the rise of Rhetorical Criticism within New Testament studies (see esp. Betz 1975; Kennedy 1984; Parsons and Martin 2018), scholars have realized that persuasion does not happen on a strictly cognitive basis alone in antiquity. Rather, there are three modes of persuasion (Aristotle, Rhet. 1.2), namely the rational argument (λόγος), the speaker's trustworthy character (ἦθος), and the audience's affective responses (πάθος). Most of all, at the beginning and at the end of a public speech, so the textbooks agree, a speaker should address the listeners' affect with the so-called *captatio benevolentiae*. This way he can gain the judge's and the audience's sympathy for his own person and encourage antipathy against the adversary. In the New Testament writings, this kind of affective rhetoric can be found for example in the letters of Paul, in the Aeropagus speech in Acts (Acts 17), or in Revelation (See Olbricht and Sumney 2001; DeSilva 2009, pp. 175–92, 193–228).

During the past decade, special attention in New Testament scholarship has been dedicated to the rhetorical pragmatics of vivid description. By employing an amount of narrative detail, a speaker can give his audience the impression of not only listening to a description, but of being present in the very events that he recounts. The technique of vivid presentation (ἔκφρασις) transports the addressees right into the narrated world and accordingly evokes all kinds of affects within the audience (see Quintilian, Inst. 6.2.29–36; Theon, Prog. 7.53–54; Rhetorica ad Herennium 4.60–69) (cf. Webb 2009). It does not take many words to create such an eyewitness effect in the listeners, and the phenomenon of vivid description can be found in several New Testament narrations, also, e.g., in early Christian accounts of hell that cause fear in the addressees, or in apocalyptic scenarios that induce an awe of God.[22]

With respect to desire, however, the New Testament writings do not aim to induce the affect but at preventing it from corrupting Christian behavior. Since affects impact human action, studies on New Testament ethics have discovered their relevance (in addition to Dannenmann 2019, also see Wischmeyer 2015, 2020; Zimmermann 2016; Maschmeier 2021). Richard Hicks points out the importance of control over the emotions in the ancient Greco-Roman world. He refers to the Hellenistic moralists, who do not evaluate emotion as radically as the Stoics but still encourage rational control over all affective impulses, which was common since Plato (see esp. Phaedr. 253c–d). Against this background, Hicks makes the case that the gospel of Mark presents an anti-emotional notion of Jesus. Although being frequently tempted to act out an emotion, the Markan Jesus never follows his affective impulses without thinking before he takes action, even where he displays anger (Mark 3:5) or gets upset (Mark 8:12).[23]

It is certainly true that the New Testament writings never encourage desire actively. On the contrary, ἐπιθυμία is widely seen as a motor of sinful behavior that should strictly be avoided. The texts associate desire with folly and sin and contrast it to virtue or a pious lifestyle. The New Testament epistles especially argue, similarly to 4 Maccabees, by holding that rational thought must rule a person's behavior and cushion the impulses of desire (4 Macc 1–2). Likewise, Philo considers desire as the "root of all evil" (Philo, Spec. Leg. 4.84–85) and justifies his rejection of desire using a Stoic slogan (similarly 1 Thess 4:5; 1 Tim 6:9–10).[24] In the first place, desire seems to support a person's survival by securing bodily needs.[25] Two characters in Lukan parables who are about to starve feel the desire to fill their stomachs with the waste from the households of their rich masters, namely the prodigal son (Luke 15:16) and the poor Lazarus (Luke 16:21). Although desire possesses this helpful quality, it can all too easily impact social life in a negative way, when, e.g., the desire for sexual intercourse leads to adultery (Matt 5:28). Desire in the New Testament can be desire

for wealth like silver, gold, and garments (Acts 20:33; also see Mark 4:19) or a legitimate desire for social status (1 Tim 3:1). But the letters also mention it frequently within catenae of immoral behavior (Col 3:5; Tit 3:3; 1 Peter 4:3). Desire causes sin (Jas 1:14–15) and stands in contrast to righteousness (Titus 2:12). So, the author of 2 Timothy exhorts his readers to flee from desire (2 Tim 2:22), and Paul forbids the Christian community in Rome to obey desire so that they prevent sin from ruling over their bodies (Rom 6:12). On the whole, Christians must not follow ἐπιθυμία but tame or better overcome their desire by cognitive means.

2.5. Body and Gender

The emphasis that New Testament texts put on the exhortations against desire prove how strong the affective impulse on the body obviously is. While scholars who hold a "cognitive theory of emotions" (such as Voorwinde 2011; Inselmann 2012; Hicks 2021; Jew 2021) tend to assume that all affects can be controlled cognitively in the ancient world, others have argued that affective movements can occur within a person that lead to an immediate bodily response. Notions like this are discussed under the umbrella term "affect theory".[26] In fact, some "emotional scripts" exist in the New Testament that narrate a sensual stimulus that produces an affect within a person and instantly culminates in a bodily reflex. [27] Women in Mark tremble of fear when they are confronted with the mighty deeds of Jesus or God and consequently freeze or flee (Mark 5:33; 16:8). Characters in the Lukan parables experience compassion as a movement of their inner organs when they see a person who is in need of help, and thus approach the needy right away (Luke 10:33; 15:20; see also 7:13) (cf. Neumann 2023, 2024). The narrative contexts in Mark and Luke do not mention any rational reflections explicitly, implying that the bodily response to the bodily stimulus takes place without an interposed activity of reason.

New Testament scholarship must at least consider how far ancient descriptions of affective dynamics balk at an unambiguous "cognitive theory of emotion". Recent studies in social history, ancient philology, and New Testament anthropology underscore the notion of a relative openness of the human body for influences from without.[28] The pores of the skin and the organs of sense perception offer entrances or exits for fluid and volatile substances to enter or leave the body (also see Martin 1995; Moss 2010). Because of this porousness, the human and especially the female body are vulnerable to affects that may enter the body by the external impulses.[29] Plato explicitly regards ἐπιθυμία as the female principle in the human soul (Plato, Tim. 69e–70a) and contrasts it to the male anger or courage (θυμός).[30] Female bodies are not only softer, colder, and more porous than male bodies, but because of these conditions, also more susceptible to sin and hence less morally perfect (see also Philo, Quaest. in Ex. 1.8). In Hellenistic Judaism, these bodily conceptions of desire parallel the notion of the "soul" (hebr. *nefesh*; gr. ψυχή) as hosting the person's thirst for life.[31]

In the case of ἐπιθυμία, it is obvious that the New Testament writings believe in the possibility of resisting desire and control its impulses by the means of rationality. But, on the other hand, the aforementioned scripts of bodily reflexes to an affective impulse illustrate how hard this can be at times. According to Paul, desire dwells in the body (Rom 7:7–8); however, Christians must not allow it to govern their bodies (6:12). When Paul exhorts his Roman readers to take care of their bodies (13:14), he considers it necessary to underline that this must not happen under the influence of desire. Some places see the prime location of desire within the body in the heart (Rom 1:24; Matth 5:28), whereas others associate desire and flesh (Gal 5:16, 24; 1 Peter 2:11; 4:1–3; 2 Peter 2:10, 18; 1John 2:16; also Eph 2:3) which may be due to the connection of desire and sexual attraction.[32] Within the body, desire can give birth to sin (τίκτω; Jas 1:14–15). In Romans 1, desire parallels burning sexual lust (Rom 1:27) and thus involves bodily heat.

2.6. Group Identity and Belonging

The above paragraphs have proved that an affect is by no means only a matter of individual experience, but the conception of affects is in large part based on social conventions. Ancient descriptions anchor affects in social settings, and affects can even be experienced collectively. The perspective of social history shows that, in such contexts, affects also shape group identity and belonging (see esp. Jew 2021). Some texts like Revelation use the arousal of affects intentionally in order to draw a clear distinction between their own group of "real" Christians and other deviant groups, as David DeSilva and others argue (see DeSilva 2009, pp. 175–92; Neumann 2021; also von Gemünden 2009; Kotrosits 2015).

This is also clearly true of the ἐπιθυμία motif in several New Testament epistles. Some texts state that Christians do not act out their desires, but rather did so before they became members of the Christian community (Eph 2:3; 4:22; Titus 3:3; 1 Peter 1:14), other texts regard ἐπιθυμία as a typical sort of heathen behavior (1 Thess 4:5; also see Rom 1:24), and 1 Peter 4:3 claims that either of the two is true. Applied in this way, the affect of desire serves to stabilize socio-cultural boundaries. Renunciation of desire functions as a marker of belonging in early Christian communities. Those who live out their desires are always the others. Accordingly, the New Testament letters discourage desire all the more, for members of the community who give in to desire and allow the affect to overpower their cognitive will would have to face the risk of separating themselves from the group.

3. Conclusions

Thinking about feelings is becoming increasingly important within New Testament studies. The numbers of published contributions probably do not justify supposing some "emotional turn", but still, emotion research faces growing interest in New Testament exegesis, making it a trend in recent scholarship. As the above examples prove, affects are closely interconnected with significant New Testament topics, such as ethics, community, the body, religious experience, and salvation. At first glance, emotion research on the New Testament may seem difficult to conduct methodologically, but a closer look reveals that recent research offers a wide spectrum of possibilities to approach the subject and gain valuable insights into the life and faith of New Testament communities. All perspectives and approaches discussed above place a thorough analysis of the New Testaments texts at the center of scholarly endeavors and choose different ways of explaining the findings within the wider horizon of historical and hermeneutical contexts. If performed in such careful ways, thinking about feelings helps to reconstruct a more wholistic picture of early Christianity, bridging the gaps between texts, authors, and communities. Humans display emotions whenever something really matters to them (such also Spencer 2021, p. 11; similarly Kuhn 2009, p. 134). Thus, affects in the New Testament should not be seen as irrelevant or even disturbing by-products of teaching, but rather as indicators of true relevance.

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Notes

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[2] Exceptions from the 1980s and 1990s include (Theißen 1983; Vogt 1993; Leiner 1995; Matjaž 1999).

[3] Available online: https://bibel.ixtheo.de/ (accessed on 11 March 2024).

[4] Date of query was 11 March 2024. The table gives the absolute number of publications connected to the search terms "affect*" or "emotion*" as well as the total number of publications registered in the database within the area New Testament and uses these variables to calculate the values of relative occurrences per year.

[5] All values are taken from (Morgenthaler 1958).

[6] Luke 8:14; Titus 3:3; Jas 4:1, 3; 2 Peter 2:13.

[7] On the basic affects in Stoic teaching cf. esp. Ps-Andronicus, Pass. 1.

[8] On the anthropological importance of these terms see the classic text book (Wolff 1974).

[9] (Bultmann 1969, p. 132); originally published in German in 1927.

[10] On the explanations for this view, see (Niederwimmer 1970; Leiner 1995, p. 51).

[11] See, e.g., the title of the works by (Voorwinde 2005, 2011; Dannenmann 2019; Hicks 2021; Jew 2021).

[12] Cf. (Inselmann 2012, pp. 14, 37–28; 2016, p. 539; Spencer 2017, pp. 5–10); also see the book titles by (von Gemünden 2009; Kotrosits 2015; Spencer 2021).

[13] Soon after Theißen's initial work on Paul (Theißen 1983), Eugen Drewermann publishes his major two-volume contribution on depth psychology and exegesis (Drewermann 1985). Although this work found a lot of favor among the Christian public, Drewermann's approach convinced less scholarly colleagues than Theißen's did, because depth psychology's perspective on the New Testament writings seemed rather associative and was hard to justify with respect to the ancient source texts.

[14] Apart from Leiner's methodological work, there is Thea Vogt's study on fear in Mark (Vogt 1993). Petra von Gemünden writes on several affects and texts in ancient Judaism and early Christianity (see esp. von Gemünden 2009), and her pupil Anke Inselmann researches joy in Luke (Inselmann 2012).

[15] Like Theißen, Vogt and Inselmann apply a variety of psychological theories when explaining different aspects of their New Testament topics. Ian Jew uses the theory of "emotional regimes" in interpreting the emotional dynamics in Paul's letters. Maia Kotrosits refers to Queer Theory and reads the descriptions of pleasure and trauma in the Gospel of Truth against this background. Douglas Geyer takes a similar approach towards the gospel of Mark, interpreting the text against the foil of trauma therapy. Daniel Maier bases his study on happiness in ancient Judaism and early Christianity in part on Flow Theory. See (Jew 2021; Kotrosits 2015, pp. 173–99; Geyer 2001; Maier 2021).

[16] Cf. (von Gemünden 2009) and esp. her chapter on 4 Maccabees (pp. 118–37).

[17] On affect control also cf. (Inselmann 2012, pp. 203–4); see also (Jew 2021; Hicks 2021).

[18] On these aspects of emotions, also see (Mirguet 2016, p. 443).

[19] Cf. (Inselmann 2012; Newberry 2022). Additionally, see (Senk 2022) on the emotional motif of unanimity in Acts.

[20] On the male addressees of these words, see (von Gemünden 2013, p. 267).

[21] Somewhat related to this scheme that identifies vision as the source of desire are some places that regard visual perception as the object of desire: Paul expresses his desire to see the Lord (Phil 1:23) or the fellowship that he addresses in his letter (1Thess 2:17), while other texts reflect on the desire to see the eschaton coming (Matt 13:17; Luke 17:22; 1 Peter 1:12).

[22] See (Henning 2014) on hell and (Yarbro Collins 1999) as well as (Whitaker 2015) on Revelation. Additionally, cf. (Nassauer 2016; Selby 2016; Wang 2017) and the variety of contributions in (Henning and Neumann 2024).

[23] See (Hicks 2021). Even at Gethsemane, Jesus manages to control his affective impulse and avoids to display a flight reaction. Instead, his reason overcomes the affect and allows the Markan Jesus to consent to the divine plan. Cf. (Hicks 2021, p. 196).

[24] Cf. (Bowden 2020, p. 218). A variant of this slogan sees the root of all bad things in the love for money (φιλαργυρία) cf. (Neumann 2009). On Philo's judgment over desire, cf. (Hutchinson 2022, p. 208). Desire is also frequently seen as the original sin in ancient Jewish literature; cf. (Räisänen 1986, p. 154).

[25] On the basis of this careful analysis of a wide range of sources from Roman imperial age, Andrew Bowden arrives at a similar conclusion. See his list of desire's objects in (Bowden 2020, pp. 314 and 316).

[26] See esp. the contributions in (Black and Koosed 2019). On the conflicting theories, also see (Elliott 2005, pp. 19–42).

[27] On this aspect in Stoic philosophy, see (Buch-Hansen 2010, pp. 104–5).

[28] See (Laqueur 1990; Padel 1992) and the collection of sources in (Weissenrieder and Dolle 2019).

[29] On female porousness and the body's effeminization in early Christian descriptions of hell, also see (Henning 2021, esp. pp. 91–94).

[30] On desire and the anatomy of the soul in Plato, see also (Hutchinson 2022, p. 207).

[31] On the functions of the soul in the Hebrew Bible, see (Wolff 1974, pp. 10–25).

[32] With respect to Rom 1:24, see (Räisänen 1986, p. 160).

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