

# A CONTEXTUALISED READING OF MATTHEW 6:22–23: ‘YOUR EYE IS THE LAMP OF YOUR BODY’

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**ABSTRACT**

For the modern reader the logion ‘The eye is the lamp of the body’ is puzzling. While most scholars concur that it has something to do with greed and envy, they often fail to explain this correlation between inner attitudes and the physical eye. In this article I argue that the meaning of this passage can only be understood when read according to the ancient understanding of vision. It is important to interpret the genitive in the phrase ‘Ο λύχνος τοῦ σώματος ἐστὶν ὁ ὀφθαλμὸς as the ancient hearer or reader would have done.

**INTRODUCTION**

In the Sermon on the Mount Jesus makes use of a *masjāl* about the eye as the lamp of the body:

*The eye is the lamp of the body. If your eyes are good, your whole body will be full of light. But if your eyes are bad, your whole body will be full of darkness. If then the light within you is darkness, how great is that darkness!*

(Mt 6:22–23)<sup>1</sup>

Jesus alludes to ancient conventions of the eye and light in his teaching on treasures, undivided loyalties and anxiety with regard to the necessities of life. For the modern reader this logion of the eye is puzzling. While most scholars concur that it has something to do with greed and envy, they fail to clarify why this is the case. In this article I argue that the meaning of this passage can only be understood once one is aware of the ancient understanding of vision. Many scholars regard the eyes as windows through which light enters into the body, interpreting the genitive in the phrase ‘Ο λύχνος τοῦ σώματος ἐστὶν ὁ ὀφθαλμὸς τοῦ σώματος as an objective genitive. However, such an interpretation is anachronistic. It is important to interpret the genitive as the ancient hearer or reader would have done.

Contextual cultural and historical perceptions with regard to the eye and sight are investigated. Aspects such as ancient physiognomy, theories of vision, perceptions of the ‘evil eye’ and the use of similar phrases in literature of those times are explored. A better understanding of these ancient conventions regarding the eye and vision helps to clarify the meaning of this saying. Keeping this context in mind, a reading of Matthew 6:22–23 is then carried out.

**Body and character in the ancient world**

In the Ancient Greco-Roman world it was common practice to draw conclusions upon a person’s inner qualities based on outer physical characteristics (Parsons 2006:17). Evans remarks that physiognomy

*enjoyed a far greater popularity among Greek and Roman writers, especially those of the later Greek society and Roman Empire, than has generally been supposed. As a quasi-science, it always bore a close relationship to the science of medicine as an art, and to the practice of rhetoric.*

(Evans 1969:5)

Galen credited his master Hippocrates as the founder of physiognomy (*Quod animi mores corporis temperament, 7*). The first occurrence of the verb *fusiognomonein* is found in Hippocrates’ *Epidemics*. He writes: ‘Those with a large head, large black eyes and a wide, snub nose are honest’ (*Epidemiae* 2.6.1). Zopyrus (5th century BCE) is one of the first persons to be reported as having been a practitioner of physiognomy.<sup>2</sup>

Eyes were one of the keys to reading a person’s character (pseudo-Aristotle, *Physiognomonica* 811b15–28; 812a38–812b13 and Polemo, 1. 107–170). Parsons (2006:76–81) draws attention to eyes in the physiognomic traditions. The eye is central in physiognomic thinking. Pseudo-Aristotle writes no less than 18 times in his treatise that eyes are distinguishing markers of various character types (807b1, 7, 19, 23, 29, 35; 808a1, 3, 8, 9, 12, 16, 28, 30, 34; 808b6; 812b8; 813a21). Polemo (*Physiognomonica* 1.20) devotes almost one-third of his work to the topic of the eye.

These ideas are also reflected in Roman rhetorical practice. Cicero diagnosed Socrates as stupid and fond of women: ‘Do we not read how Socrates was stigmatized by the “physiognomist” Zopyrus, who professed to discover men’s entire characters from their body, eyes, face and brow?’ (De Fato 5.10). Cicero argues that eyes are critical to successful oratory:

1.Paralleled in Lk 11:34–36: ‘Your eye is the lamp of your body. When your eyes are good, your whole body also is full of light. But when they are bad, your body also is full of darkness. See to it, then, that the light within you is not darkness. Therefore, if your whole body is full of light, and no part of it dark, it will be completely lighted, as when the light of a lamp shines on you’.

2.Aristotle’s writings also show an interest in physiognomic signs: ‘When men have large foreheads, they are slow to move; when they have small ones, they are fickle; when they have broad ones, they are apt to be distraught; when they have foreheads rounded or bulging out, they are quick tempered’ (*Historia animalium* 1.8.491b). The pseudo-Aristotelian tractate *Physiognomonica* reports: ‘The physiognomist takes his information from movements, shapes, colors, and traits as they appear in the face, from the hair, from the smoothness of the skin, from the voice, from the appearance of the flesh, from the limbs, and from the entire stature of the body’ (*Physiognomonica* 808b. 12–15).

*Everything depends on the countenance, while the countenance itself is dominated by the eyes...For delivery is wholly the concern of the feelings, and these are mirrored by the face and expressed by the eyes.*

(De Oratore 3.221–223)

Cicero comments on the relationship between the eye and moral character: 'She [nature] has formed his features as to portray therein the character that lies deep within him' (De Legibus 1.26–27) and 'For every action derives from the soul, and countenance is the image of the soul, and the eyes its chief indicators'. Cicero writes:

*Everything rests with the face, and the face in turn is under the power of the eyes. ... and the eyes are the index of the emotions... No one can achieve the same end with eyes closed.*

(De Oratore 3.221–222)

Elsewhere Cicero writes:

*Nature has so formed his human features as to portray therein the character that lies hidden deep within him; for not only do the eyes declare with exceeding clarity the innermost feelings of our hearts, but also the countenance, as we Romans call it, which can be found in no other living being, save man, reveals the character.*

(De Legibus 1.9.26)

Suetonius described Tiberius with physiognomic interpretation:

*His eyes were unusually large, and strange to say, had the power of seeing even at night and in the dark, but only for a short time when first open after sleep; presently they grew dim-sighted again.*

(Tiberius 69)

Evans (1969:55) interprets Suetonius' description of Tiberius. Tiberius' physical appearance reveals his bad moral character. His 'unusually large eyes' (*praegrandibus oculis*) remind one of cattle and therefore are according to pseudo-Aristotle<sup>3</sup> a sign of 'sluggishness' (pseudo-Aristotle, *Physiognomica* 812b). His temporary nocturnal vision was according to Polemo a sign of 'unjust behaviour' (*iniustitiam adiudica*) (Polemo, *Physiognomica* 152).

From this brief overview it is evident that there was a strong physiognomic consciousness in the ancient Greco-Roman world according to which a person's inner character was said to be reflected in his or her eyes.

Some Jewish and Christian sources also demonstrate awareness of physiognomics. Many scholars are intrigued by the fact that the list of physical blemishes for priests in Leviticus 21:16–21 is not balanced by moral blemishes:

*For the generations to come none of your descendants who has a defect may come near to offer the food of his God. No man who has any defect may come near: no man who is blind or lame, disfigured or deformed; no man with a crippled foot or hand, or who is hunchbacked or dwarfed, or who has any eye defect, or who has festering or running sores or damaged testicles. No descendant of Aaron the priest who has any defect is to come near to present the offerings made to the Lord by fire. He has a defect; he must not come near to offer the food of his God.*

(cf. Parsons 2006:41)

Balentine suggests:

*In Israel's priestly system the concern for wholeness and integrity of the physical body is an extension of the understanding that God's holiness is perfect and complete. Holy and unblemished persons (and sacrifices) are external expressions of the requirement to be*

*holy as God is holy.*<sup>4</sup>

(Balentine 2002:169)

The Lord's promise that eunuchs would eschatologically be included in the cults suggests that they were excluded at that stage:

*To the eunuchs who keep my Sabbaths, who choose what pleases me and hold fast to my covenant – to them I will give within my temple and its walls a memorial and a name better than sons and daughters; I will give them an everlasting name that will not be cut off.*

(Is 56:4–5)

A radical change will take place regarding who is acceptable and who is not. The servant song of Isaiah offers a physical description of the servant:

*See, my servant will act wisely; he will be raised and lifted up and highly exalted. Just as there were many who were appalled at him – his appearance was so disfigured beyond that of any man and his form marred beyond human likeness – so will he sprinkle many nations...He had no beauty or majesty to attract us to him, nothing in his appearance that we should desire him. He was despised and rejected by men, a man of sorrows, and familiar with suffering. Like one from whom men hide their faces he was despised, and we esteemed him not...*

(Is 52:13–53:3)

The servant was rejected because of his physical appearance. Blenkinsopp (2002:352) recognises in this description an assumption of a causal relation between morals and physical affliction. Misfortune and sickness are the result of moral failure. This disfigured person becomes the awesome figure by the will of Yahweh: '[S]o will he sprinkle many nations, and kings will shut their mouths because of him. For what they were not told, they will see, and what they have not heard, they will understand' (Is 52:15). Apparently the author uses physiognomic conventions to illustrate the message.

Jewish literature indicates that a person with good eyes is morally sound: 'He who has a bountiful eye will be blessed, for he shares his bread with the poor' (Pr 22:9). Sirach declares:

*Evil is the man with a grudging eye; he averts his face and disregards people. A greedy man's eye is not satisfied with a portion, and mean injustice withers the soul. A stingy man's eye begrudges bread, and it is lacking at his table.*

(Sir 14:8–10)

In the Qumran community no one with deformities were allowed to enter their assemblies: 'The maimed, the lame, the deaf, and minors, none of these may enter the midst of the community' (4QD 171:6–9).

Later Jewish traditions broke the inherent link between a flawless human body and a holy heart. Rabbi Abba bar Judah said:

*Whatever the Holy One, blessed be He, declared unfit in the case of an animal, he declared fit in the case of man. In animals he declared unfit, blind, has a broken limb, is maimed ...*

(Lv 22:22)

whereas in man he declared fit 'a broken and contrite heart' (Ps 51:19) [Masoretic text]. Rabbi Alexandrini said:

*If an ordinary person makes use of broken vessels, it is a disgrace for him, but the vessels used by the Holy one, blessed be He, are precisely broken ones, as it is said "the Lord is nigh unto them that are of a broken heart" (Ps 34:18)*

(Leviticus Rabbah 7:2)

3. Pseudo-Aristotle mentions three kinds of physiognomic analysis: The anatomical, the zoological and ethnographical methods. The anatomical method looks at facial features and then identifies its corresponding emotion. The zoological method determines a person's character by observing similarities in appearance between a person and features of various animals. The ethnological method links collective behaviours of a particular race to their distinctive physical features.

4. The depiction of Saul and Absalom presume physiognomic awareness. Saul is described as 'an impressive young man without equal among the Israelites – a head taller than any of the others' (1 Sm 9:2). Of David is said 'He was ruddy, with a fine appearance and handsome features' (1 Sm 16:12). About Absalom we read: 'In all Israel there was not a man so highly praised for his handsome appearance as Absalom. From the top of his head to the sole of his foot there was no blemish in him. Whenever he cut the hair of his head – he used to cut his hair from time to time when it became too heavy for him – he would weigh it, and its weight was two hundred shekels by the royal standard' (2 Sm 14:25).

These Rabbis obviously referred to physiognomic convention but did not agree with them.

These few examples indicate an awareness of the idea that the body and soul react with each other, though it does not necessarily mean that biblical authors believed these conventions themselves.

### EXTRAMISSIION THEORIES OF VISION

According to the anonymous Pythagoreans, Pythagoras called the eyes 'gates of the sun' (Diels & Kranz 1972, 58B 1a). This reminds of the myth that the sun and the moon are considered to be the eyes of a cosmic deity (Betz 1979:46). The dominant theory among the Greeks was that the eye was like a lamp or even the sun, emitting rays or beams to the object seen and having an effect upon that object (Betz 1995:442; Elliott 1994:66; Van Bruggen 1990:114). In discussing the creation of the human body, Plato describes the human eye as a type of fire. When the eye is functioning well, this fire 'within us' (εἶν οὐ ἡμῶν) is 'pure' (εἰς ἰκρίνη-) and flows through the eyes out into the world (Timaeus 45B–46A). Empedocles (Fragment 84), as Plato, regards the eyes as channels for this outward-flowing fire. The eye was regarded as a source of power from which emanated some substance that settled on the object seen (Davies & Allison 2004:636).

In Egypt, it was said of Horus that after his eye had been thrown away by Seth, its parts were used to assemble the moon. The sun and the moon were considered the eyes of the heaven. Accordingly, Egyptians also regarded the human eye as self-luminous (Allison 1987:64).

Expressions in the Old Testament imply that the Jews thought of the eye as having its own light. 'The light of my eyes – it also has gone from me' (Ps 38[27]:10), 'The light of the eyes rejoices the heart' (Pr 15:30), 'The Lord gives light to the eyes' (Pr 29:13). In Tobit 10:5 we read: 'my child, that I let you go, you who are the light of my eyes'. Though these expressions could be interpreted metaphorically, the point of reference relies on common knowledge of the functioning of the eye. In eight places we read that eyes became darkened (Gn 27:1; 48:10; Dt 34:7; 1 Sm. 3:2; Job 17:7; Ps. 69:23; Lm 5:17; Zch 11:17). The most natural explanation for this metaphor is to recognise the correlation between the eye and the sun. As the heavenly source of light darkens, so too can the bodily source of light dim. In Daniel 10:2–9, Daniel has a vision of a glorious man. He describes him: 'His body was like beryl, his face like the appearance of lightning, his eyes like flaming torches...' (Dn 10:6). Zechariah tells of a vision in which he saw a lamp stand and seven lamps on it (Zch 4:1–14). The record of this vision is followed by a conversation with an angelic interpreter who concludes: 'These seven are the eyes of the Lord, which range through the whole earth' (Zch 4:10).

In the pseudepigraphical source, the Testament of Job, we find a clear statement of the extramission theory of vision: 'My eyes, acting as lamps, looked about' (Test. Job 18:4). Philo, the Alexandrian Jew, also followed this extramission theory of vision. He writes that the eyes 'reach out' and 'act upon objects' and that the light within us 'goes forth towards the things seen' (De Abr. 150–156) (Allison 1987:61). From these examples it seems that the theory of the extramission of vision was commonly assumed also in Jewish sources.

From extant evidence it therefore seems that the idea of intra-ocular fire or light was taken for granted by the general public and regarded as common wisdom.

This Pythagorean tradition also contained the dualism of φῶς and σκότος. Light and darkness are metaphors for 'truth' versus 'untruth' and 'knowledge' versus 'ignorance', and 'being' versus 'non-being'. Darkness is to the worst degree the nature of a corpse, which has no ability of cognition. If the human mind is illuminated by light, cognition can take place. This tradition

also separates the σῶμα and ψυχή which is also presupposed in Matthew 6, but ψυχή is not mentioned. Matthew 6:23 has τὸ φῶς τὸ ἐν σοὶ instead (Elliott 1994:68).

The intro-mission theory of vision was universally accepted only since the 16th century CE (Davies & Allison 2004:645). It would therefore be wrong to interpret the logion in Matthew 6:22–23 according to this later theory.

### EVIL EYE TRADITIONS

Fear of the evil eye and measures to ward off its harmful glance are attested throughout the regions of the ancient Near East and Circum-Mediterranean (Elliott 1994:52; Kotze 2007:141). Basic to this belief was the notion that certain individuals, animals, demons or gods had the power of injuring any object on which their glance fell. As explained above, the eye was not considered as a recipient of external light as in modern understanding, but an active agent. The eye was thought to possess light of 'fire'. The rays the eye emitted had a good or bad effect on the objects on which its glance fell (Allison 1987:65). This concept of an 'active' eye is explained in detail in by Plutarch (Moralia, Quaestionum convivialium, 680C–683B). An evil eye was believed to have the potential to cause harm to other persons or objects. It was thought that the squeezing of the eye when glaring had a stinging effect (Kotze 2007:144).

The eye was also thought to be directly linked to the heart, the organ of thought, desire and emotion (Elliott 1994:54, 67). Eyes expressed the innermost feelings and desires of the heart. Therefore a 'good eye' revealed morally good and generous intentions, while an 'evil eye' exposed an evil heart with wicked intentions of envy, greed and jealousy (Kotze 2007:143). Envy in turn was associated with unwillingness to share one's possessions with others. Envy was regarded as 'blindness of the soul'. Plutarch wrote:

*When those possessed by envy ... let their gaze fall upon a person, their eyes, which are close to the mind and draw from it the evil influence of the passion, then assail that person with poisoned arrows; hence, I conclude, it is not paradoxical or incredible that they should have an effect on the persons who encounter the gaze.*

(Moralia 681F–82)

Plinius the Elder wrote about the evil eye among African people:

*There are families in the same part of Africa that wield the evil eye, whose gazes cause meadows to dry up, trees to wither and infants to perish ... who also injure by the evil eye and who kill those at whom they stare for a longer time, especially with furious eyes.*

(Historia Naturalis 5.2.16–18)

Concurring with such physiognomic understanding, people with unusual physical features such as ocular impairment and blindness were regarded as potential possessors of the evil eye. In the Sophoclean tragedies the blind are seen not only as having transgressed moral boundaries and being a source of pollution, but also as persons who are able to inflict the evil eye (Elliott 1994:56).

Traces of the evil eye traditions can also be recognised in the Wisdom literature of the Hebrew Bible (Kotze 2007:145). Proverbs 16:30 reads: 'He who winks with his eye is plotting perversity; he who purses his lips is bent on evil'. These acts are ascribed to the violent man. The 'winking' of the eye seems to refer to squinting as in the evil eye traditions. Other examples are: 'Let not those gloat over me who are my enemies without cause; let not those who hate me without reason maliciously wink the eye' (Ps 35:19), 'Why has your heart carried you away, and why do your eyes flash' (Job 15:12) and 'my opponent fastens on me his piercing eyes' (Job 16:9). These acts are condemned and the corrupt nature of their possessors is accentuated.

The Testament of the Twelve Patriarchs takes up the extramission theory of vision related to evil eye traditions (cf. Betz 1995:448). This Testament is a pseudepigraphic document dating from the second or third century CE. The Joseph sage from Genesis 27–50 lies behind these confessional and exhortatory speeches. This document contains more than 50 references to envy related to the eye (Elliott 1994:68). Gad, for example, confesses: ‘for in the presence of my father I spoke peacefully to Joseph; but when I had gone out, the spirit of hatred darkened my mind’ (Testament of Gad 4:5). But Gad repented: ‘true repentance of a godly sort drives away darkness, and enlightens the eyes’ (Testament of Gad 5:7). Likewise the spirit of envy and anger consumed Dan and blinded him:

*For the spirit of anger ensnares a person in the nets of deceit, blinds his eyes, darkens his understanding by means of a lie and provides him with its own peculiar vision. By what means does it ensnare his eyes? By hatred in the heart, it gives one a peculiar disposition to envy his brother.*

(Testament of Dan 2:4–5)

A darkened eye is therefore an eye (and the person) beclouded by envy, greediness, lack of compassion and malice.

### ‘YOUR EYE IS THE LAMP OF YOUR BODY’ CULTURALLY AND HISTORICALLY CONTEXTUALISED

In the Sermon on the Mount Jesus speaks of the relationship between the eye and the body:

‘Ο λύχνος τοῦ σώματός ἐστιν ὁ ὀφθαλμός. ἐὰν οὖν ἡ ὀφθαλμός σου ἀπλοῦς, ὄλον τὸ σῶμά σου φωτεινὸν ἔσται· ἐὰν δὲ ὁ ὀφθαλμός σου πονηρὸς ἦ, ὄλον τὸ σῶμά σου σκοτεινὸν ἔσται. εἰ οὖν τὸ φῶς τὸ ἐν σοὶ σκότος ἐστίν, τὸ σκότος πόσον.

(Mt 6:22–23).

The formal structure of this logion could be presented as follows:

1. Definition of the human eye:

‘Ο λύχνος τοῦ σώματός ἐστιν ὁ ὀφθαλμός.

2. Physiological and paraenetical commentary:

2.1 Interpretation of the eye as the organ of vision:

2.1.1 The condition for proper vision:

ἐὰν οὖν ἡ ὀφθαλμός σου ἀπλοῦς (condition of eye)

ὄλον τὸ σῶμά σου φωτεινὸν ἔσται (positive result)

2.1.2 The condition for defective vision:

ἐὰν δὲ ὁ ὀφθαλμός σου πονηρὸς ἦ (condition of eye)

ὄλον τὸ σῶμά σου σκοτεινὸν ἔσται (negative result)

2.2 Interpretation of the image of the lamp

2.2.1 εἰ οὖν τὸ φῶς τὸ ἐν σοὶ σκότος ἐστίν (paradoxological possibility)

2.2.2 τὸ σκότος πόσον (exclamation of surprise)

‘Ο λύχνος τοῦ σώματός ἐστιν ὁ ὀφθαλμός’ (Mt 6:22a) is a definition of the human eye and a description of its functioning. From the previous discussion it is clear that Jewish tradition was familiar with the association of the eye with a lamp. Jewish hearers and readers would interpret this according to the well-known idea of the extramission theory of vision. For the ancient reader the most obvious way to interpret the relationship between ‘ὁ λύχνος’ and ‘τοῦ σώματός’ would be as a genetivus subjectivus.

The definition of the eye is followed by physiological commentary (indicated by the introductory words ἐὰν οὖν (Mt 6:22b), ἐὰν δὲ (Mt 6:23a) and εἰ οὖν (Mt 6:23b) in paraenetical form on its functions (cf. Betz 1979:46). This commentary forms an antithetical *isocolon* (the cola of 2.1.1 being parallel to those in 2.1.2) and using *homoioleuton* (with their similar sounding endings). The parallelism is then adjoined to the sentence of Matthew 6:22a by way of *chiasm*. Mt 6:22a (colon 1) names the

lamp first and then the eye, while Mt 6:22b–23 discuss the eye first (cola in 2.1) and then the lamp (cola 2.2). The commentary proceeds from the objective phenomena stated in the third person singular (colon 1) to the paraenetic second person singular (cola in 2).

The first part of the paraenesis interprets the eye metaphor. It explains proper vision in terms of the condition of the eye and the positive result of that (ἐὰν οὖν ἡ ὀφθαλμός σου ἀπλοῦς, ὄλον τὸ σῶμά σου φωτεινὸν ἔσται) (Mt 6:22b) as well as the contrasting malfunctioning eye and the negative result of that (ἐὰν δὲ ὁ ὀφθαλμός σου πονηρὸς ἦ, ὄλον τὸ σῶμά σου σκοτεινὸν ἔσται) (Mt 6:23a). The second part of the commentary provides the paraenetical commentary based on the image of the lamp (εἰ οὖν τὸ φῶς τὸ ἐν σοὶ σκότος ἐστίν, τὸ σκότος πόσον) (Mt 6:23b). This final part of the commentary contains a concise oxymoron (τὸ φῶς τὸ ἐν σοὶ σκότος ἐστίν, τὸ σκότος πόσον) using *reduplication* (σκότος ... σκότος) and ending with an *exclamation* of bewilderment (τὸ σκότος πόσον). This second part of the paraenesis makes sense with the extramission theory of vision. The light in ὁ λύχνος is identified as τὸ φῶς τὸ ἐν σοὶ. This lamp in the body provides light and makes vision possible. The light flows from the eye.

In this commentary attention moves from the physiological to the moral level. Jesus uses two contrasting terms to indicate whether the eye is capable of seeing: ἀπλοῦς<sup>5</sup> and πονηρὸς. In physiological terms these words contrast ‘healthy’ versus ‘sick and malfunctioning’ and in ethical terms ‘sincere, undivided, pure and generous’ versus ‘evil, selfish, grudging and wicked’ (cf. Luz 1989:397). The reader is led to think of the physiological facts and then move on to their ethical connotation. Mere physiological explanations are replaced by ethical considerations. The ethical character of a person determines whether or not the eyes function properly. If the person has no internal light, he would not be able to see. Within an ethical context the eye is defected by sinfulness to cause the light to go out: τὸ φῶς τὸ ἐν σοὶ σκότος (the *lumen internum* is lost). In such cases the eye is not the real cause of sin, but the internal light that has turned into darkness. The result finds expression in the climactic conclusion ‘τὸ σκότος πόσον’.

When read according to ancient convictions about eyes and vision, the eye is physiologically regarded as an organ that emits light. Therefore it can be compared with a light and metaphorically be described as the lamp of the body. The ἀπλοῦς eye indicates an eye that is physically healthy and that reflects moral integrity, generosity and light. A good eye gives evidence of inner light. Where there is a good eye, it is a result of light within. The opposite to the ἀπλοῦς eye is the one that is πονηρὸς. The attributes most commonly associated with the πονηρὸς eye are selfishness, envy, greed and the refusal to share one’s means with others in need (cf. Dt 15:7–11<sup>6</sup>). Such an attitude can harm other human beings, their possessions and relationships. A πονηρὸς eye was regarded as a ‘darkened’ eye, a blinded eye, which signalled that a person was full of moral darkness (Keener 1999:232). In such a person there was no longer light (cf. Jn 11:9–10<sup>7</sup> and Sir 18:18<sup>8</sup>). Darkness and light are contrary powers with opposite effects. Light is the source of all good fruits and darkness of all bad fruits (cf. Eph 5:7–14).

The logion on the eye fits into a section of exhortation in the Sermon on the Mount (Mt 6:19–34) in which antithetical attitudes and behaviours with regard to one’s treasures (Mt

5. ἀπλοῦς occurs in the New Testament again only in Luke 11:34 (parallel to Mt 6:22) in terms of generosity. Matthew uses πονηρὸς 26 times and usually in an ethical sense (Morris 1992: 154).

6. If there is a poor man among your brothers in any of the towns of the land that the Lord your God is giving you, do not be hardhearted or tightfisted toward your poor brother (15:7). Rather be openhanded and freely lend him whatever he needs (15:8). Be careful not to harbour this wicked thought: ‘The seventh year, the year for canceling debts, is near,’ so that you do not show ill will (πονηρέσθαι ὁ ὀφθαλμός σου τὸ ἀδελφῆ σου) toward your needy brother and give him nothing. He may then appeal to the Lord against you, and you will be found guilty of sin (15:9). Give generously to him and do so without a grudging heart; then because of this the Lord your God will bless you in all your work and in everything you put your hand to (15:10). There will always be poor people in the land. Therefore I command you to be openhanded toward your brothers and toward the poor and needy in your land (15:11).

6:19–21), loyalties (Mt 6:24) and means of survival (Mt 6:25–34) are discussed. This section strikes at the core of human selfishness, challenging both those that have possessions and the poor who wish to acquire them (Keener 1999:228). The logion on the eye shares the same contrasting structure of the preceding and following logia: having a treasure on earth or in heaven and one's attitudes towards possessions (Mt 6:19–21), serving God or mammon – one's money or property (Mt 6:24), and anxiety over material things versus trust in God (Mt 6:25–34). Christians must not seek material gain, but trust God to provide for genuine needs. One's relationship to possessions remains central. Outward actions result from inner attitudes. Lack of generosity is signalled by an 'evil eye' (cf. Harrington 1991:101).

This collection of logia shows many similarities with an eye saying in the book of Tobit:

*Give alms from your possessions to all who live uprightly, and do not let your eye begrudge the gift when you make it. Do not turn your face away from any poor man, and the face of God will not be turned away from you. If you have many possessions, make your gift from them in proportion; if few, do not be afraid to give according to the little you have. So you will be laying up a good treasure for yourself against the day of necessity. For charity delivers from death and keeps you from entering the darkness; and for all who practice it charity is an excellent offering in the presence of the Most High.*

(Tob 4:7–11)

A direct correlation between the condition of the eye and outward actions is indicated.

*Jesus is concerned about the relationship between the eye and the inner body. The listener is called to self-examination: See to it, then, that the light within you is not darkness.*

(cf. Lk 11:35)

## CONCLUSION

The logion of Matthew 6:22–23 does not make sense when interpreted within the modern understanding of vision. Interpreted according to the modern intromission theory of vision, it would imply that the eye is seen as a window through which light enters into the body. Such an interpretation is anachronistic. The saying makes sense in a picturesque way when interpreted in terms of the ancient extramission theory of vision. The proverbial notion that the eye is the lamp of the body suggests that the eye emits rays when looking. According to the custom to find a direct correlation between body and character in ancient understanding the state of an eye signifies the internal character of a being. Therefore the description of the physical eye should be interpreted in ethical terms. Sight is a function of moral light within a person. The eye is the channel from which innermost moral attitudes of the heart flows. In the eyes the character and moral quality of a person are reflected.

The gist of this saying is: If the eye is healthy, it functions as the light of the body and indicates that the owner is sincere, generous and helpful. The owner has moral integrity and seeks the welfare of others. But when the eye turns bad and evil, it indicates that the owner is stingy and envious, even to the point of wishing that the wealth of others be destroyed. Therefore the text is not merely concerned with the nature of the person, but with his or her actions that are caused by such nature – either selfish greed or obedience, Godly trust and generosity with regard to one's treasures (Mt 6:19–21), loyalties (Mt 6:24) and means of survival (Mt 6:25–34).

This logion is uttered to provoke concern about inner light. The conscientious hearer should consider: What if my inner light is darkened? How can it be enlightened again? I have to uphold the virtue of generosity in a culture of rife competition for rare resources.

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7. Are there not twelve hours of daylight? A man who walks by day will not stumble, for he sees by this world's light.<sup>10</sup> It is when he walks by night that he stumbles, for he has no light (τὸ φῶς οὐκ ἔστιν ἐν αὐτῷ).

8. A fool is ungracious and abusive, and the gift of a grudging man makes the eyes dim.