

## **Sapiential Synesthesia: The Confluence of Light and Word in Ben Sira's Wisdom Instruction**

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### **I. Introduction**

On three separate occasions, the Book of Sirach (ca. 185 B.C.E.) characterizes the activity of wisdom teaching as a confluence of light and word. In the first instance, the book's author, Ben Sira, prefaces one of his wisdom instructions as follows:

Yet being so disposed *I will tell in full* (ἐκδιηγῆσομαι), for *like the full moon I was filled* (ὡς διχομηνία ἐπληρώθην; Sir 39.12).<sup>1</sup>

The simile conjures a sage at the moment of instruction brimming with knowledge. On the verge of dispensing his wisdom, light wells up inside Ben Sira to the point that he luminesces.

Second, in his meditation on the vocation of the sage (Sir 38.24-39.11), Ben Sira first describes workers in various trades who toil with their hands. In contrast to these manual laborers, the wisdom teacher labors with his mouth. Many of the images used to describe the sage's activities are verbal: he studies wisdom, prophecies, discourses, proverbs, and parables (39.1-3). But when Ben Sira describes the instructional activity of the wisdom teacher, he again combines visual and verbal imagery: the sage "*himself will bring to light the instruction of his learning*" (ἐκφανεῖ παιδείαν διδασκαλίας αὐτοῦ; Sir 39.6-8). Through the act of teaching, the sage converts verbal instruction into a luminous substance.

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<sup>1</sup> See the comparison in Sir 50.6b of the high priest Simon to "the full moon." The contexts of the two similes, however, differ. In the case of the high priest, Simon appears radiant during the temple liturgy, whereas Ben Sira luminesces during wisdom instruction.

Third, in Sir 24 Ben Sira identifies his own sapiential instruction with personified Wisdom and then describes the process of his teaching, once more blending the verbal and the visual:

I will again *illuminate instruction like the dawn* (παιδείαν ὡς ὄρθρον φωτιῶ), and *make them visible* (ἐκφανῶ αὐτά) from far off (Sir 24.32).

The antecedent of αὐτά (them) is most probably ταῦτα (these things) in Sir 24.23, referring to all that Ben Sira has said about personified Wisdom in 24.1-22. Thus, Sir 24.32 suggests that the sage will illuminate all these things he has discovered about wisdom, so that others can see them from a distance.

Ben Sira frequently employs sensory metaphors in his work, yet rarely does he combine visual and verbal metaphors into a single image.<sup>2</sup> These three descriptions of wisdom instruction stand out in the book of Sirach as uncommon examples in which the sage merges seemingly incompatible images. Why would a teacher radiate light at the moment of verbal instruction? Or what could it mean to convert verbal instruction into light?

I propose that Ben Sira's combination of visual and verbal metaphors to describe wisdom teaching is neither mere poetic embellishment nor a clumsy mixing of metaphors. Rather, by analyzing these combinations of visual and verbal metaphors in light of contemporaneous Greek conceptions of ocular and aural perception, I argue that Ben Sira generates a symbolic synesthesia that points to the pivotal role of the sage in the process of wisdom transmission. Moreover, the combinations of visual and verbal metaphors express the sage's experience of the teaching *event* as extraordinary. Through this symbolic synesthesia, the sage characterizes himself as someone who is especially well-positioned to communicate divine wisdom to his students.

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<sup>2</sup> The only other example I have found is Ben Sira's description of Elijah (Sir 48.1). See more on this passage at the end of the present paper.

I interpret Ben Sira's sensory metaphors using what Lakoff and Johnson term an experientialist approach. Neither completely subjective nor fully objective, an experientialist approach views most concepts as created through an interaction of human biology and the world.<sup>3</sup> A key element in this experientialist approach is the notion that humans reason about subjective experience—Knowing, for example—based on other domains of experience, most commonly sensorimotor domains. The primary cognitive mechanism for conceptualizing subjective experience is “conceptual metaphor.”<sup>4</sup> A conceptual metaphor is a mapping from one conceptual domain to another, and such mappings “structure our reasoning, our experience, and our everyday language.”<sup>5</sup> For example, the common conceptual metaphor KNOWING IS SEEING maps inference patterns about the source domain “vision” onto inference patterns about the target domain “knowledge.”<sup>6</sup>

## II. Visual and Aural Modes of Knowing in Sirach

It is not surprising that the Book of Sirach employs visual and verbal metaphors, given that Ben Sira worked within the Jewish wisdom tradition. Jewish wisdom literature belongs to a larger family of literature widespread in the ancient Near East during the second and first millennia B.C.E.<sup>7</sup> The wisdom tradition derived principles for living well from observations on nature and everyday life.<sup>8</sup> Sages distilled these observations into pithy sayings and then

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<sup>3</sup> George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, *Philosophy in the Flesh: The Embodied Mind and Its Challenge to Western Thought* (New York: Basic Books, 1999), 24-5. For more on the myths of objectivism and subjectivism, as well as the experientialist alternative, see George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980), 185-237.

<sup>4</sup> Lakoff and Johnson, *Philosophy in the Flesh*, 45. On conceptual metaphor, see also Lakoff and Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By*.

<sup>5</sup> Lakoff and Johnson, *Philosophy in the Flesh*, 47.

<sup>6</sup> See Lakoff and Johnson, *Philosophy in the Flesh*, 53-4.

<sup>7</sup> On the description of wisdom literature as a family rather than a genre, see John J. Collins, *Jewish Wisdom in the Hellenistic Age*, OTL (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1997), 1.

<sup>8</sup> In this respect, the wisdom tradition has much in common with natural theology. See James Barr, *Biblical Faith and Natural Theology* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1993), 90-4; John J. Collins, "The Biblical Precedent for Natural Theology," *JAAR* 45, no. 1 (1977): 35-67; idem, "Natural Theology and Biblical Tradition: The Case of Hellenistic Judaism," *CBQ* 60, no. 1 (1998): 1-15. On the significance of visual observation of

transmitted them through verbal media.<sup>9</sup> While Jewish sages valued both visual observation of nature and aural reception of sapiential instruction, the two modalities represented different ways of knowing: to see something for one's self and to hear something from another.

These two ways of knowing are evident from a statement in Ben Sira's poem about human free will and personal responsibility (Sir 15.11-16.23). In the poem, Ben Sira lists several examples of human wickedness. He prefaces the list as follows:

Sir 16.5a	רבות כאלה ראתה עיני
b	ועצמות מאלה <sup>10</sup> שמעה אזני
Sir 16.5a	Many such things my eye has seen,
b	and many more than these my ear has heard.

The A and B lines of this poetic couplet suggest, respectively, two primary metaphors: KNOWING IS SEEING and KNOWING IS HEARING. The point of the preface is not that Ben Sira has literally seen the following examples of human wickedness and has heard of others—though this is undoubtedly true. Rather, the preface indicates that he *knows* these examples of human behavior to be wicked.

These two metaphors for knowing, however, do not imply the same mode of knowledge acquisition. In Sirach, the KNOWING IS SEEING metaphor connotes *first-hand knowledge gained through personal experience*, whereas KNOWING IS HEARING indicates *second-hand knowledge acquired through verbal report*. This distinction between direct and indirect knowledge underscores a contrast implied in the poetic couplet: while Ben Sira knows of numerous examples of human wickedness from second-hand reports, he claims a

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nature in Sirach, see Greg Schmidt Goering, *Wisdom's Root Revealed: Ben Sira and the Election of Israel*, ed. Hindy Najman, JSJSup 139 (Leiden: Brill, 2009), 45-9.

<sup>9</sup> On the anthological impulse of the wisdom tradition, see James L. Kugel, "Wisdom and the Anthological Temper," *Proof* 17 (1997): 9-32.

<sup>10</sup> MS A and MS B read כאלה and באלה, respectively. For a discussion of text-critical issues and the emendation מאלה, see Patrick W. Skehan and Alexander A. Di Lella, *The Wisdom of Ben Sira*, AB 39 (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1987), 270.

direct connection to other such examples through his own first-hand experience—things he has seen with his own eye.<sup>11</sup>

Ben Sira’s discussion of his journeys offers also highlights the direct nature of knowing implied through the visual metaphor. Ben Sira advocates foreign travel for the sage (Sir 34.9-13), because of the first-hand knowledge one can gain:

Sir 34.12a	πολλά ἑώρακα ἐν τῇ ἀποπλανήσει μου
b	καὶ πλείονα τῶν λόγων μου σύ νεσίς μου
Sir 34.12a	I have seen much in my travels;
b	my understanding exceeds what I can say.

Here the parallelism between “have seen” and “understanding” suggests an underlying metaphor UNDERSTANDING IS SEEING, a metaphor closely associated to KNOWING IS SEEING. Within the context of traveling, the visual metaphor communicates an experiential kind of learning acquired through direct, first-hand encounter.

Conversely, the KNOWING IS HEARING metaphor in Sirach frequently refers to knowledge that is gained second hand. For example, those unschooled in wisdom are urged to avail themselves of instruction through aural means.

Sir 6.33a	אם תובא לשמע [תקח] <sup>12</sup>
b	והט אזנך תוסר
Sir 6.33a	If you are willing to listen, you will benefit;
b	incline your ear, you will be instructed.

The kind of knowledge associated with hearing is not that of first-hand visual observation. Rather it is knowledge gained indirectly from the instruction of others.

Thus we are able to formulate more precisely these two primary metaphors as follows: *DIRECT* KNOWING IS SEEING and *INDIRECT* KNOWING IS HEARING. These primary

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<sup>11</sup> Cf. the similar distinction between seeing as a metaphor for first-hand knowledge and hearing as a metaphor for second-hand knowledge in Job 42.5.

<sup>12</sup> MS A omits תקח, but its reconstruction is based on ἐκδέξῃ (wait for, expect) in G and ܠܠܗܢ (learn) in Syr. See M. H. Segal, *The Complete Book of Ben Sira (in Hebrew)*, 2d ed. (Jerusalem: Bialik Institute, 1958), מב; and Skehan and Di Lella, *Wisdom of Ben Sira*, 192.

metaphors can be understood as embodied, in the sense that they develop out of the general human experiences of vision and audition. The experience of visually acquiring an object appears to create a direct connection between subject and object. In contrast, the experience of aurally perceiving a sound appears to connect subject and object only indirectly. As Lakoff and Johnson argue, because they are rooted in an interaction between human biology and the world, primary metaphors are widespread despite other cultural variations.<sup>13</sup> It should come as no surprise, then, that the metaphors DIRECT KNOWING IS SEEING and INDIRECT KNOWING IS HEARING closely parallel ancient Greek assumptions about vision and audition.

### **III. Ben Sira's Sensory Metaphors and Greek Assumptions about Vision and Audition**

In order to understand better Ben Sira's metaphoric uses of seeing and hearing, we ought to inquire after the supposed physiological basis for vision and audition by thinkers in his Hellenistic cultural context. Three assumptions guide this inquiry. First, the uses of sensory metaphors in literary discourse are related to cultural understandings about the physiological operation of the senses. When an author employs visual and aural metaphors, at least part of the meaning is derived from the author's assumptions about the operation of seeing and hearing.<sup>14</sup> Second, despite the widespread nature of primary conceptual metaphors, these assumptions about the physiological operation of the senses vary from culture to culture and must be understood in terms of local, cultural understandings of sense perception.<sup>15</sup> Third, contemporaneous Hellenistic speculations on vision and audition

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<sup>13</sup> Lakoff and Johnson, *Philosophy in the Flesh*, 56.

<sup>14</sup> As David Chidester has argued in his study of sensory perception in the religious discourse of Augustine of Hippo, certain assumptions about the physiology of seeing and hearing were implicated in the church father's deployment of sensory metaphors: "When Augustine referred to the 'eye of the soul' or the 'ear of the heart,' at least one aspect of signification was drawn from his understanding of how eyes and ears worked." David Chidester, *Word and Light: Seeing, Hearing, and Religious Discourse* (Urbana, Ill.: University of Illinois Press, 1992), 2.

<sup>15</sup> As Chidester remarks: "A phenomenology of perception must be sensitive to the ways in which the senses were understood to operate within specific historical and cultural contexts." Chidester, *Word and Light*, 2.

provide a starting point for identifying general cultural assumptions of sense perception that inform the book of Sirach. Although Ben Sira composed his work in Hebrew, he did so in the Hellenistic cultural context of second-century B.C.E. Jerusalem. Given time constraints, I will briefly summarize my findings, drawing on David Chidester's analysis of ancient Greek speculations about the function of seeing and hearing.<sup>16</sup> As Chidester notes, ancient Greek authors thought that the perceptual modes of vision and audition were organized in distinctive ways.

Most Greek authors explained sight as the consequence of the eye having an instantaneous and unbroken connection with an object.<sup>17</sup> In the theory of vision that most closely approximates Ben Sira's theory, rays emanate from an intraocular fire, reach out to "touch" objects, and then return again to the eye.<sup>18</sup> Alcmaeon of Croton (late 6th cent., early 5th cent. B.C.E.), for example, held this extramission theory of vision.<sup>19</sup> Similarly, Empedocles (ca. 490–430 B.C.E.) compares the eye to a lantern, which protects the inner fire from wind yet permits its light to pass through.<sup>20</sup> Plato (ca. 427—ca. 347 B.C.E.) developed Alcmaeon's intraocular fire theory and argued that seeing also requires reflections from visible objects (like the Atomists), as well as an external light source. In Plato's formulation, sight is possible, because the external light permits rays emanating from the visual fire of the eye to form an ongoing connection with the reflections emitted

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<sup>16</sup> Chidester, *Word and Light*, 2-8.

<sup>17</sup> As Chidester observes, "Particularly in Platonic and Stoic theory..., vision appeared as a process initiated by the perceiving subject, harmonized with an external source or illumination, which united the subject in continuous, immediate contact with the object of vision." Chidester, *Word and Light*, 6. On the three basic ancient Greek theories of vision, see W. K. C. Guthrie, *A History of Greek Philosophy*, 2 vols., vol. 2 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1965), 234.

<sup>18</sup> See John I. Beare, *Greek Theories of Elementary Cognition: From Alcmaeon to Aristotle* (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1906), 12. Note the common primary metaphor SEEING IS TOUCHING that lies behind this tactile conception of vision; see Lakoff and Johnson, *Philosophy in the Flesh*, 54.

<sup>19</sup> Theophr. *De sensu* 26; trans. Beare, *Greek Theories of Elementary Cognition*, 11. Diogenes Laertius VIII, 83 indicates that Alcmaeon was a pupil of Pythagoras, or in a Pythagorean school. See G. S. Kirk and J. E. Raven, *The Presocratic Philosophers: A Critical History with a Selection of Texts* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1957), 232.

<sup>20</sup> Empedocles, Fr. 84; Hermann Diels and Walther Kranz, eds., *Die Fragmente der Vorsokratiker*, 7th ed., 3 vols., vol. 1 (Berlin: Weidmannsche, 1954), 341-2; trans. Guthrie, *A History of Greek Philosophy*, 235.

by the object.<sup>21</sup> That Ben Sira held some version of the extramission theory, seems evident from the allusion to an intraocular fire in Sir 3.25a. This conclusion appears to be confirmed from Ben Sira's statements about divine vision in a passage about adultery in Sir 28.18-19. The latter passage also suggests that Ben Sira, like Plato, thought an external light source was necessary for vision to occur.<sup>22</sup> Because of the immediate and continuous connection created through the bond of sight, visual objects were thought to be present (not merely represented) to their beholder.

Ancient Greek philosophers thought that audition operated independently of vision. As an independent perceptual apparatus, audition involved modes of perception that differed from the perceptual modes of vision. Whereas seeing was associated with activity, continuity, and immediacy, hearing was associated with passivity, discontinuity, and temporality. When ancient Greek thinkers considered audition, they provided a relatively consistent explanation: hearing results from a disturbance to the air produced by an external entity; the disturbance then journeys over an expanse and makes contact with the ear. For example, Anaxagoras (ca. 500-428 B.C.E.) speculated that when breath crashes into non-moving air, the latter carries sound to the ear "in the manner of an echo (ἠχώ)." <sup>23</sup> Similarly, Alcmaeon understood that the air inside the ear reproduces an echo of external sounds.<sup>24</sup> Empedocles thought that the voice stirs the air, sending waves of air toward the ear. These waves then enter and ring (ἠχη) within the ear. Where Empedocles had compared the eye to a lantern, he described the ear as a bell: when the air strikes the cartilage inside the ear, the ear resounds (ἠχων) with a sound equal to the original sound.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> *Timaeus* 45b-46d. Cited in Chidester, *Word and Light*, 4.

<sup>22</sup> Cf. Sir 16.17-23; 17.15, 19-20; 39.19.

<sup>23</sup> Aët. 4.19.5 (A106). Cited in Guthrie, *A History of Greek Philosophy*, 318 n 3. Cf. Beare, *Greek Theories of Elementary Cognition*, 104.

<sup>24</sup> "Hearing is through the ears because they contain void, which resounds (ἠχεῖν). Sound is produced in the cavity, and the air echoes (ἀντηχεῖν) it." Theophr. *De sensu*, 25; text in Beare, *Greek Theories of Elementary Cognition*, 93 n 1; ET W. K. C. Guthrie, *A History of Greek Philosophy*, 2 vols., vol. 1 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1962), 347-8.

<sup>25</sup> See Theophr. *De sensu*, 9; Aët. 4.16.1 (A93). Cited in Guthrie, *A History of Greek Philosophy*, 238-9. Text in Beare, *Greek Theories of Elementary Cognition*, 96 n 1.



Similarly, Plato thought that sound results from a blow (πληγή) that passes through the air to the ears, the brain, the blood, and the soul. The sensation of hearing stems from the vibration of this blow, beginning in the head and ending in the liver.<sup>26</sup> Much like these Greek philosophers, Ben Sira took for granted that externally produced sounds acted upon the ear (Sir 38.28).<sup>27</sup>

From this cursory survey, one can observe that Greek philosophers contrasted the modes of perception that were operative in vision and audition. While seeing was thought typically to be initiated by the eye, hearing involved the passive reception of sound by the ear. Vision involved an instantaneous and continuous connection between eye and object through space, whereas the process of audition occurred in time, over an expanse, and suggested discontinuity between the hearer and the sonant event. I have summarized these major associations between seeing and hearing and each of their perceived modalities in the following table.

<u>Seeing</u>	<u>Hearing</u>
eye	ear
active	passive
space	time
simultaneity/immediacy	sequence/temporality
continuity	discontinuity
connection	distance
presentation	representation
similarity	difference

These Greek cultural assumptions regarding the fundamental differences between the perceived modes of vision and audition inform the metaphorical use of seeing and hearing in religious discourse. When authors who operate under these cultural assumptions communicate via visual metaphors, they connote activity, immediacy, continuity, and

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<sup>26</sup> *Timaeus* 67b; ET B. Jowett.

<sup>27</sup> For the verb in this colon, G reads κατατελει (to make new), which implies Heb יחדש. Skehan and Di Lella suggest that G made the common scribal error of reading ד for ג; Skehan and Di Lella, *Wisdom of Ben Sira*, 448. With them and Segal I therefore read יחדיש (deafens); see Segal, *The Complete Book of Ben Sira (in Hebrew)*, רגז, רגא. The precise mechanism by which Ben Sira thought the ear perceived sound, however, cannot be recovered directly from his work.

connection. Similarly, when such authors employ aural metaphors, they signal passivity, temporality, discontinuity, and distance. Let me now examine how Ben Sira builds complex metaphors by combining primary visual and aural metaphors for ways of knowing with specific cultural beliefs.

#### IV. Cultural Beliefs and Complex Metaphors for the Perception of Wisdom

Primary conceptual metaphors are largely rooted in embodied experience, which explains why they are widespread across many cultures. But humans are not limited to these primary conceptual metaphors. Rather, according to Lakoff and Johnson, humans use primary metaphors and culturally acquired forms of knowledge to build “complex metaphors.”<sup>28</sup> The incorporation of local forms of knowledge into complex metaphors explains cultural variation in the use of metaphors. As we will see, Ben Sira combines primary metaphors and cultural knowledge, in order to form complex models for the acquisition and dissemination of knowledge.

##### *WISDOM IS LIGHT*

One central cultural belief for Ben Sira is the notion that YHWH distributed wisdom throughout the natural world:

Sir 1.9b	καὶ ἐξέχεεν αὐτὴν ἐπὶ πάντα τὰ ἔργα αὐτοῦ
10a	μετὰ πάσης σαρκὸς κατὰ τὴν δόσιν αὐτοῦ
b	καὶ ἐχορήγησεν αὐτὴν τοῖς ἀγαπῶσιν αὐτόν
Sir 1.9b	He poured out [wisdom] upon all his works,
10a	among all flesh according to his largess,
b	and he lavished her upon those who love him.

This cultural belief suggested that one only needed to gaze at the natural world in order to perceive wisdom.<sup>29</sup> The natural world (creations) in Sirach tends to be thought of in terms

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<sup>28</sup> Lakoff and Johnson, *Philosophy in the Flesh*, 60.

<sup>29</sup> Cf. Prov 3.19; 8.22–31; Job 28; 38–41.

of objects, and since objects are visible, this cultural belief in the outpouring of divine wisdom on creation led to the “cultural metaphor” WISDOM IS LIGHT.<sup>30</sup>

In Sirach, the WISDOM IS LIGHT metaphor operates in two ways. First, WISDOM IS LIGHT suggests that wisdom is something visible to human beings. Verbs of ocular perception appear prominently in the creation poem of Sir 42.15–43.33.<sup>31</sup> The final couplets of the entire poem juxtapose seeing the works (creations) of YHWH and the reception of wisdom (Sir 43.32-3). Ben Sira emphasizes the ubiquity of visible wisdom throughout the natural world using an analogy:

Sir 42.16a b	שמש זהרת על כל נגלתה וכבוד יי מלא מעשיו <sup>32</sup>
Sir 42.16a b	As the shining sun reveals itself to all, so the glory of YHWH fills his works.

In Sirach, YHWH’s כבוד—his glory or visible manifestation—is closely associated with Wisdom.<sup>33</sup> The verse suggests that, in the same way that the sun’s light manifests itself to all human beings, YHWH’s glory or wisdom is also visible to all, because it permeates his observable works of nature.<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> Cultural metaphor is my tentative term for a metaphor derived solely from cultural beliefs.

<sup>31</sup> In 42.15b, Ben Sira suggests that he will recount what he has seen (חזית). This verb forms an inclusio with ראיתי (I saw) at the end of the poem in 43.32b, where Ben Sira notes that he has observed only a few of YHWH’s numerous creations. Other references to human observation of divine works appear in Sir 42.22b and 25b. See Núria Calduch-Benages, “God, Creator of All (Sir 43:27–33),” in *Ben Sira’s God: Proceedings of the International Ben Sira Conference*, ed. Renate Egger-Wenzel (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2002), 87.

<sup>32</sup> MS B reads, “The glory of YHWH is upon (על) all his works,” while MS M suggests that “The [gl]ory of the Lord (אדני) fills (מלא) his works.” In either case, the implication is that God’s glory is visible to human beings in the natural world. In this stanza, the term “glory” (כבוד) also appears in v 17d, and references to God’s works (מעשים) also occur in vv 15a and 22a.

<sup>33</sup> On the term “glory” (כבוד) as a symbol for wisdom in Sirach, see Burton L. Mack, *Wisdom and the Hebrew Epic: Ben Sira’s Hymn in Praise of the Fathers* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985), 167–71. That Ben Sira would associate glory with wisdom, which as we saw the sage depicts in terms of light, should not surprise, given the biblical associations of the divine כבוד and light. Frank Moore Cross suggests that the use of כבוד as a reference to divine manifestation may derive from either “the refulgent and radiant aureole which surrounds the deity in his manifestations or theophanies” or “the dark but fiery storm cloud especially associated with the theophany of the storm god.” See Frank Moore Cross, *Canaanite Myth and Hebrew Epic: Essays in the History of the Religion of Israel* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1973), 153 n 30. Cf. pp 165–9, where Cross prefers the latter option.

<sup>34</sup> Perdue reads the analogy of the sun somewhat differently: “Thus God’s glory, like the rays of the sun, is present in all of his works, and they in turn reveal his greatness.” In Perdue’s interpretation of the analogy,

Second, the WISDOM IS LIGHT metaphor suggests that wisdom makes vision possible. The analogy in Sir 3.25 suggests this other way in which WISDOM IS LIGHT:

Sir 3.25a	באין אישון יחסר אור
b	ובאין דעת תחסר חכמה
Sir 3.25a	Where there is no pupil [of the eye], light is lacking;
b	and where there is no knowledge, wisdom is lacking.

In the couplet's parallelism, knowledge corresponds to the pupil, which according to the extramission theory permits the intraocular fire to leave the eye, make contact with an object, and reenter the eye. Wisdom corresponds to light, or the inner fire itself, that which makes seeing possible. Thus, for Ben Sira, the cultural metaphor WISDOM IS LIGHT suggest not only that divine wisdom is visible to humans through the natural world but also that wisdom makes a certain kind of vision possible.

The cultural belief in an outpouring of divine wisdom upon creation was naturally combined with the primary conceptual metaphor DIRECT KNOWING IS SEEING. Together these suggested a complex metaphor DIRECT PERCEPTION OF WISDOM IS SEEING THE NATURAL WORLD. The complex metaphor connotes the ability of humans to obtain first-hand knowledge of the divinely created order through observation of the natural world. Given the spatial associations with vision which we observed in the ancient Greek sources, the metaphor of sight inferred the discernment of patterns, and those patterns could be assigned meaning. Ben Sira thought it possible to apprehend meaning through contemplation of patterns in the natural world. For the sage, the meaningful patterns were meaningful precisely because they reflected the Wisdom by which YHWH had ordered the universe.

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Ben Sira suggests that YHWH's glory penetrates all his creations in the same way that the sun sends its rays upon everything (כל). *Wisdom and Creation*, 279–80. While Ben Sira would agree that YHWH's glory is manifest in all his works (42.16b), I understand the analogy of the sun to suggest the visibility of the divine כבוד through the natural world, just as the light of the sun is visible to human beings. Cf. the universal effect of the sun implied in Ps 19.7 [Eng. 6]. See the comments of Barr, *Biblical Faith and Natural Theology*, 87–8.

## WISDOM IS WORD

A second cultural belief lies behind another of Ben Sira's complex metaphors:

divine orality possesses a generative capacity. Into the sapiential tradition of creation by means of wisdom (Prov 3.19; 8.22-31; cf. Ps 104.24), Ben Sira's incorporates the priestly author's account of creation through divine speech in Gen 1.1-2.4a.<sup>35</sup> Not only does Ben Sira assert that the natural world came about "by YHWH's word" (בְּאִמְרַת יְהוָה; 42.15c),<sup>36</sup> and that YHWH's word continues to manage the functioning of the natural world,<sup>37</sup> but he also claims that personified Wisdom emanated "from the mouth of the Most High" (ἐγὼ ἀπὸ στόματος ὑψίστου ἐξηλθον; 24.3a). This belief leads to the cultural metaphor WISDOM IS WORD, which has two implications in Sirach.

A first implication of the WISDOM IS WORD metaphor is the conception that divine commandments are received aurally. In Sirach 24, Ben Sira famously correlates Wisdom and Torah. In this chapter, not only does Wisdom emanate from the mouth of the deity as a kind of verbal revelation (v 3), she also communicates her own revelation verbally.

Sir 24.1a	ἡ σοφία αἰνέσει ψυχὴν αὐτῆς
b	καὶ ἐν μέσῳ λαοῦ αὐτῆς καυχήσεται
2a	ἐν ἐκκλησίᾳ ὑψίστου στόμα αὐτῆς ἀνοίξει
b	καὶ ἔναντι δυνάμεως αὐτοῦ καυχήσεται
Sir 24.1a	Wisdom will praise herself;
b	in the midst of her people she will boast.
2a	In an assembly of the Most High she will open her mouth,
b	and in the presence of his power she will boast.

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<sup>35</sup> Cf. Gen 1.3, 6, 9, 11, 14-15, 20, 24, 26. On the verbal metaphor for creation in Sirach, see Leo G. Perdue, *Wisdom and Creation: The Theology of Wisdom Literature* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1994), 289.

<sup>36</sup> Yielding the metaphor CREATION IS SPEAKING.

<sup>37</sup> Leading to the metaphor GOVERNING IS SPEAKING. For example, "through his command" (בְּדַבָּר) the moon "maintains its prescribed place" in the heavens (43.10a) and the waters stand "as in a heap" (39.17a; cf. Exod 15.8; Ps 33.6-9). "His word" (אִמְרָתוֹ) controls the various winds (43.16b-17b). "His rebuke" (גְּעֵרָתוֹ), perhaps also an instance of divine orality, guides the lightning as well as meteors (43.13). In Sir 43.26b, Ben Sira portrays individual elements of nature as messengers that fulfill YHWH's will "at his commands" (בְּדַבָּרָיו). Once arranged in creation, YHWH's works do not disobey "his word" (τοῦ ῥήματος αὐτοῦ, 16.28; cf. 39.31). See further Goering, *Wisdom's Root Revealed*, 28-9. Given the ancient Near Eastern connection between governing and creating, the metaphor GOVERNING IS SPEAKING should be seen as an extension of the metaphor CREATION IS SPEAKING.

Whereas elsewhere the sage uses visual images of wisdom as “light” and “glory,” here, in the chapter where Ben Sira most closely correlates Wisdom with Torah, aural metaphors predominate. This switch from ocular to verbal metaphors for Wisdom likely results from Ben Sira’s concern in Sir 24 to relate Wisdom to Torah, the verbal revelation given to Israel. The WISDOM IS WORD metaphor and Ben Sira’s correlation of Wisdom and Torah leads to the prominent use of verbal images when the sage discusses the revelation of Torah at Sinai, a tradition Ben Sira first introduces into Wisdom literature (Sir 17.12-13; 45.3-5). Thus, one extension of the cultural metaphor WISDOM IS WORD is the metaphor RECEIVING DIVINE INSTRUCTION IS HEARING.

A second implication of the WISDOM IS WORD metaphor is the conception of sapiential instruction in verbal terms. Earlier I suggested that sages would visually observe patterns in the natural world, derive meaning from these patterns, and codify the meanings in pithy sayings. Once promulgated as wisdom teaching, these principles that originate in a visual observation then become part of a verbal process of transmission. In accordance with the WISDOM IS WORD metaphor, Ben Sira obliges those schooled in wisdom to verbalize their teaching (Sir 4.23-4), so that others might receive their instruction aurally. In addition to urging human sages to verbalize their wisdom, Ben Sira personifies Wisdom herself as a sage who instructs her pupils orally. To the pupil who faithfully attends to her verbal instruction she “reveals” (וגליהי) secrets (Sir 4.18). Conversely, those unschooled in wisdom are urged to avail themselves of instruction through aural means (Sir 8.8). Thus, a second extension of the WISDOM IS WORD metaphor is the metaphor RECEIVING SAPIENTIAL INSTRUCTION IS HEARING.

We can generalize these two extended metaphors into one complex metaphor: INDIRECT PERCEPTION OF WISDOM IS HEARING INSTRUCTION (OR TORAH). This complex metaphor results from the cultural belief in the generative capacity of divine orality, specifically the notion that Wisdom emanates from the mouth of YHWH (WISDOM IS WORD). Combined with the primary metaphor INDIRECT KNOWING IS HEARING, the

metaphor WISDOM IS WORD results in the complex metaphor for the indirect acquisition of wisdom through *torah*, understood either as sapiential instruction or as the divine Torah given at Sinai.

I have analyzed the visual and aural modalities of wisdom separately. But even in the examples I have just given, the interpenetration of visual and verbal metaphors can be discerned. For example, Sir 4.23-4 views both word and wisdom as objects, which can be hidden, withheld, or revealed. Objects suggest something visible; so words as objects can be visually perceived. Or consider the emanation of personified Wisdom from the mouth of YHWH in Sir 24.3. In the mythology underlying Ben Sira's portrait of wisdom, the divine utterance of Wisdom gives birth to the visible universe, though which wisdom may be discerned. In fact the very idea of revelation suggests the visual disclosure of something previously hidden. Thus the notion of verbal revelation already conflates visual and verbal metaphors. In the wisdom tradition, the transformation from visual observation to verbal teaching occurs in the activity of the sage, and I now explore further the combination of sensory metaphors Ben Sira uses to describe his own role as a wisdom teacher.

## **V. Sapiential Synesthesia**

As we have observed, vision and audition were thought to operate through different modes. Seeing was associated with continuity, simultaneity, and similarity. In contrast, hearing was associated with discontinuity, sequence, and difference. Moreover, these distinctive modalities appear to be mutually exclusive: under normal circumstances, one thing cannot be simultaneously continuous and discontinuous with another. And as I have suggested, these modal differences inform visual and verbal metaphors, respectively. Given that these modal differences are seemingly incompatible, what could it mean to combine them into a single image, as Ben Sira does when he describes the event of wisdom instruction?

Philo of Alexandria and the author of the Wisdom of Solomon similarly merge the visual and aural into a single metaphor when they develop the notions of the visible voice

at Sinai or the Torah of light, respectively.<sup>38</sup> Such a metaphor—in which for example the verbal revelation of the Torah is perceived as light—constitutes a symbolic or literary synesthesia. M. H. Abrams defines literary synesthesia as “descriptions of one kind of sensation in terms of another; color is attributed to sounds, odor to colors, sound to odors, and so on.”<sup>39</sup> Symbolic synesthesia has its roots in sensory synesthesia, a phenomenon involving the extraordinary convergence or interpenetration of the senses. Neurologist Oliver Sacks describes sensory synesthesia as

an instant conjoining of sensations. This may involve any of the senses—for example, one person may perceive individual letters or days of the week as having their own particular colors; another may feel that color has its own peculiar smell, or every musical interval its own taste.<sup>40</sup>

Sensory synesthesia indicates that, while seeing and hearing may construct a person’s stance toward the world in different ways, these two modes of perception are rooted in a basic harmony of the senses.<sup>41</sup>

As the figurative complement to sensory synesthesia, symbolic synesthesia combines two or more sensory metaphors (combinatory synesthesia) or describes the activation of one sense through the stimulation of another sense, when, for example, a poet

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<sup>38</sup> *Mos.* 2.213. For the text, see F. H. Colson, *Philo*, 10 vols., vol. 6, LCL 289 (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1929), 554. Cf. *Decal.* 46-7. Other early Jewish interpreters followed Philo in describing the visibility of the divine voice at Sinai; see *Mek. de R. Ish.*, Bahodesh 9; *Tg. Neof. Ex* 20.2; *Pirqe R. El.* 41. The *Prayer of Enosh* also associates the giving of laws with light (אור עולמים); see 4Q369 1.4-8. In a parallel example, Ezekiel the Tragedian and Josephus thought God spoke visually during the burning bush incident (Exod 3.1-12); see Exagōgē 99; *Jewish Antiquities* 2.267. On the concept “light of the law” in Wis 18.4, see Luca Mazinghi, “Law of Nature and Light of the Law in the Book of Wisdom (Wis 18:4c),” in *The Book of Wisdom and Hellenistic Jewish Philosophy*, ed. Géza G. Xeravits, *JSJSup* (Leiden: Brill, forthcoming). Cf. *Test. Levi* 14.4: τὸ φῶς τοῦ νόμου, although some mss read κόσμος in place of νόμου. The idea in Sirach closest to the luminescent Torah appears in a later addition to the Greek. Shortly after the account of law-giving, Sir 17.18 (GII) suggests that YHWH apportioned to Israel the light of his love (μερίζων φῶς ἀγαπήσεως), presumably a reference to the Torah. See Joseph Ziegler, ed., *Sapientia Iesu Filii Sirach*, Septuaginta. VT Graecum Auctoritate Societatis Litterarum Göttingensis editum 12, 2 (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1965), 203.

<sup>39</sup> M. H. Abrams, *A Glossary of Literary Terms*, seventh ed. (Fort Worth: Harcourt Brace, 1999), 315.

<sup>40</sup> Oliver Sacks, *Musicophilia: Tales of Music and the Brain* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2007), 165-6. For an up-to-date discussion of sensory synesthesia, see Sacks, *Musicophilia*, 165-83.

<sup>41</sup> Chidester, *Word and Light*, 14.



depicts light as heard or words as visualized (intersensory synesthesia).<sup>42</sup> By these means, symbolic synesthesia creates what Chidester calls a “perceptual paradox,” which is derived from sensory experience and yet strives to transcend sensory experience.<sup>43</sup> When an author combines visual metaphors, which suggest connection and presence, with verbal metaphors, which indicate distance and reference, the synesthetic result is the imaginative juxtaposition of continuity and discontinuity. When Philo speaks of the “visible voice” or Pseudo-Solomon refers to “the light of the Torah,” therefore, they point to a paradoxical situation in which humans experience themselves both as continuous and discontinuous with the divine realm.<sup>44</sup>

Let me return to the three examples from the book of Sirach, that I presented at the beginning of this paper. Earlier, I described a visual-verbal transformation in the process of wisdom transmission. Wisdom insights begin with visual observations of the natural world which then become codified in a verbal medium. The pivot point in this turning from the visual to the verbal is the instructional activity of the sage. It should come as no surprise, then, that Ben Sira describes his role in this transformational moment in synesthetic terms. The first example (Sir 39.12), in which the sage describes himself as filled with light at the moment of verbal instruction coheres with this characterization of the wisdom process as a visual-verbal transformation. Having made his visual observations, Ben Sira radiates like the full moon (v 12b) and prepares to dispense his wisdom teaching in oral form (v 12a).<sup>45</sup> The synesthetic image points to the pivotal role of the wise man in converting visual observations on the natural world into a medium for verbal transmission.

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<sup>42</sup> Abrams distinguishes common examples of literary synesthesia (“loud colors, bright sounds, and sweet music”) from more “complex” examples based on “sense transference,” in which one sense stimulates another, such as Shelly’s description of his experience of the odor from a hyacinth flower in musical terms (“The Sensitive Plant,” 1820); Abrams, *A Glossary of Literary Terms*, 315.

<sup>43</sup> See Chidester, *Word and Light*, 17-19. The phrase appears on p 18.

<sup>44</sup> See Chidester, *Word and Light*, 23.

<sup>45</sup> The fact that the order of presentation in Sir 39.12 does not conform to what we would expect of the temporal unfolding should not detain us here. We are, after all, dealing with poetry. Moreover, the verb tenses in this verse are clearly marked in Greek.

In light of the associations with the visual and verbal modes that I described above, the image of the wisdom teacher as a radiant moon suggests a certain conception of the respective statuses of the instructor and the student. The sage radiates light because he has perceived wisdom visually. The student, in contrast, perceives wisdom aurally, through the verbal instruction of the wisdom teacher. By means of the visual metaphors, Ben Sira constructs the sage as one who has an immediate and direct connection to divine wisdom. Because of this continuity between wisdom and teacher, the sage experiences wisdom as a presentation of divine truths. In contrast, through the aural metaphors, Ben Sira depicts the student as one who experiences the sequential unfolding of wisdom instruction in time and therefore stands in discontinuity with divine wisdom. The verbal instruction received by the student stands at some remove from the original sagely insight, which was based on visual perception. This verbal form of wisdom instruction cannot immediately present meaningful patterns discerned in nature but only represent them to the student.

The second and third examples, however, present a twist on the visual-to-verbal paradigm. Both in his general description of the sage (Sir 39.1-8) and in the self-portrait of his own instructional activity (Sir 24), Ben Sira depicts the activity of teaching as a process of turning verbal instruction into a visible medium. In both of these passages, the sage emphasizes the verbal character of sapiential study. In Sir 39.1-3, the sage studies wisdom, prophecies, discourses, proverbs, and parables. In Sir 24, Ben Sira depicts personified Wisdom in largely verbal terms and then correlates her with the Torah, the verbal revelation given at Sinai. For Ben Sira, this verbal Wisdom-Torah forms the subject matter of sagely inquiry. In both cases, the sage can engage in the mysterious activity of wisdom instruction—in “bringing to light instruction”—as a result of his expertise in these verbal matters. For Ben Sira, then, it is the event of sapiential instruction that turns the verbal revelation of Wisdom-Torah into a visual experience. The Torah on its own is not a light, as it is for Pseudo-Solomon; only when Torah becomes taught does it assume luminous qualities (cf. Ps 119.105; Isa 2.5).

Recall how the sage-as-radiant-moon example from Sir 39.12 is rooted in the transformation of visual observations about the natural world into a tradition of verbal teaching. Based on this visual-to-verbal paradigm, I would have thought the sage would describe his teaching in the second and third examples as a light which is heard. But the synesthetic metaphor in these latter two descriptions of wisdom instruction operates in reverse order from the first example: in these two instances word is perceived as light. This reversed image suggests a different concept of the wisdom teaching enterprise from the sage-as-radiant-moon example. In the bring-instruction-to-light examples, Ben Sira portrays wisdom teaching as a transformation from the verbal to the visual. In this case, the sage takes the verbal media of the wisdom tradition and brings them to light. These verbal media include, for Ben Sira, both the international corpus of collected wisdom and Israel's own Torah. The verbal metaphors used to describe these media suggest their discontinuity with divine wisdom. They are somewhat distant from divine wisdom and therefore can only represent divine wisdom. In these examples, the sage takes what is distant and makes it imminent for his students, he presents wisdom in a form which allows students to experience continuity with divine wisdom, to have an immediate, first-hand encounter with wisdom through his sapiential instruction. The sage takes what is represented verbally and makes it present again visually. In short, Ben Sira's verbal-to-visual paradigm of teaching suggests that he can provide an educational experience for his students which is similar to the primal experience of the sage who discerns meaningful patterns in nature through visual observation.

The presence of two paradigms—a visual-to-verbal and a verbal-to-visual paradigm—does not indicate confusion about the pedagogical process on Ben Sira's part. Rather, the presence of the two paradigms points to the confluence of visual and verbal modes of acquiring knowledge in the Jewish wisdom tradition. Although I have suggested that the visual mode of acquisition is primary, once wisdom has been converted into a verbal medium, it is available for study, not just to students, but to other sages, as well.

Moreover, the presence of the two paradigms suggests that, for Ben Sira, the verbal and visual cohere along the entire trajectory of the wisdom process. That is, a sage may derive original insights based on his own visual observations of the natural world. But even in this process, the sage is guided in his search for wisdom by the verbal tradition of wisdom instruction, which for Ben Sira includes the Torah. As James Kugel has pointed out, this notion of a corpus for study is the common meaning of the term “wisdom” in the Hebrew Bible.<sup>46</sup> Once collections of verbal wisdom developed, the resultant body of knowledge also became a matter for sapiential study. This verbal wisdom did not supplant the visible wisdom, however, as the continued presence of visual metaphors in Sirach suggest. The visual and verbal modes of acquiring wisdom continued to exist alongside of one another, and one mode could be used to reinforce the other, or one mode could be used to test the results of the other.

## VI. Conclusion

No matter the different directions in which the modal transformation occurs in the sage-as-radiant-light and bring-instruction-to-light images of the wisdom teacher, we are still left in both cases with Ben Sira’s unusual description of sapiential instruction as a confluence of light and word. Why does the sage resort to a symbolic synesthesia when he describes the event of wisdom teaching? What does this synesthetic metaphor suggest about Ben Sira’s experience and conception of sapiential instruction?

When Ben Sira combines visual and aural metaphors to describe his own teaching activity, the resulting symbolic synesthesia not only points to the pivotal role of the sage in merging the visual and the verbal in the process of wisdom transmission, but it also expresses the sage’s experience of the teaching *event* as extraordinary. Ben Sira’s use of

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<sup>46</sup> “The Bible’s assertion that Solomon’s wisdom ‘was greater than the wisdom of the people of the east, and all the wisdom of Egypt’ (1 Kings 5:10 [some books, 4:30]) does not seek to compare his power of understanding with that of the sages of other nations, but refers to the greater *body of learning* that he had acquired.” Kugel, “Wisdom and the Anthological Temper,” 9. Italics added.

symbolic synesthesia in these three examples indicates that he perceives the activity of instructing young men in wisdom as an extraordinary convergence of light and word. By depicting his instruction as a confluence of the visual and the verbal, the sage describes a “perceptual paradox,” in which his experience of instruction is grounded in sensory perception and yet transcends normal sensory perception. As light (WISDOM IS LIGHT), wisdom instruction may be perceived at once in space, but as word (WISDOM IS WORD) it also unfolds sequentially in time. Ben Sira’s teaching stands both in continuity and discontinuity with heavenly wisdom; it is at once connected to and distant from wisdom, similar to divine wisdom and yet different from it. His teaching is simultaneously presentational and representational: in the synesthetic moment of instruction, Ben Sira both embodies divine wisdom (presentation) and points to the vast reservoir of divine wisdom that lies beyond him in the cosmos (representation).<sup>47</sup>

By positioning the sage as a liminal figure—as one who is both in continuity and in discontinuity with divine wisdom—Ben Sira constructs himself as an intermediary between the celestial and terrestrial realms.<sup>48</sup> In fact, in the continuation of the third example of symbolic synesthesia from Sir 24, Ben Sira specifically describes his own teaching activity in prophetic terms:

I will again pour out teaching like prophecy (διδασκαλίαν ὡς προφητείαν ἔκχεω; Sir 24.33)

The intermingling of light and word in the description of his teaching activity situates Ben Sira in the interstitial space between heaven and earth. This construction of the sage as an intermediary using visual and verbal images echoes Ben Sira’s portrait of the prophet Elijah. In his hymn In Praise of the Ancestors, the author describes Elijah as a prophet “whose words were as a blazing furnace” (וּדְבָרָיו כְּתִנּוֹר בּוֹעֵר; Sir 48.1). In the Hebrew

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<sup>47</sup> See Sir 1.9b-10b, cited above.

<sup>48</sup> In this sense, Ben Sira’s self-portrait of wisdom-teacher-as-prophet has much in common with his depiction of personified Wisdom as a prophet; see Sir 24.

Bible, Elisha is associated with fire, a source not only of heat, but also of light. The story of Ahaziah in 2 Kgs 1.1-16 engages in word play when it portrays Elijah as the **איש אלהים** (man of God) who brings down **אש אלהים** (fire from God; v 12). Likely inspired by the juxtaposition of Elijah's name and the phrase **בער כתנור** (blazing like a furnace) in Mal 3.19-24 (ET 4.1-6), Ben Sira extends this biblical association between Elijah and fire to suggest that his verbal prophecies also appeared as luminescent fire. Given what we have observed about the intermediate position indicated by the confluence of light and word, it seems no coincidence that the only other visual-verbal synesthesia in the book of Sirach occurs in a description of a prophet. The paradoxical qualities that attend the metaphorical convergence of light and word suggest the liminal status of Ben Sira as a wisdom teacher better than any title could. Through this symbolic synesthesia, the sage positions himself as a prophetic intermediary who is both continuous and discontinuous with the sacred realm and, thus, well-suited to communicate divine wisdom to his students.

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