

# IS WISDOM A MEDIATRIX IN SIRACH?

A study of the wisdom poems



by

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## DECLARATION

I, the undersigned, hereby declare that the work contained in this dissertation is my own original work and that I have not previously in its entirety or in part submitted it at any university for a degree.

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## ABSTRACT

The figure of Woman Wisdom appears in several key poems in Sirach, namely Sir 1:1-10, 1:11-30, 4:11-19, 6:18-37, 14:20-15:10, 24:1-34 and 51:13-30. Woman Wisdom is a metaphor that employs feminine imagery to speak of the tradition as taught by the sages and contained within the sacred writings of Judaism. Ben Sira uses it to show that the Jewish tradition is the pathway to genuine piety. The metaphor functions to reinforce the implicit claim of conservative scribal circles to be the legitimate interpreters of the tradition. The personification of wisdom is the basic trope underlying the presentations of Wisdom. This feminine personification is then filled out with a number of metaphors, rendering Woman Wisdom an easily recognisable entity in the text despite the wide range of imagery applied to her. The wisdom personified includes both the content of the Jewish tradition and the disposition to live in conformity with that tradition, summed up in the fear of the Lord. This tradition is seen as the distillation of universal wisdom. The gender of Woman Wisdom is rhetorically important in those poems where wisdom is presented as a desirable goal to be passionately and zealously sought. But Ben Sira does not exploit the metaphor 'wisdom as woman' as a conceptual tool for reflection on wisdom in and of itself or in its relationship to God. In Sir 24 the feminine dimension of the Wisdom figure recedes; Wisdom is personified as an angelic figure and her gender becomes simply a fact of grammar. The metaphor 'wisdom as angel' may be an attempt to picture wisdom in the closest possible association with the Lord and in the most exalted position possible without compromising monotheism. Angels are also portrayed as mediators in Second Temple writings. The movement and action of Wisdom, God and human beings relative to each other in the Wisdom poems provides hints that the Jewish tradition plays a vital role in the relationship between God and humanity. God relates to human beings by revealing to them wisdom, which finds its most perfect expression in the Jewish written tradition. How a person relates to this tradition will determine how God relates to that person. Conversely, it is impossible to find wisdom if one does not have the correct attitude toward God and if one does not live according to the tradition. Since all wisdom is from God, there is no wisdom outside of what God gives, and the wisdom God has given is embodied in the traditions of Israel.

## OPSOMMING

Vrou Wysheid funksioneer prominent in Sir 1:1-10, 4:11-19, 6:18-37, 14:20-15:10, 24:1-34 en 51:13-30. Sy is 'n literêre figuur wat vroulike beeldspraak gebruik om van die tradisie wat in die heilige geskrifte van die Judaïsme voorkom, te praat. Dit stel daardie tradisie voor as deurweg na opregte piëteit. Ben Sira wend hierdie figuur aan om die aanspraak vanuit konserwatiewe skrywersskole te onderskraag dat hulle die legitieme interprete is van hierdie tradisie. Personifikasie is die basiese stylfiguur wat ten grondslag lê van die voorstellings van wysheid en die vroulike personifikasie word met 'n hele aantal metafore ingeklee. Juis daarom is die figuur van wysheid 'n maklik identifiseerbare entiteit in die teks afgesien van die wye reeks van beelde wat op haar van toepassing gemaak word. Die wysheid wat gepersonifieër word, omvat beide die inhoud van die Joodse tradisie en die wil om volgens daardie tradisie te lewe; dit word opgesom in die vrees van die Here. Hierdie tradisie word beskou as die distillasie van universele wysheid. Die geslag van vrou wysheid is retories belangrik in daardie teksgedeeltes waar wysheid voorgestel word as 'n begeerlike doelwit wat ywerig en vuriglik nagestreef moet word. Desnietemin benut Ben Sira die metafoor "wysheid as vrou" nie vir die doeleindes om oor wysheid *an sich*, of in haar verhouding tot God te besin nie. In Sir 24 verskuif die vroulike dimensie van hierdie figuur op die agtergrond en word wysheid personifieër as 'n engelagtige figuur; haar geslag word gewoon 'n grammatikale gegewe. Die metafoor "wysheid as engel" open die moontlikheid dat wysheid voorgestel kan word in die mees intiem moontlike relasie met die Here en terselfdertyd in die mees verhewe posisie in 'n monoteïstiese sisteem. Engle funksioneer ook as middelaars in die geskrifte van die tussen-testamentêre tydperk. Die beweging en optrede van wysheid, God en die mens relatief tot mekaar in die wysheidspalms suggereer dat die Joodse tradisie 'n kardinale rol vervul in die verhouding tussen God en die mens. God maak met mense kontak deur aan hulle wysheid te openbaar wat haar mees perfekte uitdrukking vind in die geskrewe Joodse tradisie. 'n Persoon se verhouding tot daardie tradisie bepaal God se verhouding tot daardie persoon. Omgekeerd is dit onmoontlik om wysheid te vind as iemand nie die korrekte instelling tot God het nie en as iemand nie volgens die tradisie leef nie. Aangesien alle wysheid van God afkomstig is, is daar geen wysheid buite dit wat God gee nie, en die wysheid wat God skenk, word omvat in die tradisies van Israel.



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# CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

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## 1.1 INTRODUCTION

The figure of Woman Wisdom is a fascinating one. She makes her appearance in the opening chapters of Proverbs as a foil to the deadly Madame Folly. This latter lady is the sort of literary construct one would expect in a staunchly patriarchal culture; she is foreign and 'other', alluring but dangerous, a woman who threatens the established order.<sup>1</sup> The student eager to gain wisdom is warned to stay far from her. Woman Wisdom by contrast is an overwhelmingly positive figure. She is to be made the object of an earnest pursuit; the student must not rest until he has obtained her. And yet she does not remain in the circumscribed domestic sphere that patriarchal societies deem appropriate for women, nor does she demur to male authority. She is forceful, demanding, operating confidently in the public arena. Who precisely is she, and what is her role within a symbolic universe constructed by males?

Woman Wisdom survives beyond the pages of Proverbs to reappear in later Jewish writings, *viz.* Sirach, Baruch, Wisdom of Solomon and the writings of Philo of Alexandria. A role is also assigned to her in a number of Gnostic and cabalistic ontologies [Lang 1986:153-4]. The Early Christian Church recognised in her qualities of pre-existence and

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<sup>1</sup> Recent work done on the figure of Madame Folly includes Blenkinsopp [1991:457-73] and Maier [1995].

proximity to God a valuable heuristic tool for reflecting on the person and work of Jesus of Nazareth.<sup>2</sup> In her diachronic development she gains in prestige, accruing to herself more godlike attributes, so that in Alexandrian Jewish theology she is clearly an intermediary between God and the created world [Baer 1970:63-64]. But in this development her gender becomes an embarrassment; Philo goes to great lengths to explain that 'she' is really masculine, and only considered feminine by virtue of her relationship to God, which is one of subordination. He effectively diminishes her by equating her with the male *Logos*, who shares identical attributes and functions, and banishing her to the heavenly realms.<sup>3</sup> In Christianity she is subsumed in the man Jesus. In Rabbinical writings she retreats behind the Torah understood in cosmological and ontological terms which then becomes the mediator of creation and revelation between God and the world [Hengel 1974:171].

Research into how the figure of Wisdom is to be understood has focussed largely on the presentation of wisdom as a woman in Proverbs 1-9. Here she has been read as a literary personification or metaphor [Camp 1985, Yee 1982], a demythologised ancient Hebrew goddess [Lang 1986], or an extension or hypostasis of God [Ringgren 1947].<sup>4</sup> Several scholars

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<sup>2</sup> For example, the influence of Wisdom 7 is evident in the Christological formula in Col 1:15-17.

<sup>3</sup> Philo writes of Wisdom: "Let us, then, paying no heed to the discrepancy in the gender of the words, say that the daughter of God, even Wisdom, is not only masculine but father, sowing and begetting in souls aptness to learn, discipline, knowledge, sound sense, good and laudable actions." (Fug 51-52) – quoted by Baer [1970:62].

<sup>4</sup> Ringgren [1947:99] classifies Wisdom in Prov 1:20-33, 8:1-21 and 9:1-6 as 'allegories or poetic personifications', but regards Wisdom in Prov 8:22-31 as a true hypostasis of one of Yahweh's attributes.

trace her prehistory to pagan goddesses [Albright 1919; Boström 1935:156-174].<sup>5</sup> She has been compared to Ma'at in Egypt [Bauer-Kayatz 1966] and to the international goddess Isis [Fox 1995:46-47].<sup>6</sup> Most of the academic debate has concentrated on her origins and prehistory rather than her function. Exceptions to this include the literary analyses by Gale Yee [1989] and Carol Newsom [1989]. Camp [1985:69], after providing a useful critical overview of the various methods employed and conclusions reached by scholars in their study of personified Wisdom, makes the important observation that insufficient attention has been given to the gender of the figure. She seeks to rectify the situation in her own study of Woman Wisdom. The lack of consensus about Woman Wisdom's origins and the influences that shaped her development suggests that there is much work still to be done before the intricacies of this intriguing woman are fully grasped.

In this dissertation I endeavour to enhance our understanding of Woman Wisdom. I have chosen to do so by concentrating on Sirach.<sup>7</sup> This choice of text has several motivations. In the first place, Woman Wisdom features prominently in a number of poems in this work – 1:1-10; 1:11-20; 4:11-19; 6:18-37; 14:20-15:10; 24:1-34 and 51:13-30. Although

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<sup>5</sup> Albright recreates a 'goddess of life and wisdom' who was also imaged as the goddess of the vine and traces her descent through Ishtar to Wisdom. Boström sees the *אִשָּׁה זָרָה* as the devotee of a Semitic love goddess (Babylonian Ishtar or Canaanite Astarte). Although Wisdom in and of itself is a summary of the instruction of the wisdom teacher, she has been created to stand in opposition to the goddess cult and thereby to the goddess herself, and so she is depicted with characteristics that correspond closely with the presentation of the foreign goddess.

<sup>6</sup> To be precise, Fox does not regard Wisdom as a goddess but as a literary figure some of whose features are borrowed from Isis aretologies or from similar hymns.

<sup>7</sup> I use the designation "Sirach" for the text and "Ben Sira" for the author.

there is a lack of consensus as to the macrostructure of the book, it is widely acknowledged that the poems in chapters 1, 24 and 51 occupy key positions within the book. Jacob [1978:254] points out that these pericopes on Wisdom shore up the book at the beginning, in the middle and at the end. Blenkinsopp [1983:141] echoes this observation. In the division proposed by Pfeiffer [1949:353], chapter 24 has a comparable function to chapter 1, since he proposes that Sir 1-23 and Sir 24-50 were originally published as separate books. His reason for seeing two originally separate books is unconvincing,<sup>8</sup> but there are other scholars such as Skehan and Di Lella [1987:330] who concur that chapter 24 is the introduction to the second main section of the book. Marböck [1971:41-43] views chapter 24 as the conclusion to the first part of the book rather than the introduction to the second because Sir 1:1-10 and chapter 24 with their similarities in structure, message and vocabulary form an *inclusio*. However he also considers Sir 24 to be a transition to the second part of the book. Extracting the common thread from these positions, we may assume that at least Sir 1:1-10 and 24:1-34 are pivotal passages in Sirach. They are, in the words of Marböck [1971:17], fundamental programmatic declarations of Ben Sira about Wisdom. Collins [1997:45-46], following Segal and Roth, divides the book into two main parts which are in turn subdivided into five sections each.<sup>9</sup> Each of the subdivisions of Part I are introduced by the poems on

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<sup>8</sup> The only piece of evidence he puts forward in support of his thesis is his unlikely interpretation of 24:30-34, which he takes to indicate that the author had only planned the first volume, but as his material grew he decided to pour forth more wisdom in a second book.

<sup>9</sup> **Part I:** A: 1:1-4:10; B: 4:11-6:17; C: 6:18-14:19; D: 14:20-23:27; E: 24:1-34

**Part II:** A: 25:1-33:18; B: 33:19-39:11; C: 39:12-43:33; D: 44:1-50:29; E 51:1-30

Wisdom – 1:1-10, 4:11-19, 6:18-37, 14:20-15:10 and 24:1-34. Kearns [1969:542] considers Sir 1-43 to consist of proverbs woven together into series, subdivided by passages of a more theological nature which expound the nature of wisdom itself and its intimate relationship to God and introduce the pragmatic considerations which follow them.<sup>10</sup> Woman Wisdom is found in these ‘theological’ passages. She is thus not likely to be an inconsequential flourish; we can expect her to be a significant instrument in Ben Sira’s conceptual repertoire, used to express foundational insights.

Secondly, our understanding of literature is greatly enhanced when we are able to study it within a particular period and culture, because every culture is a complex, interconnected web with religion, literature, social and political organisation, economics and aesthetics all aspects of the whole, mutually determining and affecting each other. Because the date and provenance of Sirach are known, I am able to ground my literary study within the broader cultural framework. This background will be used as a means of suggesting the issues that are likely to be addressed in the text and as a way of demonstrating the plausibility of my interpretations.

Further motivation for focusing on Sirach comes from the fact that this work documents a significant stage in the intellectual history of Judaism. Boccaccini [1991:78] finds in the literature of this period contemporary anxieties emerging from within Judaism and from its contact with

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<sup>10</sup> Kearns [1969:542] regards ch 44-50 as the second part of the book which illustrates the divine wisdom as it is worked out in the Lord’s holy people, while ch 51 is an appendix of prayer and reflection only loosely connected with what precedes it.



Hellenistic culture. The figure of Woman Wisdom could be employed as a tool for reflection on any of a number of pressing theological and ideological issues.<sup>11</sup> Sirach also occupies an important place in the diachronic development of the Wisdom figure, being relatively close in time to the biblical text and self-consciously drawing on it. Because Ben Sira inherited the metaphor of Woman Wisdom from the tradition, I can side step the debate over her ultimate origins and concentrate on the origin of those features which mark a progression or deviation from the imagery employed in Proverbs.

Having chosen the text on which to concentrate, I further narrow the scope of my research by focusing on a specific aspect of Woman Wisdom - how she is conceptualised as mediating in the relationship

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<sup>11</sup> See Mack [1970:52-59] for the thesis that the wisdom writers used the figure of Wisdom as a method of expressing theological concerns and making theological affirmations. Mack understands Wisdom as a mythic figure made up of language borrowed from the Egyptian Maat and Isis which the sages employed for the task of theological reflection. By portraying wisdom as an objectified, mythic person whom human beings must seek, but who is difficult to find in this world, the sages were able to express their insights into the limitations of human understanding of God. The mythos provided them with new tools for visualising the wisdom of the Lord's created order, and the manner of his making himself known to humankind. Mack is followed by Cady et al [1986:69-73] and Deutsch [1996:21]. Perdue [1993:79] also sees in the personification of Wisdom the exercise of theological and sapiential imagination to construct a symbolic universe in which the sages lived and understood and interpreted life. Camp [1985:273-4] postulates that Wisdom was introduced as a mediator figure in the post-exilic period to compensate for the loss of the king, who was the most important mediating figure of the pre-exilic period.

between God and humanity. It is not immediately obvious that she is a mediatrix at all, but several factors indicate that she could be viewed in this light. Aletti [1976:25-37] conducted a structural analysis of Proverbs 8:22-31 in which he plotted Wisdom's semantic relationship to God, the creation and humanity. He discovered a progression in the poem from Wisdom's passivity beside God (vv 22-26) to a statement of her presence (v 27) to a qualification of this presence (v 30ab) and finally to her activity (משחקת vv 30c-31). The object of Wisdom's activity is humankind. The whole movement of the poem - from Wisdom's begetting by God to her presence at God's side when he organised the world, to her activity with respect to humankind - suggests her mediatory role between God and humanity, although the character of the mediation is not specified. Yee [1982] builds on Aletti's work with a rhetorical analysis of Proverbs 8:22-31 that pays attention to the intricate parallelisms, repetition of particles, and verbal forms in the passage. She discerns a tripartite division<sup>12</sup> that highlights Wisdom's pre-existence (vv22-26), her presence during God's creative activity (vv 27-30a), and her interaction with humankind (vv 30b-31). She draws attention to the chiasmus of vv 30b-31 formed in the interplay of the synonymous words משחקת and שעשעיו where Wisdom is God's delight and playing in his presence, and also delighting in humankind and playing in the inhabitable world. This chiasmus at the conclusion of the poem emphasises the role that Wisdom plays in linking God and humanity. She thus agrees with Aletti that, except through the mediation of Wisdom, the

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<sup>12</sup> Contra Aletti [1976:26-28] who divides the text into two parts - vv 22-26, 27-31 - although he admits that this bipartite structure does not account for the fact that the poem deals with three protagonists: God, Wisdom and humanity.

passage is silent on the relationship between God and humanity and concludes: “The whole poem builds structurally to portray Wisdom as the ultimate mediator between God and humanity” [Yee 1982:236]. It is thus possible to view Wisdom as a mediatrix in Proverbs 8, one of the key texts that Ben Sira drew on for his own portrayal of Wisdom.<sup>13</sup>

Waltke [1988:1-15] has attempted to show that Wisdom is a mediatrix in Proverbs 1:20-33.<sup>14</sup> His exegesis of Prov 1:20-33 points to the fact that the sage spoke as Yahweh’s mediator and with divine authority. It does this by showing that Woman Wisdom’s speech contains forms and motifs from both the sapiential and prophetic tradition, but in addition it contains forms and motifs which show a very close relationship between Yahweh and Woman Wisdom. These include her laughter at the time of judgement (cf Ps 2:5,37:13, 59:9), the unconditionality of her proclamation of judgement after her admonitions have been rejected (which has more unconditionality and irrevocability than the threats of judgement in the prophets), and the motifs of calling and not hearing and of seeking and not finding (Mic 3:4, Is 1:15, Jer 11:11, Hos 5:6). These motifs consciously express the speaker’s awesome authority and move Woman Wisdom into the closest association with Yahweh. As Yahweh’s word demands obedience and as disobedience to Him provokes his

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<sup>13</sup> The thesis that Proverbs 8 presents Wisdom as mediator or link between the divine and human has found general acceptance among a number of scholars, e.g. Camp [1985:272-273], McKinlay [1996:78].

<sup>14</sup> His primary aim is to undermine the scholarly assumption that the sage derived his teachings not by revelation but by a secular, scientific method, delivered his teachings in a non-authoritarian way, and codified his observations as traditions. He claims instead that the sages received their moral teaching by revelation and delivered them authoritatively.

judgement, the same is correspondingly valid for Wisdom. Also, both promise security to those that obey them. In the light of these correspondences, Waltke describes Wisdom as a divine mediatrix in that her words express divine revelation with the highest authority. In the first part of Baumann's (1996) work she presents various views about the mediatory role of Wisdom. She demonstrates that the mediary role of Wisdom is generally understood to be an important aspect of the presentation of Wisdom in Proverbs (cf. also the review by Nel 1999). She does, however, not deal extensively with Sirach in this regard.

Wisdom is clearly one of several intermediaries in the literature of Alexandrian Judaism [Baer 1970:63-64], which suggests the question whether this development is also present to some degree in the writing of a Palestinian Jew. In Sirach itself, the fact that Wisdom is somehow identified<sup>15</sup> with the Law and with the fear of God suggests that she is involved in some way in God's revelation of his will to humanity and in humanity's responsive approach to God. She could be viewed as a mediatrix if she facilitates the relationship between God and his creation, particularly humanity. Does God communicate his presence or his will through Wisdom, and is Wisdom the means by which persons are to come to know God? Is she a link in the relationship between human beings and God?

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<sup>15</sup> The exact nature of the relationship between the concepts of 'wisdom' and 'law' is discussed in chapter 3. 'Identification' is not an accurate term for describing that relationship if by it one means a straightforward equation of the two concepts or a statement of their equivalence.

The gender dimension of Woman Wisdom cannot be ignored. Commentators often accuse Ben Sira of misogyny, or at least feel obligated to defend him from this charge.<sup>16</sup> It is therefore pertinent to ask what use, if any, he makes of the inherited gender of his figure. If she mediates in some way between God and humanity, is it as a feminine entity - as a *mediatrix*? And if significant use is made of the gender of Woman Wisdom, how does this feminine figure operate within the patriarchal worldview of Sirach?

The term *mediatrix* needs some explanation and qualification. It is the feminine form of *mediator*. The Oxford English Dictionary lists first as the meaning of *mediator* 'one who intervenes between two parties especially for the purpose of effecting reconciliation; one who brings about (a peace, a treaty) or settles (a dispute) by mediation'. It gives its theological meaning as 'one who mediates between God and man'. *Mediation* is defined as action or agency as a mediator; the action of mediating between parties at variance; intercession on behalf of another; the state or fact of serving as an intermediate agent, a means of action or a medium of transmission; instrumentality. To mediate is to occupy an intermediate or middle place or position, to form a connecting link or a transitional stage between one thing and another. It is to intercede or intervene for the purpose of reconciling. A mediate entity is one intervening or interposed in position, rank, quality, time or order of succession. The term *intermediary* has a similar semantic domain. The

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<sup>16</sup> Contra Davidson [1895:404], Trenchard [1982] makes a case for Ben Sira's general misogyny. See my discussion of 'Women in Sirach' in Chapter 3.

Oxford dictionary defines it as one who acts between others, a go-between, a mediator.

Current secular use of the term 'mediator' emphasises the reconciliatory aspect,<sup>17</sup> which is not the sense in which I use the term. In religious idiom, the term *mediation* characterises the indirect agency of God in relation to man and the world. It is the mode by which a transcendent deity is enabled to produce effects in the world without being himself the immediate agent of these effects [Ormond 1911:59-60]. In this dissertation, the concept of mediation focuses on the part of its semantic range which expresses the idea of mediation as a means of indirect encounter; the mediatrix Wisdom is the intermediate agent, means of action or medium of transmission, interposed somehow between God and humanity.

If the term *mediator* suggests an arbitrator in a conflict situation, the term *intermediary* seems to suggest a being that is intermediate between the divine and human realms. The designation *intermediary* is used of the various entities bridging the gap between the transcendent God and the created order in Alexandrian Judaism and in Gnosticism, including Sophia. If used of Woman Wisdom in Sirach, it could appear to presuppose her existence as a distinct ontological entity, which is an assumption I do not make. Perhaps a word like *mediary* could be used to

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<sup>17</sup> This same emphasis is found in the Christian use of the term. Christ's work of mediation is primarily seen in his interposition between a holy God and estranged sinful humanity to bring about reconciliation. Christ is however also seen as mediator of creation in the sense of the agent of God's activity. In the Old Testament the revelation of God is mediated through the prophet and reconciliation is mediated through the priest [Denney 1915:516].

speaking of a mediating agent while avoiding connotations of a conflict situation and assumptions about ontological status. Unfortunately the term mediary is not to be found in the Oxford dictionary!

My thesis may be stated as follows:

*The figure of Wisdom in Sirach is a metaphor using feminine imagery to speak of the tradition as taught by the sages and contained within the sacred writings of Judaism. Wisdom mediates a relationship with God in that through her one may acquire a true knowledge of God and a correct understanding of his revelation given to Israel. To this end, she is identified with the Law and with the fear of the Lord. This mediation is not to be understood in terms of a hypostasised intermediary; it is the Jewish tradition itself and not the feminine personification that is seen as the mediator of knowledge about God and the pathway to genuine piety.*

*Ben Sira uses the metaphor of Woman Wisdom to legitimate his teaching and to affirm that wisdom is to be found in the teaching of the sages who pay careful attention to the world as the Lord has made it. The metaphor is used to reinforce the implicit claim of conservative scribal circles to be the legitimate interpreters of the tradition and thus the true successors to the prophets.*



## 1.2 METHODOLOGICAL CONSIDERATIONS

My investigation of Ben Sira's employment of Woman Wisdom as a trope for speculation on wisdom and its function in the relationship between God and humanity is undertaken primarily on a literary level. I provide a careful reading of all the poems in Sirach which deal with personified Wisdom. In analysing the texts, I draw on the insights of rhetorical criticism<sup>18</sup> to define the limits of a literary unit, uncover component parts and structural patterns at work in its shape, and point out the literary techniques used in ordering its artistic composition. I assume that the aesthetics of the text are integral to its meaning, and that a persuasive interpretation will disclose coherence within a text.

The literary readings are undertaken in the service of a conceptual analysis that seeks to elucidate an aspect of the worldview of the community of which Ben Sira was a representative. I take cognisance of the fact that the material at my disposal is poetic rather than a rational, discursive treatment of the subject. Perdue [1994:51-58] differentiates between "first order –" and "second order theologising". The first type of theological reflection informs the understanding by appealing to the imagination through the use of root metaphors, literary forms, linguistic structure, repetition of words and images, sounds, parallelism and

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<sup>18</sup> I follow Muilenburg's [1969] definition of 'rhetorical criticism', which is not the same as 'rhetorical analysis', which is the study of rhetoric in the more narrow sense of the art of persuasion and which aims to reveal the speaker's strategy for convincing his audience [Gitay 1993:136].



inclusions. The second employs more precise philosophical language to give a systematic and rational presentation of ideas. Ben Sira operates on the level of “first order theologising”. The questions I ask of the text must respect this fact; I cannot demand philosophical precision in Ben Sira’s conceptualisation of Wisdom. In poetry images are metaphorically evocative rather than logically coherent.

Passages read without respect to their literary context are readily distorted. I thus read the sections dealing with Woman Wisdom with a careful eye to the matrix in which they are embedded. The nature of the work makes the question of the relevance of the immediate context of a passage difficult; although there is more thematic arrangement of material than in Proverbs, the book reads as a compendium which moves from one topic to the next, often without bridging passages. But there are instances where the sections preceding and / or following a poem on Wisdom nuance our reading of the poem. The pertinence of the immediate context for exegesis is therefore evaluated on a text-by-text basis. The various Wisdom poems are read individually and together to provide a composite picture of Woman Wisdom. As will be shown, there are indications that the author provided subtle links between the passages on personified Wisdom, confirming the validity of an intertextual reading.

The Hebrew Bible provides a broader literary context for Sirach. It is universally recognised that the book is peppered with scriptural allusions. The question of how to recognise and interpret allusions is complex. In the first place, Ben Sira is steeped in the language of the Hebrew Scriptures, and a turn of phrase that suggests a biblical passage

may simply be accidental. Even where it can be said with some certainty that a particular biblical passage is being recalled, we cannot assume that the meaning of the original has been transported unchanged into Sirach. Sheppard [1980] has conducted a detailed analysis of the use of Old Testament traditions in Sirach. The summary of his findings [Sheppard 1980:101-8] illustrates the creative use that Ben Sira makes of the tradition. Occasionally there is a full citation of a single biblical text without alteration in wording. More often however the citation is partial, including additions and omissions. Key words or phrases are used as *Stichwort* connections to specific texts or traditions. Ben Sira is most likely to use allusions or paraphrases and he makes imaginative use of metaphors that allow for a variety of free associations with biblical imagery. He fuses together different texts or traditions, and collects and re-employs words and phrases gleaned from a variety of different texts that are presumed to be linked by a common theme or subject matter. Diachronically related narrative texts are juxtaposed synchronically. A key word or phrase may recall a distinct biblical context and at the same time allow the interpreter to elaborate that context using expressions indicative of some other scriptural tradition or outside source. At times Ben Sira makes selective alterations in the citations of a text that change its original meaning. Texts or traditions pertaining to one agent or subject are identified as pertaining to another, and familiar themes, metaphors or motifs are extended to other related subjects [Sheppard 1980:101-108].

The texts are also read within their cultural context because literature is rooted in and profoundly affected by the historical situation from which it emerges. Although my interpretation demonstrates its points primarily

from the text itself, it aims to be cognisant of the general historical, literary and sociological matrix out of which the text comes. Insight into the issues and conflicts of the time suggests new questions to ask of the text and provides clues as to the answers that may be found therein. My reading of the metaphor is credible only when the passages dealing with Woman Wisdom are not isolated unnaturally from the whole of Ben Sira's thought and from the particular historical phase of Jewish thought in which Ben Sira and his peers were forging their own ideological identity. I read the text in the light of a social reconstruction of Second Temple Jerusalem, and then confirm the legitimacy of my reading by showing how the Wisdom metaphor addresses issues confronting the group of which Ben Sira was a representative.

Although clues to the socio-historical situation may be found in the book of Sirach itself, one cannot assume that the situation as reflected in Sirach is an exact or reliable reflection of his society. Davies [1992:11-18] presents a forceful argument against the facile reconstruction of history from a literary text.<sup>19</sup> Even if one does not assume the radically sceptical stance of Davies, one must acknowledge the danger inherent in a naive movement from literary text to historical community, an activity which presupposes that the society as reflected in the text is the society as it "really was". This approach does not give due credit to the unique integrity of the literary text as an imaginative creation of the author and results in the illegitimate transfer of meaning from text to social background [Carroll 1989:206-207]. The bridge between the preserved

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<sup>19</sup> He dismisses the scholarly picture of 'ancient Israel' as the product of the light historicising of the construct found in a literary text, calling into question the extent to which the historical people of central Palestine corresponded with the entity described in the Bible.

Text and the no-longer directly accessible historical situation must be traversed with great care.<sup>20</sup> I am able to avoid many of the problems attached to moving from literary text to social background because the scope of my dissertation does not include my own reconstruction of the past. I am dependent upon the work of other scholars to describe the Second Temple situation into which I project my interpretation of Woman Wisdom.

We can expect Sirach to be tendentious. Ben Sira did not attempt to give a full and fair description of society, but endeavoured to win readers over to his way of thinking. A case in point is his depiction of women. We cannot read Sirach as an objective account of the actual status and role of women in society. Although Sirach does not give us an unobstructed window onto the social world of Ben Sira, it provides us with something much more interesting and well suited to our purpose - it gives us insight into the world as he perceived it or wanted it to be. Sirach reflects Ben Sira's own view of women and their role in society. That provides us with valuable insight into his use of the Woman Wisdom metaphor, because we have access to the way in which he saw the semantic domain of the vehicle.

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<sup>20</sup> Grabbe [1995:8-9] believes that, with a great deal of methodological care, one can derive data about the society from the literary construct, and offers guidelines for this movement from text to society.

## 1.3 GENERAL INTRODUCTION TO SIRACH

Sirach names its author (Jesus ben Sira), has a date which can be readily established (ca 180 BCE) and comes from a milieu which can be pinpointed (Jerusalem in Hellenistic times). The difficulty that Sirach presents lies in the textual material, for there are various translations and their relationship to each other and to the recently rediscovered Hebrew text is complex.

### *1.3.1 Authorship and Date*

The book of Sirach is unusual among wisdom writings in that it is neither anonymous nor pseudonymous. The author's name is given as Jesus son of Eleazar and grandson of Sira (Prologue 3; Sir 50:27), hence the appellation Ben Sira.<sup>21</sup> From what he writes and from the prologue which his grandson prefixed to the Greek translation, we can deduce that Ben Sira was a learned scribe, steeped in the Jewish Scriptures, and a devout believer in the God of Israel. He was a teacher, probably domiciled in Jerusalem.

According to the prologue to the Greek translation, Ben Sira's grandson arrived in Egypt in the thirty-eighth year of the reign of King Euergetes. This would have to be Ptolemy VII Euergetes II (170-164, 145-117 BCE) since the reign of the first Euergetes lasted only twenty-five years. The

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<sup>21</sup> The use of a male ancestor as a patronymic with 'Ben' prefixed was not unusual, particularly when the name of one's father was not sufficiently distinctive [Skehan and Di Lella 1987:4].

Year in question would then be 132 BCE. Working back from this date by allowing the appropriate length of time between grandfather and grandson, the period of completion of the Hebrew original can be placed in the first quarter of that century, ca 180 BCE.

This date is confirmed by internal evidence. Ben Sira speaks in glowing terms of the high priest Simon, describing his attire and ministrations with a vividness which is suggestive of an eyewitness account (Sir 50:1-24). This would have been Simon II who held office ca 219-196 BCE [Kearns 1969:542]. That Ben Sira wrote this after the death of Simon is implied by the phrases בְּדוֹרוֹ and בְּיָמָיו (50:1-3). The silence regarding the tumultuous events of the religious crisis under Antiochus Epiphanes IV suggests that the book was completed before 175 BCE.

By Ben Sira's time the world empire of Alexander the Great had broken up into several Hellenistic kingdoms. Palestine was a bone of contention between the Ptolemaic kingdom based in Egypt and the Seleucid kingdom of Syria. Coele-Syria which incorporated Palestine came under the control of Ptolemy Lagi I in 301 BCE. The Seleucid kings made several attempts to regain control of the region, with Antiochus III the Great finally succeeding in 198 BCE at the battle of Panion. According to Josephus [Antiquities xii,3] the change to Seleucid rule in Palestine was welcomed by a large number of Jews.

Little is known of life in Palestine during the Ptolemaic period. It is probable that the Ptolemaic overlords continued the Persian administrative system in many respects, confirming the high priest in his

dual role of religious leader and secular representative of the people [Di Lella 1992:933]. Coele-Syria was treated as another province of Egypt. The administration kept a tight rein on the affairs of the province, and their extensive economic and administrative activities penetrated to the lowest levels of Jewish society. There was a systematic exploitation of the countryside through heavy taxation and the establishment of landed estates. In addition to the administrative presence the Ptolemies kept a considerable military force in Palestine since it formed their border with the hostile Seleucid kingdom. Greeks and Macedonians settled in the cities and in the countryside. It would appear inevitable that every sector of the country be more or less shaped by Hellenistic influence [Smith 1987:54]. Despite the heavy financial burdens, life under the Ptolemies appears to have been relatively peaceful and stable for the Jewish nation. When the Seleucids wrested control of Coele-Syria the general circumstances in Palestine do not seem to have been affected initially, and life was much the same as it had been under the Ptolemies [Grabbe 1992:274-5].

Ben Sira lived most of his days under Ptolemaic rule, with the change to Seleucid rule taking place in the latter part of his life. Although they were military rivals, culturally the states which emerged from the empire of Alexander the Great were one [Pfeiffer 1959:83]. Both the Ptolemaic and Seleucid kingdoms were strongly Hellenistic which means that throughout the period Palestine would have been subject to the international currents of Hellenism. In Ben Sira's time Jerusalem experienced a period of relative calm, but in light of the storm which broke under the repressive regime of Antiochus IV Epiphanes and led to the Maccabean revolt, one could expect there to have been growing

tensions and divisions in the city and surrounds. Pfeiffer [1959:79] and Tarn and Griffith [1966:214] point to inner dissension in Jerusalem which Antiochus IV exploited in his attempts to suppress traditional Jewish religion. Tcherikover [1959:114] describes the Jerusalem of Ben Sira's day as a scene of social tension with friction between rich and poor and between supporters of the Seleucid government and adherents of the Ptolemies, and of cultural and religious differences between the followers of the ancient Jewish tradition and those who were attracted to the new Hellenistic life. While the degree of Hellenisation that had occurred and the strength and forms of opposition to it, as well as the reasons underlying the Maccabean revolt may be disputed,<sup>22</sup> we can safely conclude that this period in Jewish history was a time of change and uncertainty with traditional beliefs and values being challenged by the dominant Hellenistic culture.

### ***1.3.2 Texts and versions***

#### *1.3.2.1 The Hebrew text*

The extant texts and versions of Sirach present a confusing picture and suggest a complicated history. The work was originally composed in Hebrew. The Hebrew text fell largely into disuse, however, when the rabbis denied the work a place in the canon, and the Greek translation was its primary means of transmission. We know that Jerome in the fourth century CE was acquainted with the Hebrew text, as was Saadya

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<sup>22</sup> Pfeiffer [1949:9-10] summarises four conflicting explanations of the Maccabean revolt. See Grabbe [1992:247-256] for a discussion of the various views taken on the causes of the Maccabean revolt.



in the 10th century CE [Kearns 1969:546], but with the exception of more or less precise rabbinic quotations, the Hebrew text was lost to scholarship until the turn of the century.

In 1896 Solomon Schechter identified a leaf of the Hebrew Sirach among a cache of manuscripts that had been recovered from the Genizah of the Qaraite Synagogue in Cairo. Further investigation of material from the Genizah brought to light additional fragments, parts of four distinct manuscripts which have been named A, B, C and D. Several decades later J Marcus [1931:223-240] identified a fragment from a fifth manuscript (E) originating from the same Genizah. More leaves of Mss B and C were discovered and published by J Schirman [1958:440-443]. A Scheiber [1959:125-134] found a new leaf of Hebrew Sirach and the corner of a damaged leaf of Ms C [Scheiber 1958:440-443] among the fragments from the Cairo Genizah stored under “Miscellanea and unidentified” at the Cambridge University Library. He classified the new leaf as part of Ms D, an identification which is disputed by Di Lella [1988:226-7] on the grounds that this new leaf is written stichometrically, unlike D, and in different handwriting. Hence Di Lella classifies it as a new manuscript, Ms F.<sup>23</sup> The Cairo manuscripts date from the 10th to 12th centuries CE. Ms C is an anthology of passages from Sirach which does not follow the original order. Beentjes [1988:46-59] has outlined probable reasons for the arrangement of verses followed in this manuscript.

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<sup>23</sup> Di Lella [1988:231-237] provides a transcript of the text.

The Cairo Genizah finds were later supplemented by scroll fragments from Qumran and Masada. The Qumran fragments date from the second half of the first century BCE.<sup>24</sup> At Masada 26 leather fragments dating from the first century BCE were unearthed. Y Yadin [1965] has documented this discovery.

Scholarly opinion has fluctuated in its assessment of the authenticity of the Genizah scrolls. Initially they were judged to contain an essentially authentic text independent of Greek and Syriac, marred by textual corruptions.<sup>25</sup> E Nestle [1902:548-9] attempted to prove that the Genizah fragments represent a text that is partly original and partly retranslated from the Greek (Ms C) and from the Syriac (Ms A). I Levi [1905:393] thought the Hebrew manuscripts to be substantially authentic but containing doublets due to a retranslation from the Syriac. Later scholars expressed doubt as to their genuineness. D S Margolioth, on the strength of some Persian glosses in the margin of Ms B, proposed that the Cairo mss were a retranslation from the Greek executed by a medieval Persian Jew [Di Lella 1966:27-29]. His theory was quickly refuted [Toy 1901:1168], but several eminent scholars<sup>26</sup> have repeated the theory that the manuscripts represent a retranslation from the Greek, the Syriac or both.

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<sup>24</sup> These have been published by M Baillet [DJD IV 1965:75] and J A Sanders [DJD 1965:79-85].

<sup>25</sup> This position has been held by M H Segal, R Smend, A Fuchs, N Peters, G H Box and W O E Oesterly. Di Lella [1966:22] gives a summary of their positions.

<sup>26</sup> Di Lella [1966:16] mentions E J Goodspeed, C H Gordon, A Bucher, R Storr, M Hadas, C C Torrey, H L Ginsberg, H Duesberg and P Auvray.

Di Lella [1966:47-77] supplies persuasive proof for the substantial authenticity of the Cairo manuscripts. He rejects the validity of a claim made on the basis of study of *isolated* verses that the *entire* text is retroverted from the Syriac. Positively, he advances a number of arguments in favour of their authenticity. He begins by studying two Old Testament citations in Sirach which agree with the *Vorlage* of the Septuagint rather than with the Massoretic text.<sup>27</sup> These suggest that the Cairo Hebrew represents a text which for the most part antedates 135 CE at which stage the *textus receptus* had already been stabilised. “[I]t is inconceivable that a medieval Jew who knew his Massoretic text would revert to a hebrew text of an Old Testament citation or allusion that is not in keeping with the *textus receptus* but one related to the *Vorlage* of the LXX” [Di Lella 1966:49]. Secondly, the order of chapters 30-36 which follows the primitive order rather than that of the Greek and its daughter translations<sup>28</sup> militates against its being a later retranslation from the Greek or a translation based on that. Thirdly, Di Lella critically analyses typical examples from each of the Mss, comparing them with the ancient versions. His conclusion is that the Cairo Hebrew is independent of the Greek and Syriac and that these versions find their common origin only in a text like the one found in the Cairo Genizah. Di Lella [1966:78-105] also advances historical arguments in favour of the authenticity of the Cairo manuscripts. He presents culminatively convincing arguments to support the hypothesis that the Cairo Genizah fragments of Sirach were copied from exemplars which represented a text that ultimately goes

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<sup>27</sup> The Cairo Hebrew for 46:19c is a clear reference to 1 Sam 12:3, but in the recension that underlay the LXX. So too the reference to Is 38:17 in Sir 51:2b.

<sup>28</sup> See below, “The Greek text”.

back to the caves near Khirbet Qumran.<sup>29</sup> While none of the arguments advanced by Di Lella are in themselves conclusive, their combined effect makes the thesis plausible. This would point to a date prior to 68 CE for the text which forms the basis of the Cairo Hebrew. It can therefore be held that despite numerous errors and corruptions the Genizah texts substantially reflect the Hebrew that Ben Sira himself wrote.

The discovery of the Masada scroll provided further evidence in favour of the authenticity of the Cairo Genizah manuscripts. The material contained in this scroll overlaps with the contents of Ms B. From a comparison of these two texts, Yadin [1965:10-11] concludes that despite many variants, the Masada text is basically identical with that of the Genizah manuscripts. Moreover, the Masada text is closest to the original of Ben Sira. Just over two thirds of the Hebrew text has now

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<sup>29</sup> Central to the thesis is the Letter of Timothy I Patriarch of Seleucia to Sergius the Metropolitan of Elam which describes the discovery of Jewish books in a cave in the vicinity of Jericho. Di Lella [1966:150-151] suggests the following history for the Hebrew text of Sirach: After Ben Sira wrote his book, numerous copies were made and circulated. It was valued by the Essenes who hid some copies away in the caves near Khirbet Qumran. The rabbis suppressed the book at the Synod of Jamnia, but a few copies remained in circulation. Jerome (d. 420 CE) knew of the Hebrew of Sirach, but it appears that by the middle of the fifth century CE the Hebrew text disappeared. Popular recollections and favourite proverbs were remembered and often quoted by the rabbinic writers, but such quotations were often inexact. Near the end of the 8th century CE, the Hebrew text was recovered from the Jericho cave that was accidentally chanced upon by an Arab. The Qaraites utilised and made copies of it and Jewish writers such as Saadya were also able to use it. But the book was again suppressed and the Hebrew text disappeared into the Genizahs, to be rediscovered only in 1896.

been unearthed,<sup>30</sup> and present scholarly consensus is that the extant Hebrew texts are relatively good copies of the “original” text [Beentjes 1988:46].

The Genizah manuscripts with their discrepancies and reduplication seem to bear witness to the existence of more than one recension of the Hebrew text. Rüger [1970] has made a detailed study of the text of the Cairo manuscripts. He examines and criticises Ziegler’s arguments for retroversion from the Greek in 11:2b, 20:13a and 37:20b, his own opinion being that in these texts we have to do with genuine Hebrew glosses in the original text of Sirach, which originate within the Judaeen exegetical tradition. He reaches similar conclusions regarding Di Lella’s judgement that there is retroversion from the Syriac in 16:3b,d and 32:16b [Rüger 1970:4-8]. After undertaking a detailed comparison of the reduplication in Ms A [Rüger 1970:12-26] and comparing the parallel traditions in passages which are found in more than one manuscript, Rüger [1970:112-113] concludes that there were originally two forms of the Hebrew text. The first recension was written in late Hebrew and is closely followed by the grandson’s Greek translation. The second recension was written in a language close to that of the Mishnah. It can be connected with the Syriac translation and is attested to for the first time in Clement of Alexandria. The subsequent copying process brought about a partial and confused amalgamation of the two text forms. In a number of places it is clear that the primitive translations were made before the amalgamation took place and it is possible to see that, for

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<sup>30</sup> For a summary of the contents and proposed dating of the recovered portions, see Skehan and Di Lella [1987:52-53].

instance, the Syriac has translated one Hebrew form while the Greek has followed another. The phenomenon accounts for a considerable number of divergences between the Hebrew and the Greek.

A possible explanation for the existence of an expanded Hebrew text of Sirach is outlined by McNamara [1983:155]. Sirach became very popular and was used in circles that had passed beyond his conservative theology of retribution and the afterlife. In such circles the original Hebrew was updated, either by marginal glosses or by insertions into the text, and references made to divine visitation after death, to a judgement and such like. Kearns [1969:549-550] has made a study of the editorial additions found in the expanded recension(s) and looks to their eschatology in particular as a clue to their origins. His conclusions are as follows. The Hebrew text underlying the longer Greek text (GII) and the Old Latin (OL) translation depends to some degree on late second century BCE Palestinian writings, *viz.* the Book of Jubilees, the Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs and the Book of Enoch 1-36, its main source being Enoch 37-71 (Enoch B) and 91-105, 108 (Enoch E). It also shows dependence on the Wisdom of Solomon. All of this points to a date around the end of the reign of Alexander Jannaeus or slightly later for the longer Hebrew recension. The evidence from the Syriac translation is less abundant, but also points to influence from the Book of Jubilees and especially Enoch B and Enoch E, suggesting a similar date for its *Vorlage*. This would make it contemporary with the Essene movement. The possibility of Essenian origin is enhanced by a study of the teaching of the Qumran scrolls. The Old Testament pseudepigrapha reflected in the additions, *viz.* Jubilees, The Testaments of Levi and Naphtali, and the relevant sections of Enoch, were all prized by the Qumran sect whom we

know also used Sirach. They would have considered this last book to have been defective in its eschatology, in its internalisation of personal religion, and its notions of repentance, personal acceptance and rejection by God and union with him through trust and love. Therefore the text was glossed or 're-read'. This expanded text could have found its way into surviving Greek manuscripts via the Hexapla. The Cairo manuscripts which contain readings of the expanded text could have been copied from exemplars going back to a find of manuscripts at Qumran.<sup>31</sup>

While Di Lella [Skehan and Di Lella 1987:59] is willing to concede that there is evidence of primary and secondary text forms, he takes issue with the assertion by Rieger that inner developments in the Hebrew sufficiently account for the forms in the Cairo manuscripts, making the explanation of retroversion from the Syriac unnecessary. He maintains that some of these passages do not have the same kind of Hebrew as the secondary text-form (HTII) which dates back to the first century BCE, but have diction and grammar which are often demonstrably Mishnaic. There is thus broad agreement concerning the existence of more than one recension of the Hebrew, the point of dispute being whether or not one need to take into account the possibility of retroversion when unravelling the textual difficulties of the Cairo Genizah manuscripts.

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<sup>31</sup> See above, Di Lella's [1987:78-105] historical arguments for the authenticity of the Cairo Genizah manuscripts.

### 1.3.2.2 *The Greek Text*

There are two forms of the Greek translation, a shorter form to be found in the great uncial codices of the LXX, A C S and B and in the cursives which follow them, and a longer text preserved mainly through minuscule 248.

The Greek Version made by Ben Sira's grandson is of the shorter form. It appears that the grandson's *Vorlage* was a copy in poor textual condition, and he makes clear in his prologue that he did not make a slavish translation of the Hebrew. Furthermore the Greek text has suffered editorial alteration and scribal corruption in transmission. But the Greek text has come down to us with a fair amount of early textual evidence, ancient related versions and patristic citations which enable its original form to be reconstructed with some confidence.

There is a textual displacement common to all Greek translations:<sup>32</sup> the positions of 30:35-33:13a and 33:13b-36:16a are switched around. It would appear that the pairs of leaves on which these sections were written were accidentally transposed. This implies that every Greek manuscript in existence derives ultimately from a single exemplar.

The translation made by Ben Sira's grandson (GI) reflects, albeit with corruptions, the Hebrew text as it left the hand of Ben Sira (HTI). GI generally reflects the Hebrew text found at Qumran and Masada. But

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<sup>32</sup> Only 248 does not have this displacement, and this has probably been corrected [Toy 1901:1170].



scholars have long recognised the existence of another Greek recension, GII, whose main witnesses are certain Greek cursives and the Old Latin (OL). Kearns [1969:548] cites cursive ms 253, the Syrohexapla, Codex Venetus and mss 248, 493 and 637 as reflecting GII. These witnesses do not actually preserve the text of GII but transmit a form of GI which has been expanded under the influence of one or more manuscripts which we call GII. Hence they only offer a selection of GII readings as opposed to the complete contents [Skehan and Di Lella 1987:55]. The translator of GII did not produce an independent new translation but worked from GI, supplementing his work with translations from an expanded Hebrew text (HTII) where he deemed it necessary. GII is characterised by many additions, ranging from a word or two to complete bicola or cola.

### 1.3.2.3 *The Latin Version*

The Latin version included in the Vulgate is a recension of OL since Jerome did not make a new Latin translation of Sirach. The translation appears to have been made in Africa by Christians in the second half of the second century CE from a Greek exemplar. It does not contain the transposition common to all extant Greek manuscripts. The exemplar used by the translator of OL contained numerous additions of GII type which it is generally believed go back ultimately to HTII. There is some dispute as to the precise character of the Greek text used by the translator. Kearns [1969:548] cites the conflicting views of Smend and De Bruyne. The first holds that the form of Greek immediately underlying the primitive OL was basically a manuscript of GI, but one which contained many traces of the influence of GII. De Bruyne on the

other hand holds that OL was based directly on a GII manuscript, but that many opposing readings of GI entered it later.

The OL lacked chapters 44-50 (the Praise of the Fathers) and the Prologue, but had chapter 51 and an intrusive chapter 52 which really belongs to 2 Ch 6:13-22 and 1 Kings 8:22-31. It underwent alteration prior to being incorporated into the Vulgate in the fifth century CE. Changes were made and sections pruned to bring it into greater conformity with GI and preferable alternate translations were inserted to improve its latinity. The missing prologue and chapters 44-50 were added later by scribes and editors of the Vulgate [Kearns 1969:547]. As a result, the Latin Sirach has a text replete with doublets, variants, interpolations and transpositions. Despite the difficulties it presents, however, it is of importance for text-critical purposes, especially as it witnesses to the expanded text.

#### *1.3.2.4 The Syriac Versions*

There are two Syriac versions of Sirach, the Syrohexapla and the Peshitta versions. The first was produced in 615-7 CE and is based on the Greek text of the fifth column of Origen's Hexapla. The end product is a cautious and faithful rendering of Origen's text which preserves even the variants from Aquila, Symmachus and Theodotion [Nelson 1981:36].

There are a number of theories concerning the origins of the Peshitta version of Sirach. It is commonly held to have been made by Christians. Kearns [1969:547] would date it ca 200 CE while Wright [1989:6] places it more generally before the early fourth century CE. A later revision was

undertaken in the latter part of that century. The translation was made from a Hebrew text which had characteristics of both Hebrew recensions, but the translator was frequently influenced in his choice between doublets by a Greek version that had much in common with GII [Kearns 1969:548].<sup>33</sup> It preserves the correct order of the text after 30:24.

Winter [1977:237] has given a summary of the quantitative differences between the Syriac, GI, GII and the Hebrew. To the 1616 lines of GI, the Syriac adds 74 lines, but omits 193,5. When we compare the Syriac to the extant Hebrew, it adds 40,5 lines not present in the Hebrew, but omits 169,5 lines. Where GII readings are available for comparison, the Syriac agrees with 19 lines of distinctive GII material, but omits 47 GII lines. Sir 26:26 in the Syriac has no corresponding text in the other versions. None of the 43,5 lines of GII preserved only in the Latin is found in the Syriac. Qualitatively, the Syriac often offers a different wording and meaning from the Hebrew and / or Greek.

Some discrepancies may be dismissed as scribal errors, careless paraphrases or free translation by a translator who was ignorant of the Hebrew meaning. But there may also be more deliberate influences at work in these divergences, with the translators altering the text to suit their theological preferences. Winter's [1977:237-253] hypothesis is that there is a group of peculiarities of the Syriac version, too numerous and too consistent to be dismissed as the products of chance, all of which conform to the distinctive marks of Ebionite theology. He notes in

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<sup>33</sup> Nestle [1902:546] also notes that the Syriac is influenced by the Greek even though it was translated from the Hebrew.

certain peculiar readings in the Syriac a reluctance to speak about sacrifices, hostility to both the priesthood and the monarchy, a preference for poverty, vegetarianism, the elimination of anthropomorphisms, and a reluctance to quote the written prophets. He claims that these characteristics are all distinctive marks of the Ebionite theology. Against this, Owens [1989:63] states that too little is known about the Ebionites for anyone to be confident in distinguishing their 'distinctive tenets'. In particular, he has called into question the supposedly Ebionite features that Winter claims to find in Peshitta Sir 32:1-13. Here the Syriac differs from the LXX in two ways - it further heightens the priority of morality over cultic worship by spiritualising the concept of sacrifice (vs 8) and by setting forth ethical observance as equivalent or superior to cultic worship (vv 1, 2-4, 7); and it substitutes almsgiving for the bringing of temple offerings and sacrifices (vv 9-13). Owens believes that this substitution reflects a mainstream Christian perspective; there is nothing specifically Ebionite about it. The Peshitta translator does not avoid referring to cultic sacrifice - it is specifically mentioned in vv 2-4 and 8. Without providing a discussion of Winter's other proof texts for Ebionite interpretations, Owens [1989:65 n48] claims that close investigation will show them in every case to be either a feature quite compatible with mainstream Christianity or Judaism, or based on an artificial interpretation of a textually problematic passage.

Winter [1977:494-507] also attempts to show that another group of readings peculiar to the Syriac can best be explained as further editing by orthodox Christians in the latter part of the fourth century. He identifies a series of passages in which the wording has been changed to avoid a flattering reference to the Jewish Law, and verses where the text is

altered to refer either to Christ or to John the Baptist. He believes that there are four passages in particular which have been changed to avoid speaking about the creation of Wisdom - Sir 42:20-21, 39:32, 1:4 and 1:9. Writers after the Arian controversy were extremely sensitive about the issue, since the Old Testament personification of Wisdom was understood as pre-figuring the second Person of the Trinity, and the alleged creation of the Son by the Father was a central theme in Arian Christology. Winter [1977:505] has ascertained that these Syriac variations are notably different from the readings of GII. They are found in all available Syriac manuscripts. This suggests that the changes were either made in the initial act of translating or in the course of a far-reaching revision such as that which produced the Peshitta. Once again, Owens [1989:42-48] disagrees with Winter's assessment of these last-mentioned passages. The first two are fraught with textual difficulties, and Owens offers alternative explanations for the Syriac translation of the last two that do not entail an attempt to suppress references to the creation of Wisdom. He makes the valid point that there are glaring references to Wisdom's creation in other places in the Syriac Sirach, most notably 24:8,9. No Syriac scribe who was so repulsed by any hint of the creation of wisdom that he would make the subtle changes Winter proposes in some verses would leave untouched such clear, bold statements about Wisdom's creation in other places in the text. Owens [1989:47-8] also points out that tampering with biblical texts to obliterate references to the creation of wisdom was not characteristic of orthodox Christianity in the fourth century. There is no textual evidence that shows any attempt to alter the text of Peshitta Prov 8:22 which reads unequivocally "the Lord created me". He thus concludes that Winter fails in his attempt to establish a specific date for Peshitta Sirach.

The work by Nelson [1981] seeks to determine the relationship of the Syriac version to the Hebrew and Greek materials and to characterise the unique features of the Syriac version. The Syriac version of Sirach was made from a Hebrew original which bore a close resemblance to the Cairo manuscripts and the scroll from Masada, although the translation was done before the material had taken the final form attested to in the Cairo manuscripts. The Syriac translator was dependent upon a Greek version for the meaning of many passages, but he did not translate from the Greek originally. By the middle of the fifth century CE the Syriac version had undergone a Christian revision. This was not a complete revision, but by means of some additions, omissions and alterations, the Syriac version was made more acceptable to Christian readers [Nelson 1981:152-154].

Owens [1989:48-75] makes a study of the quotations from and allusions to Sirach in the Demonstrations of Aphrahat, writings of a church leader from the Seleucia-Ctesiphon area which can be dated to 337 CE. The study is complicated by the fact that Aphrahat almost always quotes from memory, and does not always indicate quotations. There is thus difficulty in locating and identifying citations, and neither literalness or inexactness can be assumed *a priori* until each citation is examined in the light of its function and context and compared to the ancient Bible texts that could have been known to Aphrahat. He concludes that Aphrahat's text of Sirach is essentially identical to that found in the Peshitta manuscripts of the sixth to eighth centuries and later. This suggests that by the time Aphrahat wrote the translation must have been in circulation in the Mesopotamian church for a number of years. One

may therefore assume that the basic Peshitta text of Sirach, including at least some of its Christian features, was in existence by about 300 CE and probably earlier.

Kearns [1969:548] detects tendentious alteration already in the underlying Hebrew text since many of these variants show the characteristic doctrinal trends of GII and OL. Therefore the Syriac version presents the reader with multiple complications. A reading that differs from the Greek and / or Hebrew could reflect a divergent Hebrew *Vorlage*, or the discrepancy could be due to the theological views of the translator.

#### 1.3.2.5 *The Other Versions*

Ancient versions of Sirach include the Armenian, Georgian, Coptic, Ethiopic and Arabic. Since these all derive from the same Greek text, as do most of the quotations found in the Greek fathers [Nestle 1902:544-545], they are not of importance for this study.

#### 1.3.2.6 *Summary*

Gilbert [1984:291] sums up the points about the text of Sirach concerning which there is general agreement: Ben Sira wrote in Hebrew in Jerusalem around 190 BCE. This text, called HTI, is supposed to be the archetype of the Qumran and Masada manuscripts. At some stage after 132 BCE Ben Sira's grandson undertook a Greek translation (GI)

while living in Alexandria. This translation survives in the great uncials. Between 50 BCE and 150 CE the Hebrew underwent expansion and alteration. The final product of this process is known as HTII. The Cairo manuscripts, especially Ms A, contains numerous doublets which could to some extent reflect this new stage of the text. The Peshitta appears to have been translated from this later Hebrew text. A second Greek translation based on HTII was made between 105 and 200 CE. It is quoted by Clement of Alexandria before 215 CE, but the new translation has not been preserved intact. The Greek manuscripts with longer text, especially 248, really give GI with passages added from GII. The Old Latin witnesses to GII to some degree. It also has additions which show Christian influence.

#### *1.3.2.7 Reconstruction of the Hebrew from the Greek*

There are several texts pertinent to my dissertation which are not extant in the Hebrew, in which cases I am entirely dependent upon the translations. This is problematic since the relationship of even GI to the Hebrew original is not such that an accurate reconstruction of the Hebrew is possible. Wright [1989] has studied some aspects of the translation technique of the grandson and his degree of dependence upon lexical equivalents suggested by the Jewish Greek translations. The accuracy of his results is affected by the poor state of the Hebrew text and the presence of some elements of HTII [Wright 1989:115], but the general picture they yield may be taken as reliable. The following conclusions drawn from his statistical analysis are of direct concern for the present study:



1. The grandson does not use the same Greek rendering for each occurrence of a Hebrew word, nor is he dependent on lexical equivalents suggested by the LXX [Wright 1989:108-9 & 235-6].
2. The grandson did not depend heavily on the Old Greek versions (OG) for his translations. Where there is a clear allusion to the Hebrew Scripture in the Hebrew text, there is no clear pattern of recognition or of a subsequent use of OG or OG translation equivalents to render these sections into Greek. Any use of OG terminology may be adequately explained by familiarity with the material in contexts such as worship or school without the need to postulate recourse to written texts [Wright 1989:229].

Middendorp [1973:92ff] has made a study of “synonyms” - those cases where a similar idea is expressed in the various versions with different words - in the Hebrew Ms B, the marginal notes of this manuscript, and the Greek. He concludes that where differences are slight, they can be attributed to scribal errors, but when another similar word is used, the change is due either to failure in memory or to intentional change. The fact that these books were learned by rote allowed such alterations to take place. The presence of these “synonyms” prevents the possibility of reconstructing precisely the original words of Ben Sira.

All this means that it is impossible to reconstruct the underlying Hebrew with any certainty from the Greek alone. Simultaneous use of the Syriac versions may provide additional information about the original Hebrew, but even where Greek and Syriac are both consulted, a confident reconstruction may elude us.

The safest conclusion to draw from this is that the Hebrew text of Sirach and the Greek translation by the grandson should be considered to be distinct literary entities, and not exchanged one for the other. However, since the Hebrew text is fragmentary, and corrupt in places, we cannot build up a complete and accurate picture of Ben Sira's original by studying it in isolation. We therefore need to engage in the hazardous task of attempting to read the non-extant Hebrew behind the available translations. Because any Hebrew reconstruction is tentative at best, I do not offer detailed reconstructions of the text. Where Hebrew is available, I follow it unless there is an obvious reason to prefer another reading. Where the Hebrew is not extant, I work predominantly from the Greek, ignoring GII additions, since the grandson worked with a *Vorlage* that was closest to the original. When working without a Hebrew text I avoid wherever possible argumentation that requires an accurate reconstruction of precise terminology employed by Ben Sira. In places where the underlying Hebrew word or construction is important for my line of reasoning, I will use both the Greek and Syriac translations in attempting a reconstruction, with occasional recourse to the Latin. Passages which appear to be from the expanded text, particularly those found in the Latin but not in GI or Syriac, do not bear witness to the conceptual world of Ben Sira and so will not be discussed. Since the grandson does not copy the wording of the Old Greek translations to render biblical quotes or allusions in the Hebrew, we need not establish direct literary correspondence before we can assume that a specific text lies behind a particular thought or use of imagery.

### 1.3.3 *Ben Sira's bible*

The extent and status of the Jewish Scriptures in the Second Temple Period is a matter of debate. Certainly there existed a body of writings held in high esteem in the Jewish community and considered in some way to be authoritative. Two questions in particular are of relevance for this study. What constituted Ben Sira's bible? Did he consider the canon to be closed, or did he and / or his grandson entertain the thought that Sirach could also be included within the parameters of the sacred writings?

Ben Sira's reputed knowledge of the "Law, Prophets and other books" and his own description of the scribe as one who studies the Law of the Most High, the wisdom of the ancients, and prophecy (Sir 39:1) leads one to expect his work to reflect the language and teaching of the Hebrew Scriptures. Indeed, it is universally recognised that Sirach is permeated with biblical allusions and phrases. These allusions indicate which writings formed the basis of his study. Ben Sira cites or alludes to the Pentateuch, Joshua, 1-2 Samuel, 1-2 Kings, 1-2 Chronicles, Nehemiah, Psalms, Proverbs, Job, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Haggai, and Malachi. He mentions in passing the Judges and the Twelve Minor Prophets, but he does not refer at all to Ruth, Ezra, Esther, Daniel or to the apocryphal books of Tobit, Judith and Baruch [Skehan and Di Lella 1987:41].<sup>34</sup> The absence of references in Sirach to certain writings does

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<sup>34</sup> This list of cited biblical sources agrees with that of Rüger [1984:60-64] who concentrates on the quotations and allusions found in the Praise of the Fathers (Sir 44-50). He also finds no reference to Song of Songs.

not prove that Ben Sira denied these a place in the collection of authoritative writings, nor does it necessarily prove that they were unavailable to him. An argument from silence is always precarious.<sup>35</sup> There are many possible reasons for his failing to allude to them, one being that his subject matter may not have demanded or provided the opportunity for such allusions. Even if Ben Sira excluded certain books from his ‘canon’, this does not reflect on the status of those books within other interpretative traditions. One cannot infer the ‘canonicity’ of a work from the fact that it is quoted in Sirach either. The only legitimate inference is that Ben Sira knew the book, and most likely held it in high regard.

The grandson’s designation of the written tradition as “τοῦ νόμου καὶ τῶν προφητῶν καὶ τῶν ἄλλων πατριῶν βιβλίων” suggests that the Law and Prophets were already recognised bodies of work, and probably had some kind of canonical status [Orlinsky 1991:484]. The less precise “other books” confirms the existence of works outside the above-mentioned categories that also commanded the respect of the Jewish community, though this third section, in contrast to the law and prophets, is not clearly demarcated [Hengel 1994:159]. Rieger [1984:66] infers from the imprecision of the references to these “other books”<sup>36</sup> that the third category had not been finalised, and that the canon was thus seen as open-ended. This would

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<sup>35</sup> It is however interesting that Ben Sira makes no mention of Ezra in the Praise of the Fathers, although he refers briefly to Nehemiah (Sir 49:13). Schnabel [1985:26-27] gives a brief review of solutions offered to explain this silence.

<sup>36</sup> In the Prologue they are variously referred to as ‘τῶν ἄλλων τῶν κατ’ αὐτοῦς ἠκολουθηκότων (1), τῶν ἄλλων πατριῶν βιβλίων (10), τὰ λοιπὰ τῶν βιβλίων (25).

allow for Sirach to be included in the sacred tradition.<sup>37</sup> Blenkinsopp [1995:20] also suggests that the grandson implies an open-ended corpus of ‘other books’ to which other compositions could, in theory, be added, and sees in the prologue a hint that the grandfather’s work merits co-option into the collection. Against this Van der Kooij [1998:23-24,31] has argued that the ‘other books’ are *together with* the Law and Prophets described as πατρίων βιβλίων (Prologue 10). They are therefore also held to be a part of the venerable tradition making up the national literary heritage. The use of the definite article, “*the* other books”, seems to presuppose that the third section was a defined section. Van der Kooij [1998:23] also points out that Josephus, in using a similar designation (‘the remaining books’) clearly refers to a defined group of books, since he can list them. The grandson argues for Sirach’s derived authority because it is based upon and consistent with the teaching of the ‘books of the fathers’, but he is surely not asking that such a recently-penned book be classified with the πατρίων βιβλίων. I will return to the question of whether and in what way Ben Sira himself considered his book to form a part of the sacred tradition.

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<sup>37</sup> Rüger [1984:69] writes that Ben Sira regards his work as “*un livre qui se situe à l’intérieur de la frontière du ‘canon’*”.

## 1.4 THE SOCIAL SETTING FOR SIRACH

Second Temple Judaism is not a monolithic entity. Its variegated nature has been noted by many scholars;<sup>38</sup> Boccaccini [1991:20] goes as far as to speak of ‘Judaisms’. Key characteristics of Judaism in this period which impact upon our reading of Sirach are the quest for self-definition which involved competing interpretations of the tradition, the decline of prophecy and growing dependence upon written scripture, the confrontation with Hellenism, and the emergence of apocalyptic movements.

Post-exilic Judaism engaged in the pressing task of self-definition. No uniform answer had been agreed upon to the question of what it meant to be the people of God. Different groups offered different answers, and one may see the quest for identity in terms of a struggle of competing groups within Judaism to advance their own ideas on the issue. Among these the answers of the wisdom tradition had long enjoyed support.<sup>39</sup> But there

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<sup>38</sup> Davies [1992:153-4] refers to this as a ‘fairly recently acquired understanding of Judean religion in this period’. He claims that there was no orthodoxy other than the authorised sanctuary procedures, and these could change as the priestly families dictated

<sup>39</sup> Clements [1992:26f] sketches the ascendancy of the sapiential worldview after the exile. The deportations and return had created an entirely new situation for Israel and threatened to render inadequate previous models for self-understanding. In the period of the monarchy, Israel had a national identity and understood their God as a national god. But the kingship disappeared with the loss of political sovereignty and exile and the destruction of the temple robbed them of the security provided by the national cult. Even though prophetic eschatology envisioned Israel’s future return to a nation state, for the present they had to learn to live as a community which was physically divided and scattered among other nations, lacking full control over their own affairs even in Judah itself. The conservative sapiential worldview

were competing claims made by the Hellenists and by the apocalyptic voices raised in this period.

### ***1.4.1 Hellenisation***

Certainly the challenge of Hellenism had to be confronted in Jerusalem. Palestine in Ben Sira's day was far from isolated. Even in the pre-Hellenistic period the Phoenicians mediated Greek contact with Palestine through their trade with the Aegean.<sup>40</sup> This contact intensified with the conquests of Alexander the Great who brought the ancient Near East directly under Graeco-Macedonian rule. The subsequent Hellenistic Kingdoms consolidated the Graeco-Macedonian presence in the region. There are conflicting opinions as to the effect of this Hellenistic presence on the Jewish nation. Tarn & Griffith [1966:210-266] are representative of those who vehemently deny any significant Hellenisation of Judaism. They describe the Jews as "the one race strong enough to resist the impact of [the Greek world's] victorious culture" [1966:210]. They restrict the impact of the Hellenistic spirit to the syncretistic Jewish-pagan cults in Asia Minor and Syria; any other borrowing was on the level of outward forms only. This view has been shown to be untenable and Hengel's [1974:12f] thesis that all Judaism from the middle of the third century BCE must be designated Hellenistic Judaism has become

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with its more universalistic approach and emphasis on the individual offered a way of looking at the world that took account of these altered circumstances. It placed less emphasis on the immediacy of cultic worship, on the covenant and on the national character of God,<sup>39</sup> and kinship ties were played down in favour of the importance of the household. It was therefore an ideal resource for coping with this time.

<sup>40</sup> There is evidence of Greek mercenaries and merchants in Palestine from at least the seventh century BCE and Greek coins from after the sixth century BCE [Hengel 1974:32].

widely influential. In his book he describes a context in which the Jews were bound to be influenced by Greek culture and in which Hellenisation was inevitable, barring a strong conscious effort to reject all Greek influences. Collins [1986:11], in discussing the differences between Judaism in Palestine and the Diaspora in Egypt, shows that there is a difference in degree of Hellenisation in the two Jewish communities, with the antipathy towards Hellenism stronger in Palestine where the philosophical influence was also more limited. But this distinction is not absolute; it is one of degree. He thus concurs that all Judaism of this period is in some sense Hellenistic Judaism. Nonetheless, it is still valid to recognise degrees of Hellenisation, and to point to this process as one that forced Jews to rethink their identity.

Some of the disagreement about the degree of Hellenisation of the Jewish people stems from different understandings of what is meant by *Hellenisation*. Grabbe [1992:168] differentiates various usages of the term and explains in what sense one can refer to degrees of Hellenisation. In the broadest sense all of the Near East was Hellenised in that it was incorporated into the Hellenistic kingdoms. The Greek spirit first impacted upon the East in terms of a perfected, superior technique of war and an inexorable state administration whose aim was the optimal exploitation of its subject territories [Hengel 1974:12]. *Hellenism* is more frequently used in the sense of the cultural phenomenon – pertaining to literature, art, philosophy and a syncretistic religious context. Hellenistic culture is not equivalent to Greek culture – it designates a complex mixture of oriental and Greek elements. The balance between these elements was not static, but constantly changing and developing. Some regions, strata of society and institutions became or remained almost



purely Greek, others escaped the Greek influence, and between these two poles there were various shades of interaction. Thirdly we may speak of the Hellenisation of individuals. Once again, the extent to which individuals adopted or conformed to specific Greek practices varied. There were several responses to Hellenism possible to a Jew living in Ptolemaic and Seleucid Palestine. One could wholeheartedly embrace the Graeco-Macedonian lifestyle and worldview, seeking advancement by identifying as much as possible with the ruling class. This would inevitably involve some conflict with traditional interpretations of the Jewish law and tradition. Russell [1986:8] identifies the wealthier sections of the Jewish community, including the priestly aristocracy as the circles most open to Hellenism. These upper classes had the greatest opportunities for contacts with foreigners and the greatest motivation to actively pursue these contacts, for Hellenism carried with it social and economic as well as cultural and religious implications. It was also possible to react violently against Hellenism. Those who chose the latter option did not necessarily reject all aspects of Hellenistic culture; often specific things, such as political domination and those practices which directly affected the Jewish religion, were opposed while the subtler points of Hellenistic culture were absorbed.<sup>41</sup> Between these extremes, many Jews were able to borrow from Hellenistic culture and thought where it was not perceived to compromise their Jewish beliefs. One could expect this openness to aspects of Hellenistic culture to be greater in the period prior to the attempt by Antiochus IV to suppress the Jewish faith.

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<sup>41</sup> The Maccabean revolt and the resultant Hasmonean Kingdom which was in many respects Hellenistic illustrate this fact.

In the light of the Hellenistic challenge the question of what was central and indispensable to Jewish faith had to be addressed. The groups more open to foreign influences sought ways to lessen the divide between Jew and Gentile through rationalistic interpretation of the Jewish Law. They wanted to express the essential truth of Judaism in a universalistic way. These rationalist interpretations of the law provoked conservative elements to an even firmer insistence on the entire corpus of laws strictly interpreted as the essence of Judaism and as establishing qualification for membership of the people of God [Blenkinsopp 1981:2]. Very shortly after Ben Sira's time there was the outbreak of life-and-death struggle between the reform party and the conservatives. We can assume that the conflict of interpretations had been going on for some time prior to the uprising.

The question of Ben Sira's attitude toward Hellenism is an important one, for his understanding of the nature and scope of wisdom would undoubtedly be influenced by whether he perceived non-Jewish philosophy and culture to be a threat. While there is general agreement that Ben Sira is conservative, scholarly opinion about Ben Sira's "anti-Hellenistic" tendencies is becoming more nuanced. R Smend [1906:xxiv] at the turn of the century found in Sirach 'a Jewish declaration of war against Hellenism' and Tcherikover [1959:144] also regarded Ben Sira as vehemently anti-Hellenistic. Hengel [1974:131f] discusses this period of Jewish history under the heading "Ben Sira and the Controversy with Hellenistic Liberalism in Jerusalem". He believes that Sirach marks the transition between the predominantly positive epoch of the first encounter between Judaism and Hellenistic civilisation, and a new era

which is characterised by critical repudiation. Writing shortly before the Hellenistic reform attempt in Jerusalem, Ben Sira was involved in a controversy with those groups of the Jerusalem upper classes who as a result of their assimilation to foreign culture had become almost completely alienated from the belief of their forefathers. Hengel [1974:138] thus discerns an apologetic-polemic tone in Sirach which to some degree conflicts with his thought and its indebtedness to traditional wisdom.<sup>42</sup> Marböck [1971:175] believes that Ben Sira felt free to borrow some Stoic ideas. He thus concludes that Ben Sira's stance is not *simply* anti-Hellenistic. Nonetheless the manner in which he uses Hellenistic ideas and forms shows that it is not his aim to encourage an appreciation of Hellenism's riches, or to remain neutral about Hellenism's influence on Judaism. Although Di Lella [1993:136-140] interprets several passages in Sirach as a polemical response to Hellenism, he states that Ben Sira's purpose was not so much to engage in a systematic polemic against Hellenism but rather to convince Jews and even well-disposed Gentiles that the inspired books of Israel and not the writings of Hellenistic humanism are the repositories of true wisdom [Di Lella 1976:141]. Sanders [1983:58-59] describes Ben Sira as opposed to the 'dismantling of Judaism', yet indifferent to the issue of the Hellenistic provenance of ideas to the point that he felt free to take over a good idea from any source, as long as he could agree with it. Witherington [1994:78-79] claims that it is "quite clear" that one of the major purposes of the book is to stress the need for both a more Torah-centric and

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<sup>42</sup> For example, Hengel [1974:140-141] sees in Ben Sira's insistence on the free will a dialogue with the deterministic ideas which would have been found in wisdom schools strongly influenced by Hellenism, and discerns a reaction / repudiation of the almost 'Epicurian' claim that God was not concerned with the fate of the individual.

temple-centric orientation among Jews, especially in view of the ever growing influence of Hellenism in Jewish culture.<sup>43</sup> He suggests that Ben Sira was attempting to establish a new sort of conservatism among Jews, with Wisdom and Torah in tandem, that could withstand the challenges presented by Hellenism without giving up some benefits from and dialogue with Hellenism.<sup>44</sup> Collins [1997:41] describes Ben Sira's objective in incorporating the Torah into his wisdom teaching as constructive rather than apologetic. He is simply integrating the traditions at his disposal.

Even if the tenor of Ben Sira's thought were largely anti-Hellenistic, the possibility that he borrowed from Greek culture would not be ruled out. Most scholars acknowledge that there is at least some trace of such borrowing, although the extent of, and purpose for, such borrowing is disputed.<sup>45</sup> Hellenistic influence may be looked for on several levels. On a social level, Soggin [1976:453] views Ben Sira's negative evaluation of the trades in comparison with the vocation of the scribe (Sir 38:24-39:11) as distinctly Hellenistic. Later rabbis by contrast considered the knowledge of a trade important. Snaith [1995:172-173] suggests that Ben Sira actually shows a positive attitude to Hellenistic culture: surrounded

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<sup>43</sup> He finds the strongest evidence for this in the fact that the three major theological ideas of the book are Wisdom, Torah and fear of the Lord. I do not think that Ben Sira's emphasis on 'Torah' is sufficient to elevate it to the level of "major theological idea" alongside Wisdom and the fear of the Lord. See my discussion on 'Law and Wisdom' in chapter 3.

<sup>44</sup> Witherington [1994:84-85] gives this as the reason that Ben Sira found it necessary to ground Wisdom not just in creation but also in the history of Israel, and to connect it with Torah.

<sup>45</sup> Reiterer [1997:40-49] outlines current research into the external and internal cultural influences on Sirach.

by Greek influence he sought to show pious Jews how to live with Greek culture positively, not rejecting it altogether. He supports this assertion with reference to Ben Sira's positive regard for the medical profession (Sir 38:1-19), which contrasts with the attitude expressed in rabbinical Judaism. Here Ben Sira commends new Greek medical ideas while also commending religious observance. Snaith also detects openness to the world of Greek custom in the discussions on dining customs and table manners (Sir 31:12-32), as does Collins [1997:32-33]. Gammie [1990:360-361] is willing to go even further. He claims that Sir 31:16 and 32:1 indicate that Ben Sira had abandoned the line of separation between Jews and Gentiles insofar as the ingestion of food was concerned. But, as Witherington [1994:81] points out, there is no evidence that Ben Sira is here discussing a banquet where Jews would be expected to eat unclean food. Rather, this advice is given to his students who are the sons of wealthy Jews in Jerusalem who would have been likely to host or attend such dinners. A question like that asked in 34:30 would suggest that Ben Sira assumes that the levitical laws about clean and unclean are still in effect.

Aspects of the style and structure of Sirach are also regarded as reflecting Greek influence. Middendorp [1973:32] advances the thematic treatment of topics within the book as evidence that Ben Sira has written a school-book in Greek style. Hengel [1974:131] notes the following peculiarities in the work which betray the influence of Hellenistic usage and which represent an innovation in Hebrew poetry: titles for individual sections; some transitional passages; and the naming of the author. In addition, the Praise of the Fathers (Sir 44-50) is reminiscent of the Greek biographical

genre *de viris illustribus*.<sup>46</sup> On the level of ideas, Hengel [1974:147] observes traces of the Hellenistic spirit in the great confidence that Ben Sira places in the possibility of a rational understanding of the world. The purpose and goal of the world created by God are to be demonstrated by means of rational argument, even if the full extent of the works of God, like God himself, in the last resort remains unfathomable.

Literary dependence of Sirach on Theognis [Sanders 1983:29] and Euripides [Pfeiffer 1949:371] has been postulated, and Stoic influence is suggested [Marböck 1976:1-21; Pautrel 1963:535-549]. Middendorp [1973:7f] identifies a large number of Hellenic statements in Sirach. Most of these express concepts at home in Judaism. The problem with the majority of these supposed parallels is precisely their closeness to intrinsically Jewish ideas. Sanders [1983:55-56] has shown that most of the instances cited by Middendorp are unconvincing, and may more naturally be explained as arising purely from those Judaic ideas to which they bear an equally close resemblance. Still, he does find evidence that Ben Sira made use of Theognis' elegaic poems. These poems enjoyed considerable fame, consisted primarily of practical advice and were formulated in elegaic couplets that closely resemble Hebrew parallelism. Ben Sira drew on this material to add detail to his own ethics of caution or to expand on themes which he inherited from Judaic proverbial

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<sup>46</sup> Hengel [1974:136] regards this representation of Israel's great men as 'heroic personalities' and the 'principle of succession' (Sir 46:1, 47:12, 48:12) whereby the continuity of salvation history is guaranteed as an expression of Ben Sira's apologetic attitude. The holy literature and history of Israel with its great men and acts is far superior to Greek history and literature (44:3-9).

tradition. Sanders [1983:57-59] proposes that when it suited his purpose or when he considered it to be true, Ben Sira claimed a particular saying or insight for Judaism. He discerns no tendentious motive in this borrowing;<sup>47</sup> Ben Sira was indifferent to the issue of the Hellenistic provenance of ideas and was open to taking over a good idea from any source, so long as he believed it could be Judaised. That Ben Sira drew on foreign wisdom in his own writings is significant for an understanding of his concept of the scope of wisdom. His own practice suggests that he recognised wisdom beyond Israel's borders.

I do not discern in Sirach a strong polemic against Hellenism. In fact, many of the passages which are cited as anti-Hellenistic are open to other interpretations. Sir 3:21-24 is often read as a warning against Greek speculation.<sup>48</sup> But it is just as plausible to read it as a warning against Jewish groups that propound esoteric teaching [Argall 1995:73-78]. Di Lella [1993] interprets several passages in Sirach as directly countering the allure of Greek ways and culture. He characterises Sir 24 as one of several passages "where Ben Sira reminds his students to resist the allure of Greek ways and culture" [1993:136]. I do not believe, though, that one can infer from the positive statement which Ben Sira makes about the Wisdom domiciled in Jerusalem and expressed in the Law of Moses that he is issuing a warning against the wisdom of Athens. The reader may

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<sup>47</sup> Contra. Middendorp [1973:29] who claimed that Ben Sira chose those Hellenic statements known to his readers that are close to Judaic concepts to demonstrate the great similarities that existed between Hellenistic and Jewish thought in order to promote a fusion of these thought-forms.

<sup>48</sup> Snaith [1995:173]; Skehan and Di Lella [1987:160]; Smend [1906:222]; Hengel [1974:139] Mackenzie [1983:34].



conclude that since Wisdom has made her home in Jerusalem, she is not to be sought in Athens (and Ben Sira may well concur with that), but that is not the thrust of the passage.<sup>49</sup> Here is no direct ‘reminder’ to resist Greek ways and culture. Di Lella [1993:140] writes that the “double path” of Sir 2:12-14 refers to the traditional path of Jewish faith and practice, and the new path of Hellenism and its life-style and describes Sir 41:8-10 as “even harsher words for those who compromise their faith”, implying that this compromise occurs in relation to Hellenism. But Argall [1995:236-239] reads these passages as woe-oracles directed against those who have strayed from the true path of Wisdom and argues that the reference fits those who turn aside to a rival Jewish wisdom tradition (such as that represented by *1 Enoch*). Of Sir 19:22-25 Di Lella [1993:146] writes: “It is probable that in this passage Ben Sira had in mind the Jews who were tempted to compromise their faith for the blandishments of Hellenistic learning and culture”. Ben Sira is definitely opposed to intellectual speculation that does not have an ethical valence but such ‘false wisdom’ is not necessarily Greek. I do not dispute that these passages can be applied to those who embraced Greek culture at the expense of their ancestral faith, but I contend that their referent is not unequivocally this group and so these passages are not evidence of a strong polemic against Hellenism. To the extent that the ‘Hellenisers’ forsake the law and embrace learning that is incompatible with the Jewish faith, these condemnations apply to them, but it is not Hellenism *per se* which is the focus of Ben Sira’s invective. Even the strongly worded prayer for the deliverance and restoration of Israel (Sir 36:1-17) is not directed against Hellenism as a cultural phenomenon or against

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<sup>49</sup> Sirach 24 is dealt with in detail below.



Jews who have embraced a foreign culture, but against foreign political rule. Collins [1997:33] notes that the conflict that runs through Ben Sira's ethical reflection is not between Greek and Jew, but against arrogance and temerity on the one hand, and humility and caution on the other. It is true that Hellenistic culture seemed to promote arrogance and temerity, but that was not a reason to reject all aspects of it.

Although it is an argument from silence and therefore tentative at best, I find it significant that Ben Sira does not exploit the metaphor of Dame Folly / Strange Woman that appears in Proverbs 1-9 to condemn foreign wisdom. He has made extensive use of her counterpart Woman Wisdom to speak about the Jewish traditions and in Prov 1-9 Woman Wisdom and the Strange Woman are clearly rivals for the student's loyalty. If he believed that Hellenistic wisdom was the antithesis of true (Jewish) wisdom, then one would expect him to make the connection with the Strange Woman, something he does not do. The translator of LXX Proverbs, working in the second century BCE<sup>50</sup> recognised the symbolic potential of the Strange Woman. Cook [1994:470] has shown how the translator has clearly interpreted the **אשה זרה** and related 'ladies' as metaphors for foreign wisdom in Prov 2,5,6,7 and 9. In view of his dating of LXX Proverbs he identifies this foreign, dangerous wisdom with Greek philosophy as encountered in the Hellenistic period of circa 200 BCE. Fox's study of the strange woman in LXX Proverbs, which he notes may be read in dialogue with Cook [1994], points in a similar

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<sup>50</sup> Dick [1990:21,50] advocates an early second century dating in view of the minimising of the theology of the afterlife alongside the universalist outlook. J Cook [1993] supports a similar dating on the grounds of the translator's familiarity with Hellenistic literary style and his supposed suspicion of foreign thought.

direction. The major difference is that he does not discern a single exegetical perspective in LXX Proverbs, but sees a variety of interpretation of the Strange Woman converging in the text [Fox 1996:32 n5]. Fox [1996:37-43] does concur that the additions in LXX Prov 9 address the question of the necessity of avoiding incorporation of alien thought and culture. He concludes that “the Strange Woman was a multivalent symbol with the potential for application to an indefinite variety of inimical realities, including bad advice, folly of all sorts, foreign doctrines, and foreign civilisations and cultures.” I suggest that the antipathy toward Hellenism is much stronger in LXX Proverbs because it was written slightly later than Sirach, after the tumultuous events under Antiochus IV Epiphanes.

Where then should we place Ben Sira *vis-à-vis* Hellenism? He strongly opposes those who forsake the faith of the fathers, and this includes those who do so because they have embraced a Greek lifestyle. But he is not averse to drawing on the insights of foreign wisdom where he finds them consonant with Jewish belief. I concur with Melchert [1992:139] who writes: “In Sirach, we find an author steeped in Hebrew culture using Hellenistic resources to reinterpret yet reinforce Jewish traditions, without withdrawing from life as an active citizen within a socio-political world ruled by Hellenists”. Ben Sira is a conservative wisdom teacher who is concerned that his students look to the venerable Jewish tradition as he interprets it to find wisdom for life. In his time the threat which Hellenism posed to the traditional observance of Judaism in Palestine was not as great as elsewhere, but there would have been a temptation for many to compromise the Jewish laws in order to enjoy the economic and social benefits that Hellenism offered. He is therefore not concerned to

refute Hellenism as a philosophical system,<sup>51</sup> but strives to combat the divorcing of the quest for wisdom from religious observance and ethical living.

#### ***1.4.2 The written tradition***

Otzen [1990:61] writes of the Judaism of this period that it “erected defensive works” to ensure that it retained its distinctive character in the face of powerful influences. The formalisation of the written sacred tradition was an important strategy in this defence. Writings that were regarded as authoritative and normative could be used to decide questions concerning the central tenets of the faith. As has been stated, the status of Jewish Scripture in this period is disputed. Davies [1992:153-4] concludes from the variegated nature of Judaism and the lack of an established “orthodox” position that the role of the biblical literature was also variegated. Different writings could have been regarded as scriptural by different groups.<sup>52</sup> Nonetheless, we can follow Blenkinsopp [1981:3] in asserting that the common element between the various Judaisms was a shared tradition that had reached a mature stage of cohesion and articulation in writing. This is not to say that we are dealing with an established canon, since the emergence of a canon was

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<sup>51</sup> Collins [1997:41] states that “there is no evidence that Sirach, or anyone else for that matter, actively opposed Greek philosophy in this period, or saw it as a threat. There was no need to oppose it, as it was not being promoted.”

<sup>52</sup> It seems likely, however, that the Pentateuch was generally regarded as an authoritative writing, although it was approached through a variety of reading strategies.

one aspect of the struggle for self-definition that continued throughout the Second Temple period.

The movement toward an established canon could not in itself guarantee homogeneity within Judaism. Where a collection of writings is deemed central to the definition of a faith, the focus of debate shifts to the interpretation of that tradition. In such a situation, interpretation of the sacred writings was not simply one of several forms of literary and intellectual activity going on at the time. It was decisive for the way the community was to understand itself [Blenkinsopp 1981:24-25]. Blenkinsopp [1981:11] points out that the interpretation of prophecy was particularly important for competing views of the nature, function and form of the community. The classical prophets had spoken of a 'remnant', thereby envisioning the creation of a new community. The various groups within Judaism therefore viewed the interpretation of prophecy as of utmost importance in proving the legitimacy of their own vision of what it meant to be the people of God.

In the pre-exilic period, prophecy was a strong component of Yahwism and the prophet was understood to be God's spokesman. But Blenkinsopp [1981:10] notes that in the period from the first return up to Ben Sira there was a decisive shift suggesting that an epoch in the history of prophecy had come to an end.<sup>53</sup> From a survey of relevant texts<sup>54</sup>

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<sup>53</sup> The decline or end of prophecy in the post-exilic period is recognised by rabbinic literature. Schniedewind [1995:15] quotes *t.Sot(dot)13.2-3* which speaks of the Holy Spirit which had inspired the prophets departing from Israel and being replaced by the *Bat Qol* which informed the sages.

Grabbe [1998:524-545] has put together a picture of the state of prophecy in the second temple era. The literature is not unanimous on the question of the continued existence of prophecy in this period. Some saw prophecy as a thing of the past, while others accepted that prophets could exist in the present.<sup>55</sup> All, however, seem to recognise that a future prophet could arise, and those that admit to the present possibility of prophets do not usually see them as anything but an exception. The prophetic message could take a variety of forms: an oral message from a prophetic figure; a vision; a dream; or a written oracle which was seen as authoritative. The concept of inspired interpretation was an innovation that arose during the second temple period. Once established it took its place alongside other forms of claims about prophecy. Grabbe also concludes that whatever the actual differences between prophecy and apocalyptic, at a literary level they functioned in a similar way. People read it for knowledge of the future. Not only ancient prophetic literature but also other sections such as Psalms and Torah were seen as sources for God's plans and a key to the future if the right interpretation could be found. This answer was found not in some sort of exegetical technique or hermeneutical rules, but in the continued inspiration by the same spirit which had guided the prophets whose numbers included Moses and David.

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<sup>54</sup> Sirach, 1 Macc; Qumran Scrolls. Philo of Alexandria; Josephus; Joseph and Asenath; Pseudo-Philo and Early Christian writings.

<sup>55</sup> The book of 1 Maccabees gives expression to the view that the prophetic spirit had disappeared in this period (4:46; 9:27; 14:41). From this we may not infer that there were no claimants to the prophetic office, only that in at least some groupings within Judaism prophecy was seen to have ceased. Schniedewind [1995:16-17] points out that although Josephus (*Apion* 1.41) acknowledges that the exact succession of prophets had ended in the Persian period, he affirms that prophets could still arise and individuals could still prophecy.

A shift therefore took place in the understanding of the concept of the 'word of God'. Blenkinsopp [1995:164] notes that a more or less official corpus of prophetic writings would not in itself rule out continued prophetic activity, but it would tend to shift the weight from the present to the past, from the spoken to the written word, and from direct prophetic utterance to the interpretation of written prophecy. The prophetic role thus gets absorbed into those of sage, exegete, and eventually rabbi. Now it is the inspired scribe like Ezra or Baruch and inspired teachers like Jesus or the Teacher of Righteousness who reveal the mysteries of the word of God [Schneidewind 1995:18f]. Ben Sira is not at the end of this development<sup>56</sup> but it does appear that he saw himself in something of this light. Witherington [1994:80] suggests that Ben Sira saw himself as a kind of prophetic sage or, as Rickenbacher [1973:170-171] has suggested, some sort of successor to the prophets in an unsettled time. He was active at a time when the Judean literary tradition was already, in essence, fixed as the basis for further reflection and study [Blenkinsopp 1995:20]. As a scribe he devotes himself to the study of the Law, wisdom of the ancients and prophecies (39:1-2). The wisdom that he is able to expound as a result of his labours comes to him as inspiration from God (6:37; 39:6-7), and he actually likens his teaching to prophecy (24:33). Blenkinsopp [1981:15] concludes after looking at Ben Sira's description of the activity of the ideal scribe (Sir 39:1-11) that "[i]t appears then that by the time of Ben Sira scribalism has taken over from prophecy and that inspired interpretation, including the interpretation of prophecy, has taken the place of prophecy itself."

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<sup>56</sup> Lang [1983:152] describes Ben Sira as no longer a prophet, but not yet a rabbi.

This emphasis on the study of written traditions represents a shift in the activity of the wisdom teacher. Hengel [1974:135] notes that for Ben Sira, the 'wisdom teacher' has become one 'learned in the Scriptures', in that his activity is concentrated more and more on the sacred Scriptures of Israel. Sanders [1983:4-11] points to many similarities between Sirach and Proverbs, and Prov 1-9 in particular. Ben Sira stands firmly within the Judaic proverbial tradition, as one would expect. What is more surprising is his use of the other streams of the Jewish faith. He draws on eschatological traditions, themes from Deuteronomy, Israel's salvation history, prophetic traditions and uses hymns and beatitudes to express his wisdom teaching [Witherington 1994:117]. Not only does Ben Sira quote from and allude to these various traditions, but Sheppard [1980:19-72, 100-116] has shown how he reinterprets them from a wisdom perspective.

### ***1.4.3 Apocalyptic***

Scholarly debate about the phenomenon of 'apocalyptic' is complex and in a state of flux. Davies [1989:251-255] draws attention to the unproven assumptions in most discussion about the social context of the apocalyptic writings. Scholars have bundled together a group of writings under the term 'apocalyptic', often without due care being taken to prove that there actually is such an identifiable literary genre, and then moved from the literary domain to that of ideology by assuming that there is a worldview held in common by these works. The socio-historical phenomenon of 'apocalyptic communities' is postulated on the strength



of this reconstructed ideology. Davies [1989:252] notes that “[c]ertainly apocalypses have social contexts, but the existence of a literary genre does not imply a correspondingly discrete social ‘genre’. The anatomy of literature and the anatomy of society are not equivalent and one cannot infer one from the other”. There is thus a growing awareness of the literary, ideological and social dimensions of apocalyptic and of the difficulties in relating them.

Was there a tradition of apocalyptic thought contemporary with Ben Sira with enough cohesion and self-identity to be considered a separate ideological tradition? On the question of whether one can speak of an apocalyptic ideology, Boccaccini [1991:128-130] notes that the presence of some recurring themes is not sufficient to identify a tradition of thought. Not only can the same forms be used by different traditions, but similar ideas can assume a different meaning in different contexts. He cautions that texts do not necessarily belong to the same tradition of thought simply because they share the same literary genre and even the same general worldview. He works with the assumption that an ideological affinity exists only if the authors have consciously organised and developed their thoughts out of the same generative idea. The generative idea of apocalyptic he locates in a peculiar conception of evil as an autonomous reality which existed prior to the beginning of history and antecedent even to humanity’s ability to choose, and which has contaminated the creation. Boccaccini identifies *1 Enoch* as representative of this interpretative tradition.<sup>57</sup> *1 Enoch* is an integrated

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<sup>57</sup> According to this definition of apocalyptic ideology, Daniel is not an ideologically apocalyptic document, even though it utilises the literary genre of apocalyptic [Boccaccini 1991:160]



collection of books in which each book consciously refers to the preceding one(s) through a consistent system of literary connections, allusions, and quotations. *1 Enoch* was compiled over a long period - from the fifth or fourth century BCE to the first century CE. The fact that these works were constantly reconstituted into one book witnesses to the presence of an uninterrupted dynamic ideological tradition in the history of Jewish thought.

S Cook [1995:20-35], rather than looking for a “generative idea”, takes as his starting point the Wittgensteinian approach of “family resemblance” as a means of defining and classifying terms. Instead of looking for the essence of apocalyptic, he defines it by sketching various resemblances that overlap and crisscross the various instances of the phenomenon. He assumes that the appeal to Wittgenstein is sufficient to counter the objection that lists of random features fail to describe apocalyptic adequately, and that a definition requires a clarification of a phenomenon’s essential or intrinsic nature.<sup>58</sup> A weakness in this approach is that in order to work with the concept of ‘family resemblances’ one has to begin by assuming that a certain collection of items are legitimately grouped together for purposes of definition. This can be seen from the way in which Cook proceeds. He takes as his ‘raw data’ those works which are commonly designated apocalypses and 20th century studies of millennial groups. Cook differentiates between apocalypticism as a literary phenomenon, as a worldview or type of (religious) thinking, and as a historical and social phenomenon. The

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<sup>58</sup> This objection is raised by Hanson [1979:6-7] to the approach of D S Russell. Hanson asserts that lists of shared features are misleading in that no apocalyptic work incorporates all the features included in such lists.

literary phenomenon is characterised by the major features of dualistic language (moral, temporal and / or metaphysical dualism) and the expression of futuristic but immanent eschatology. Secondary features include numerology and coded terms, pseudonymity, a visionary manner of revelation, notions of determinism and predestination, angelology, demonology and an emphasis on a messiah. The apocalyptic worldview combines a linear view of history with a futuristic immanent eschatology. There is an expectation of radical reversal of the present order brought about by divine intervention and the eschaton ushers in a qualitatively different existence. A moral or ethical dualism is also part of these worldviews, with elect and damned clearly distinguished.

The apocalyptic ideology to which Ben Sira was exposed did not have all the characteristics and elaborations of apocalyptic from a later period. Hengel [1974:190] enumerates some differences between this early apocalyptic and its later forms. Firstly, there were no direct and clear details about the total course of the world. Secondly, the clear distinction between two ages, the present aeon and the coming aeon, was absent. Thirdly, the Davidic Messiah had not yet been given any significant part as an eschatological redeemer figure; and finally, there was no real dualism. God is regarded as the unqualified Lord over the world and its history.

Given that it is possible to identify an apocalyptic ideological tradition, were there apocalyptic communities that subscribed to this ideology? If so, what was their socio-economic position *vis-à-vis* other groups within Second Temple Judaism? There are several theories about the rise of

apocalyptic movements in this period,<sup>59</sup> all of which assume conceptual and power-related conflict between the various groupings in Palestine. In his overview of biblical research on apocalypticism and sociological research on millennialism Cook [1995:2-18] cites numerous studies to illustrate that alienation and deprivation are almost universally assumed to be characteristic of the tradents of apocalyptic ideas. Sociologists regard apocalyptic movements as a minority phenomenon involving

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<sup>59</sup> These are well summarised by Blenkinsopp [1981:11-13]. Plöger [1968:26-52, 108-112] attempts to trace a trajectory linking pre-exilic and restoration prophetic eschatology with apocalyptic of the kind found in Daniel.<sup>59</sup> He argues that throughout the Second Temple period tension was developing between the theocratic leadership whose point of view is represented by P and Chronicles, and pietistic groups whose faith was nourished by devotion to the laws and by prophetic eschatology. The former group believed that the restored community founded exclusively on cult and law marked the fulfilment of prophetic eschatology, and thus made it superfluous. The pietistic groups however were still convinced of the contemporary validity of the prophetic word. It was out of this latter group that the apocalyptic movement emerged. Plöger places Ben Sira firmly within the theocratic camp, and therefore in opposition to the apocalyptic groups. Hanson [1975:20-21] denigrates as an oversimplification reconstructions which treat apocalyptic as the property of one sect or party within Judaism. Instead one must understand the apocalyptic mentality as a function of the relation of a group to positions of power and control in the nation and cult. The power relationships of the particular groups were different at different periods in post-exilic history, resulting in now one, and now another group resorting to apocalyptic. Hanson sees the pull to apocalyptic eschatology within the conceptual framework of the tension in Yahwism between vision and reality. The visionary impulse that gives rise to apocalyptic is strongest among those who lack access to control of the political and cultic structures of the nation. Their belief in the prophetic promises that the Lord will restore the faithful (whom they identify as themselves) is denied fulfilment within the existing order of things. They therefore project their hope to a period when the existing order of things will have been overturned. The pragmatic or realistic impulse tends to be strongest among those exercising control over political and religious structures. Their interest in maintaining the status quo

marginalised elements within society. Festinger's theory of cognitive dissonance<sup>60</sup> is often used in close conjunction with deprivation theories. Cognitive dissonance occurs when two cognitions (pieces of knowledge, beliefs or feelings) which are inconsistent with each other are held simultaneously, causing the person to experience interior conflict. This crisis of incompatibility between religious hopes and experience results in the collapse of the worldview which defined the values of and ordered the universe for a group of people. This thrusts that group into an experience of chaos and conflict with the majority who are happy to continue inhabiting a symbolic universe defined by past norms. According to this theory apocalypticism would resolve these inner contradictions by constructing an alternative symbolic universe. Cook [1995:15-16] describes the close linking of the dissonance theory with the deprivation theory as "unfortunate", since cognitive dissonance can also occur among the upper levels of the social structure among people of wealth and prestige, and can even be experienced by society's leaders, for example when they are confronted with an important omen or the message of a persuasive teacher. He lists several examples of non-deprived millennial groups from medieval to modern times [1995:35-40]. Cook prefers to concentrate on positive motivating factors in the emergence of millennial groups, such as a belief disposition and events which call currently held worldviews into question creating cognitive dissonance. A catalyst such as an influential literary work or a teacher or

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often leads them to actively oppose the visionaries whom they view as a threat to their positions of leadership.

<sup>60</sup> Leon Festinger, Henry W. Riecken, Stanley Schachter, *When Prophecy Fails: A Social and Psychological Study of a Modern Group that Predicted the Destruction of the World*. New York: Harper and Row 1964; quoted in Cook [1995:14].

a visionary coming into a predisposed situation is often a second positive motivating force. Such a catalyst brings any latent eschatological expectations to the surface, acts as a symbol for the group and helps to bring an apocalyptic group-vision to the surface [1995:46-48].

Cook's [1995:32-35] description of millennial groups is based largely on sociological studies of more recent groups. While this provides a useful model, one cannot claim with any certainty that it is a valid description of the apocalypticists of the Second Temple period. He notes that millennialism is a group, and not an individual phenomenon. These groups have a strong self-identity and seek to maintain and preserve the nature of the group. Their organisational hierarchy often includes a prophet or catalyst figure, a clique of special disciples and an outer group of followers. Their vision for the coming new era includes specific goals for the group, and many of them believe that their vision and goals will be realised within a framework provided by a supernaturally revealed timetable of past and future events. To realise its goals and find a way of living in the last days of history, the millennial group develops a practical program for action which can fall anywhere along a continuum from a passive to an active response. An active program organises collective action to help bring on, or at least prepare for the eschaton. These groups may separate themselves from their world. They exhibit either blatantly unethical behaviour and antinomianism, or extreme self-control and discipline. The former response is motivated by their self-understanding of being in a transition phase between this world and the next, as living in an inverted world, or as already beginning to enjoy an existence that transcends the social conventions of this age. The latter

ethical option is motivated by the belief that the end-time judgement and the new age are immanent.

Which social group would have embraced an apocalyptic ideology in Ben Sira's time? Hengel [1974:180] pinpoints the circles of the 'pious' as the place where Jewish apocalyptic reached its first climax. The Hasidim were a clearly defined party at the beginning of the Maccabean revolt in 167/6 BC. Since the group seems well organised at this time, the period of its origin would lie at least a few years earlier [Hengel 1974:175], making them contemporaneous with Ben Sira, at least in incipient form. They were probably opposed to the 'official' Judaism embodied in the priestly hierarchy and the rich lay aristocracy. Argall [1995:250] speaks more generally of teachers of esoteric wisdom whose work is identified with the book of *1 Enoch*. Although we cannot place the 'apocalypticists' with any certainty within the social grid, we can say that they opposed the status quo. Since Ben Sira is universally recognised as an upholder of the status quo,<sup>61</sup> we can expect that his ideas would not be consonant with theirs. That is not to say that he necessarily formulated his ideas in conscious opposition to apocalypticism.

I will take *1 Enoch* to be representative of apocalyptic thinking. Of this book, the *Book of the Watchers* (chapters 6-36) and the *Book of Astronomy* (72-82) had already been composed by the beginning of the

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<sup>61</sup> For example, Blenkinsopp [1981:14] considers Ben Sira to be a typical representative of the theocratic point of view (and hence opposed to the apocalyptic worldview). Ben Sira urges his readers to honour and support the priesthood and sacrificial system and he has high praise for Aaron's priestly line, especially for Simon son of Onias II, his contemporary.

second century BCE [Boccaccini 1991:78]. The text itself claims to be a compilation of books of wisdom [Argall 1995:2] and the authors viewed themselves as sages and scribes (1 En 12:3,4; 15:1; 98:9, 99:10). Thus the authors of *1 Enoch* can be viewed as representing an intellectual tradition within Judaism, distinct from the conservative sapiential tradition, but also interpreting, retelling and expanding scripture to address contemporary issues. I leave unanswered the question of their socio-political alignment, other than to observe that they were opponents of the *status quo*.

Argall [1995:8] highlights the difference in outlook between the authors of *1 Enoch* and Ben Sira. Ben Sira is an advocate for the status quo. While he is critical of abuses within society, he counsels his students to act in ways that preserve the current political, social and religious institutions. The authors of *1 Enoch* by contrast are critical of those occupying positions of authority and they warn of the imminent overturning of the present institutions. They anticipate the collapse of the status quo.

Some comparative studies have been done which compare the treatment of themes in Sirach and apocalyptic writings. Argall [1995] has provided a comparative literary and conceptual analysis of the themes of revelation, creation and judgement in Sirach and *1 Enoch*, while Boccaccini [1991:80-125] looks at the manner in which these two books approach the questions of epistemology and soteriology. Collins [1996:19-32] compares Sirach and the Dead Sea Scrolls on the question of the origin of evil. Harrington [1997:25-38] compares Sirach and Qumran Sapiential Work A. The latter has a 'lively interest in



apocalyptic' [32]. These studies are unanimous in concluding that there are substantial differences between Sirach and apocalyptic writings. Argall [1995:250] concludes that each tradition would have viewed the other among its rivals, and Boccaccini [1991:80] claims that Ben Sira was aware of apocalyptic theologies and was writing against them.

The arguments that Ben Sira was aware of the apocalyptic writers are tentative. They are largely based on his references to Enoch. The reference in Sir 44:16 is plagued with textual difficulties. This verse is missing in the Masada scroll and in the Syriac. The Hebrew of ms B is obviously corrupt and must be restored from the Greek. The verse is not taken as authentic by Skehan and Di Lella [1987:499]. They regard it as an expansion due to Enoch's popularity in the last centuries BCE as a custodian of ancient lore. If the verse does reflect Ben Sira's own work, then it would indicate that he was aware of a tradition of Enoch as a revealer figure. His designation of Enochic revelation as **אוֹת דַּעַת** ('a sign of knowledge') is semantically similar to the Ethiopic expression 'sign of wisdom' used in the superscription to the Epistle of Enoch (*I Enoch* 92:1). This shared vocabulary may also indicate that Ben Sira shared something of the tradition of Enoch as revealer figure. Argall [1995:12-13] argues that Sir 49:14 shows some awareness of extra-biblical tradition about Enoch, but it appears to me to say little more than the biblical passage in Genesis 5.

It is not clear that there is any polemic against these groups in Sirach. Argall [1995:74-76] interprets the warning in 3:21-23 as directed against teachers of esoteric wisdom and Wright [1997:209-211] reads it as an



injunction not to delve into the secrets of the created order and what will be in the future, two of the more conspicuous elements found in *1 Enoch* and Aramaic Levi.<sup>62</sup> Argall [1995:81-82] and Wright [1997:212-214] also read Sir 34:1-8 as a criticism of the parabolic interpretation of ‘dream-visions’ which are characteristic of *1 Enoch*. While the authors of *1 Enoch* may be seen to fit these characterisations, we have seen that the same passages can be applied to other ‘opponents’, such as the Hellenists. Wright [1997:204-208] points out that Ben Sira supports a lunar calendar (Sir 43:6-8) while *1 Enoch* and Aramaic Levi evidence use of a solar calendar. I think, though, that he overstates his case when he describes chapter 43 as ‘polemic against the use of a solar calendar’ [208]. On this point Ben Sira clearly differs from the authors of the other works, but that does not necessarily imply that he is actively opposing them. I am of the opinion that Ben Sira would be better described as non-apocalyptic rather than anti-apocalyptic.

#### ***1.4.4 The social location of the sage***

Ben Sira is obviously a learned man. He is a teacher and a scribe. Certainly he can be considered a sage. There is little agreement as to the social location of the sage.<sup>63</sup> Many scholars assume that the ‘wise men’ formed a professional class analogous to the priests or prophets, but Whybray [1974] has seriously questioned this assumption. He prefers to speak more vaguely of an ‘intellectual tradition’ in Israel which was not

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<sup>62</sup> Prockter [1990:245-252] also reads this text as a polemic against mystic and apocalyptic speculation.

<sup>63</sup> This is particularly true for the pre-exilic period.

the preserve of a specific group.<sup>64</sup> Grabbe [1995:169-170] points out that the main requirement for intellectual activity was leisure.<sup>65</sup> Only certain types of people did not have to pour all their energies into the daily grind of eking out an existence. These were the upper classes, the wealthy, priests, scribes, and some others employed in government administration. The wealthy upper classes had the opportunity for education and the interest in pursuing or promoting intellectual activities for personal gain, for advancement of status, for entertainment, and for their own personal interest. It was probably priests and Levites who were taught the scribal skills needed by the temple. The priests had a secure income and plenty of spare time when not on duty in the temple and were the ideal group to be concerned with preserving the tradition and composing theological and other works. The third main group of people able to devote time to reading and composing literature was the scribes. The term 'scribe' seems to have been used of a variety of administrative officials in temple and political circles. The 'wise' therefore were not a specific class or profession, but encompassed all sorts of individuals from various strata of society. Anyone could be wise – for example a craftsman who had mastered a number of skills – but the wise par excellence were the learned, the advisers, the counselors, the viziers – whether spiritual, political or even private. Even though the wise did not constitute a profession as such, the learned professions were more likely to bear the designation 'wise' [Grabbe 1995:176].

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<sup>64</sup> Blenkinsopp [1995:9] also adopts this idea of an 'intellectual tradition' outside of the priestly-cultic sphere as a starting-point for his discussion on 'sage'.

<sup>65</sup> This is in line with Ben Sira's own observation in Sir 38:24. On the basis of such statements Lang [1983:148] characterises Ben Sira as an 'honourable idler'.

To which category does Ben Sira belong? Lang [1983:150] places him in the rich urban class and describes him as being in ‘solid economic circumstances.’ By his own admission (Sir 38:24) he has leisure to engage in activities unrelated to gaining his livelihood. He is an intellectual, and has the means to travel abroad and to study.

Stadelmann [1980:4-26] argues that Ben Sira is a member of the priestly aristocracy living by taxes paid to the Jerusalem temple.<sup>66</sup> However Lang [1983:150] believes he is a layman since his genealogy lists no more than three generations (50:27). Ben Sira is certainly very supportive of the priesthood, as is evidenced by passages such as Sir 7:29-31 where he encourages his readers to give the priests their due, and the praise Aaron (45:6-22),<sup>67</sup> Phineas (45:23-25) and Simon the High Priest (50:1-21) in the Praise of the Fathers. Wright [1997:195-6] quotes the paper by Tiller and Horsley<sup>68</sup> where they suggest that Ben Sira belonged to the ‘scribe-sage’ class, a retainer class that acted as mediators between the rulers, primarily priests, and ordinary Jews. Some of the functions of this class, such as teaching the law, would have overlapped with those of the priests. The scribe-sages would have been heavily dependent on the priests for their livelihood and social status, while still having some measure of independence and authority as those who guard, teach and interpret the divine commandments. Collins [1997:31-32] also places the

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<sup>66</sup> Hengel [1994:166] concurs: “His high regard for the cult and the priestly office suggest that he was a priest scribe.”

<sup>67</sup> It has often been noted how much more attention Sirach devotes to Aaron than to his more famous brother, Moses.

<sup>68</sup> “Ben Sira and the Sociology of the Second Temple”, presented to the Sociology of the Second Temple Group, SBL, San Francisco 1992.

scribe in the retainer class which served the needs of the governing class and included such professions as soldier, educator and bureaucrat. Argall [1995:7] points out that, whatever else they were, in the Hellenistic era sages were certainly scripture scholars, interpreting, retelling, and expanding scripture to address contemporary concerns. Ben Sira often refers to the appearance of the wise man in the council and the assembly of the people (4:7, 15:5, 21:17, 38:33 39:10), from which we may infer that he sometimes performed public functions, perhaps as a judge or counsellor and member of the gerousia [Hengel 1974:133].

Although the existence of schools in pre-exilic Israel and Judah is disputed,<sup>69</sup> it is generally accepted that there were wisdom schools in Ben Sira's time. Much is made of the reference to his school in Sir 51:23, which is usually understood literally. It is possible that *בית מדרשי* (my house of instruction) is a metaphorical reference to his book. Still, that would not nullify the usefulness of this verse for proving the existence of schools in Judah in this period, because the use of the metaphor presupposes a familiarity with schools. Hengel [1974:132] describes Ben Sira as a wisdom teacher giving regular instruction. Whatever his precise relationship to the priesthood, it does seem clear that he regarded himself as a teacher of wisdom, and his work is directed toward those who would learn wisdom. A school setting does seem a likely place for such instruction to occur. Collins [1997:38] defines 'school' simply as a relationship between a teacher and some number of students who are not his actual children. From the practical advice on gaining wisdom found in Sir 6:34-37 Collins concludes that Ben Sira is advocating a tutorial

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<sup>69</sup> See Davies [1995:199-211] for a discussion of this question.

relationship rather than a formal course of study. He suggests that the wisdom school of Ben Sira may have had the character of a group tutorial. There would have been several schools<sup>70</sup> in Jerusalem representing very different positions. Hengel [1974:78] sketches a plausible scenario. There were scribal schools in the temple and probably elsewhere from pre-exilic times, which served primarily to instruct priests and levites who would in turn instruct the people in the law on the great feast days and who had to make legal decisions on the basis of the law. In Hellenistic times the temple could be expected to become a stronghold of the old national language and tradition. But in Jerusalem we also see the opposite tendency, where the rich priestly nobility were particularly open to foreign cultural influences. Thus at the beginning of the Hellenistic period the 'scribal schools' had two completely opposite possibilities of development. The majority of them most probably took the course of conservatism and preserving the old tradition, but this did not exclude the adoption of new forms and conceptions. But there would also have been scribes and sages in the camp friendly to Greece. Hengel [1974:79] postulates that it was precisely the intellectual struggle with Hellenism which brought the office of *sopher* more and more out of the exclusiveness of the privileged scribe, associated with the temple, and made it accessible to wider circles of the laity. Hellenism as a cultural movement could only be offset by a strong educational effort among the masses.

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<sup>70</sup> By 'school' I mean a particular body of thought, with its propagators and disciples. I do not specify the precise institutional form that such a 'school' would take.

What then can we say of Ben Sira's position within the matrix of Second Temple Judaism? Ben Sira was a wisdom teacher and a scribe positively disposed toward and probably closely affiliated with the priesthood. He was active at a time when the written tradition was gaining in importance as foundational for Jewish identity, and his own writing represents one of several interpretations of that tradition. Ben Sira was conservative,<sup>71</sup> and therefore not open to a radical re-interpretation of the Law to bring it more in line with Greek cultural and philosophical norms. He sharply condemns those who forsake the Law. Yet as someone who aspired to serve the great (Sir 38:32-33) and probably dependent on the ruling classes for his livelihood, Ben Sira was not well positioned to be a social critic [Collins 1997:32]. He supported the status quo as that was represented by the incumbent priesthood in Jerusalem. This would place him in a different camp from the apocalypticists. He is certainly non-apocalyptic, and there are times when his teaching differs markedly from theirs, but he does not engage in vociferous polemic with them.

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<sup>71</sup> Di Lella [1976:139] argues that Ben Sira's thought and approach is conservative in the sense that it is characterised by a tendency to preserve or keep unchanged the truths or answers of the past because only these are seen as adequate as solutions for present problems.

## CHAPTER 2: WOMAN WISDOM AS METAPHOR

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Woman Wisdom in Proverbs and Sirach is usually treated either as a poetic personification or as a hypostasis. In other words, she is viewed as a poetic device, a distinct ontological entity, or something somewhere in between. Since my aim in this dissertation is to explore Ben Sira's understanding of wisdom's role through an analysis of the texts in which personified Wisdom appears, it is imperative that I choose a reading strategy which will illuminate the meaning of those passages. I believe that engagement with Woman Wisdom as *metaphor* will best accomplish this.

### 2.1 METAPHOR

#### *2.1.1 Definition and Function*

Recent discussion of metaphor - what it is and how it functions to convey meaning - is voluminous and complex, but its subtleties are beyond the purview of this writing. In what follows I extract from literary scholarship definitions, distinctions and methodologies which will be helpful for the task at hand, *viz.* to understand how Ben Sira uses the figure of Sophia to say something about wisdom's function as a mediary in the relationship between God and humanity.

A metaphor is a trope - a figurative as opposed to a literal piece of language. Sapir [1977:3-4] describes a trope as a figure of speech that operates on the meaning rather than the form of words, and says of the specific trope 'metaphor' that it states an equivalence between terms taken from separate semantic domains. In very simple terms, a metaphor speaks of one thing<sup>72</sup> in terms of another thing which in some sense resembles it [Ricoeur 1977:53]. Richards [1971:93] writes that "when we use a metaphor we have two thoughts of different things active together and supported by a single word, or phrase, whose meaning is a resultant of their interaction." For Macky [1990:49] metaphor is that figurative way of speaking (and meaning) in which one reality, the subject, is depicted in terms that are more commonly associated with a different reality, the symbol, which is related to it by analogy. A metaphor, then, places in juxtaposition two terms that can be thought of as both similar and dissimilar and invites the hearer to discover meaning by exploring the relationship between the two.

I use the nomenclature of Richards [1971:96 *et passim*] and speak of tenor - the underlying subject - and vehicle - the mode in which it is expressed. Tenor and vehicle come from separate semantic domains and carry a range of meanings and associations that are largely dissimilar. But there must be some area of overlap, however obscure, which allows the reader to understand or experience the tenor in terms of the vehicle. The resemblance can be in direct characteristics shared by tenor and vehicle, or it may be in their common effects or in attitudes taken toward them [Ricoeur 1977:81-2]. A metaphor can only be recognised and

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<sup>72</sup> 'Thing' signifies any object or state of affairs, and not necessarily a physical object.



understood within its wider context. The topic of that context points the reader to the tenor, even if the tenor is not explicitly named in the metaphor. One is invited by the metaphor to bring the system of commonplaces associated with the vehicle to one's contemplation of the tenor, to filter out those aspects that are unsuitable and to choose those that are illuminating. Metaphor is thus more than vehicle and tenor; it is also constituted by the bundle of shared features possessed by the vehicle and tenor, by the topic of the wider context and by the system of commonplaces that respectively embrace or place the tenor and vehicle [Sapir 1977:12]. The metaphor of Woman Wisdom has 'wisdom' as its tenor and 'woman' as the vehicle in terms of which it is expressed. The identity of the tenor is suggested by the literary context, and in fact the literary context enables one to pinpoint the precise nature of the wisdom being spoken of in the metaphor. If we are to understand what is being said about wisdom through its presentation as a feminine figure, we need to explore the system of associations connected with the vehicle - be it in terms of feminine characteristics, roles, or more vaguely in terms of attitudes toward the feminine - upon which Ben Sira's audience drew.

Many recent treatments of metaphor work with an *interactionist* model:<sup>73</sup> the metaphor functions to convey meaning because the sets of associations of tenor and vehicle are brought together in an 'interanimation of terms' [Soskice 1989:101]. One's understanding of the tenor is enhanced because the exercise of viewing it in the light of one's understanding of the vehicle leads to fresh insights. But the meaning-

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<sup>73</sup> Black 1962, Richards 1971, Ricoeur 1977, Sapir 1977, Soskice 1989 all fall into this category.

creating power of metaphor is taken to be operative in both directions; the juxtaposition of tenor and vehicle also alters the way one views the vehicle. This presumes that all metaphors are dual-directional. In fact, this may be too restrictive a view of metaphor. Macky [1990:57-63] describes the prototype metaphor as that in which a better known vehicle is used to elucidate a mysterious tenor. Here the aim is obviously to say something about the tenor in terms of something else which is better known. If the vehicle is a physical symbol then it is likely that this will be a one-way metaphor in which the hearers' understanding of the vehicle is not changed, only their understanding of the tenor. However, if the vehicle is non-material (supersensible), there is a greater chance that the metaphor will lead ultimately to a change in understanding of the meaning of the vehicle as well, i.e. that there will be two-way interaction between tenor and vehicle. Some metaphors are comparative - they have as their purpose getting the reader to notice the similarities between two equally well-known realities [Macky 1990:64-65]. In this kind of metaphor, two-way interaction between tenor and vehicle is also likely. Perhaps it is best to recognise the potential that metaphor has for changing one's understanding of both tenor and vehicle, but to also recognise that this potential is often not actualised by the recipient of the metaphor and may not have been intended by its originator. I do not believe that Ben Sira intended to say anything about women when he spoke of Woman Wisdom, nor that he intended his audience's perception of women to be transformed through their engagement with his metaphor. Nevertheless, the metaphor leaves open the possibility of a

reading which is dual-directional and thus subversive from the point of view of a patriarchal worldview.<sup>74</sup>

A minimalist view of metaphor would see it as simply an ornamental figure with aesthetic value which can be restated in literal terms without loss of cognitive content. The interactionist view defends the value of metaphorical expression by insisting that metaphors convey meaning that would be lost in any literal rephrasing of the metaphor. We should recognise, however, that not all metaphors are designed to be insight-provoking. Macky [1990:64-65] calls 'subsidiary' those metaphors which are used with well-known subjects and whose major purpose is aesthetic. In one sense a literal translation of the metaphor is possible - the presentative content of the metaphor can be expressed in a literal rewording - but the literal form could never offer a complete substitution because it does not have the same affective impact upon the reader. Olsen [1982:40-42] designates some metaphors as 'summarising' or 'ornamental'. A summarising metaphor provides an appropriate metaphorical label for a state of affairs conceived under a certain description which the speaker makes or presumes known to the receiver independently of the utterance of the metaphorical label. It serves as an economising device and has an epigrammatic quality - providing a short, striking and memorable summary of a description which is already articulated. Here the vehicle is simply a decoration or colouring of the tenor. An ornamental metaphor concentrates on the image of the vehicle itself. This type of metaphor is not used to say something new about the

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<sup>74</sup> This possibility is explored by feminist writers such as Johnson [1992:86-99], Fiorenza [1994:133-138] and Cady, Ronan and Taussig [1986:17-37].

tenor but is an invitation to visualise. Summary and ornamental metaphors are important and valuable because such rhetorical features as economy, epigrammatic memorableness and sensuousness are important and legitimate. However I will show that Woman Wisdom is more than an ornamental or summarising metaphor – she functions to promote insight into the relationship between God and humanity.

Although I am heavily indebted to the interactionist model in my exposition of Woman Wisdom, I do not go so far as to say that a metaphor deals with two different topics at the same time. According to Mooij [1976:30-34], the interaction theory maintains that the metaphorical sentence has (at least) two subjects, that the finding of the subsidiary subject depends upon picking up the normal referential meaning of the metaphorical words, and that the main subject is conceived in terms of the subsidiary subject so that the resulting meaning of the sentence involves a certain blending of the two subjects.<sup>75</sup> This concept of a duality of subjects can lead to confusion. A metaphor has only one subject in the sense of a single topic – the reality that the writer was concentrating on when he employed the metaphor [Soskice 1989:101]. Thus the passages in Sirach which present Woman Wisdom are not at the same time passages about wisdom and passages about women. They are to be read as dealing with a single subject – wisdom. The answer to the question “What is Ben Sira writing about here?” is ‘wisdom’ and not ‘woman’. It is only when we ask *how* Ben Sira is

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<sup>75</sup> For example, Black [1962:44] speaks of the two distinct subjects of a metaphorical statement- the principal and the subsidiary subjects. The metaphor works by applying to the principle subject a system of ‘associated implications’ characteristic of the subsidiary subject.

writing about wisdom that we can say that he writes in terms of a feminine figure.

How does a metaphor work? In one sense, a metaphor's meaning is uncovered when the features shared by tenor and vehicle are discerned and the tenor is understood in terms of them. But metaphors always have a surplus of meaning. There are new and unexpected ways that knowledge of the vehicle can affect the way that the tenor is viewed. As well as foregrounding the shared features, the metaphor invites us to transfer from one term to the other, but mainly from the vehicle to the tenor, other features that are not obviously shared. It is this process that gives the metaphor its colour [Sapir 1977:9]. Kenneth Burke<sup>76</sup> has stated it well: “[Metaphor] brings out the thisness of a that, or the thatness of a this.”

Metaphors may also appeal to a positive or negative emotive value. Richards [1971:118] makes a broad distinction between metaphors which work through some direct resemblance between the tenor and vehicle and those which work through some common attitude which we may take up towards them both. Even metaphors which fit into the first category will gain their colour from the emotive connotations of the vehicle. This point raises interesting questions for the metaphor of Woman Wisdom. Ben Sira is often considered to be something of a misogynist, and yet the metaphor brings positive connotations to his discourse on wisdom. We will need to explore this paradox.

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<sup>76</sup> Quoted in the preface of Sapir [1977].

The recognition and interpretation of a metaphor is context-bound. In the first place, one only recognises a metaphor as such by the context in which it is used. Mooij [1976:26] gives a very technical account of how one identifies a metaphor. The linguistic context and / or the non-linguistic situation must make it clear that the utterance is substantially about a certain subject, *A*. The words employed, *W*, have a field of literal descriptive meaning, *F*, determined by semantical conventions, often relative to the context and / or the situation. These words *W* are used in the utterance in such a way that at least part of their function seems to be a direct description, characterisation or indication of certain aspects of *A*. Although *A* and *F* may be only vaguely circumscribed, it has to be clear that the aspects of *A* meant in the above do not show the features of *F*. Nevertheless, the utterance is not false, since it is understandable as a significant contribution to the discourse about *A*. The metaphorical words actually give information about *A*. Applying this to the passages in Sirach which speak of Woman Wisdom, we note that Ben Sira's discourse is substantially about wisdom, although he is speaking about a feminine figure. He is using words and images which refer to a woman. The concept "woman" has a field of literal descriptive meaning (all the things associated with real woman) which is informed by the social context in which Ben Sira finds himself, also the literary tradition context which already suggests this metaphor to him, and maybe even the context of his own opinion about women. The figure of Woman Wisdom is used in such a way that at least part of its function is a direct description, characterisation or indication of certain aspects of wisdom. Clearly Ben Sira does not "really think" that wisdom is a woman. Nevertheless, he is able to say something significant about wisdom by

using this feminine imagery. We thus recognise Woman Wisdom as a metaphor.

A metaphor's meaning is determined by the social context out of which it is interpreted. The system of associations attached to both vehicle and tenor are culturally determined; they are a function of the experience and mindset of the metaphor's recipient. The field of literal descriptive meaning which Ben Sira and his audience attached to 'woman' would be strongly determined by their patriarchal context. If one reads the metaphor out of one's own context, drawing upon one's own conceptions of the vehicle of the metaphor, one interprets the metaphor in a way not intended by the original author. To expound what Sirach is saying about wisdom through the metaphor, one needs to study the system of associations that woman conjured up in Palestinian Second Temple Jewish thinking. Macky [1990:19] makes the insightful comment that when we speak of the 'meaning' of a metaphor, we should treat 'meaning' as a verb form. He goes on to speak of meaning as something that the speakers are doing while speaking, something they represent by their speech, rather than something objective and disembodied. It is interesting that he locates the source of the meaning in the speaker. Much modern literary theory locates the meaning of the text in the text itself as an autonomous creation, or in the reader who is seen to actively recreate meaning in interaction with a text. There is a strong swing away from talk about the 'intention' of the author, as if one could read the author's mind. In fact, the only means of determining what the author meant is through careful study of the text within its original conceptual framework to the extent that such can be recreated. Reader-response criticism offers



fascinating possibilities for a contemporary re-appropriation of the ancient texts, but such an exercise falls outside the aims of this work.

If one accepts that a metaphor has insight-provoking power and that a literal rephrasing is not possible without reduction, how does one go about explaining a metaphor? Macky [1990:23-24] visualises the process as ‘opening a second window’ on the speaker’s meaning. The exposition of a metaphor creates a synonymous speech act, one that has approximately the same meaning but will be understandable to the hearer. There are several reasons that a metaphor might not be readily understood by the hearer, and so need to be explained: the presence of the metaphor may not be discerned and need to be pointed out; the tenor of the metaphor may be implicit and so not fully recognised; the vehicle may be alluded to rather than described in detail; the vehicle chosen may be unknown to the hearer and so the explainer would need to describe the vehicle and the way it affected the author and its first hearers; the interpreter may need to suggest the way to use the imagination to see the tenor in the light of, against the background of, the vehicle. No explanation is ever an exact equivalent of the original. It is best seen as ‘opening a more accessible window’. In expounding the metaphor of Woman Wisdom, I defend my engagement with her as a metaphor, make explicit the tenor of the metaphor, and unpack the vehicle and its system of associations so that it becomes clear what the metaphor is claiming for its subject - the written Jewish tradition upheld and interpreted by the conservative sages.

The plausibility of an interpretation of a metaphor may be tested on a literary and a sociological level. In the first place the reading suggested



must make sense of the text within its broader literary context. But in addition the interpretation of a metaphor is valid if, at some level or another, it shows how the figurative material at hand fits into the larger framework of basic cultural understandings, and the more thoroughly and exhaustively it does, the better [Sapir 1977:5]. Although metaphor is a literary device, it draws upon the non-linguistic realities referred to by tenor and vehicle, and these can only be understood within their cultural setting. For this reason I do not stop at a literary reading of *Woman Wisdom*, but justify the likelihood of my interpretation by placing the use of the metaphor within the cultural context of Palestinian Second Temple Judaism.

### ***2.1.2 Metaphor and worldview***

In his latest book, Leo Perdue [1994] adopts a novel approach in his study of the theology of the sages: he studies the wisdom writings<sup>77</sup> within a paradigm of imagination and metaphor to see how the sages construct a worldview. He describes imagination as the capacity of the human mind to form images, organise them into a coherent whole, and provide them with meaning. Common imagination allows us to complete the fragmentary data of the senses and classify, reflect upon and artfully present it. But there is also creative imagination which is involved in the construction of a worldview. Creative imagination is at work when we place the various objects of reality into a meaning system that makes sense of human experience and provides a context for making one's way in the world. Creative imagination also allows us to get a handle on

things that exist beyond human experience or perception; it uses tools such as metaphor to speak of the transcendent [Perdue 1994:50-51].

A metaphor is potentially a powerful heuristic tool. Perdue [1994:61-62]<sup>78</sup> describes the metaphorical process. A metaphorical statement uses absurdity as a strategy of discourse to disorientate the audience. The metaphor both deconstructs the literal meaning of a statement and at the same time poses a meaningful contradiction that provides for the possibility of new insight. This initial disorientating shock is succeeded by the shock of recognition - the absurd connection of the metaphor is correlated with the possibility of truth. The resultant transformation leads to a new understanding of the subject, an understanding that is potentially so important that the worldview of an audience is changed or even newly created. The final step in the metaphorical process is restabilisation. This altered or renewed reality is reshaped, the meaning system is restabilised, and a new way of living in the world takes place.

The sages used images and imagination to build a world in which human beings could live and act meaningfully. They had certain beliefs, certain ways of seeing, interpreting and organising their perceptions of reality and conceptions of that which exists beyond immediate sensual perception, and these were expressed in their writings. In looking at the metaphor of Woman Wisdom, therefore, I am not simply studying a decorative device that Ben Sira used to say something that could have just as easily have been said another way. I believe that this metaphor

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<sup>77</sup> Proverbs, Job, Qohelet, Sirach, Wisdom of Solomon

<sup>78</sup> Here he follows Ricoeur [1977].

was used by the sages to say something about reality as they perceived it, and that the image not only expressed something already known and believed by the sages - it opened up a way of looking at the world which suggested new possibilities for conceptualising the relationship between God and humanity.

Individual imagination is not an autonomous activity, but it occurs within a linguistic field informed by existing tradition [Perdue 1994:53]. Ben Sira had been socialised and educated to perceive reality through the lenses of the sapiential worldview; he did not set out to create his conceptual world *de nouveau*. He, like all the sages, drew on existing tradition. But the tradition was not a static entity – it could be reshaped and transformed to come to terms with new conditions and new situations.

In Sirach, Woman Wisdom is an inherited metaphor. Because she has already become part of the sapiential tradition, she no longer has the disorientating, destabilising effect that she would have had when she was newly coined. But she still functions powerfully. She has transformed in some way the sages understanding of reality, and she offers afresh in Ben Sira's day the possibility of looking at the old and familiar in new ways. Metaphors have a tensive quality which allows their usage to expand under new circumstances and to include new content, as well as to acquire and abandon various features. Therefore Ben Sira is not restricted in his use of the metaphor to what it has been used to say previously,

particularly since he extends the semantic range of the vehicle.<sup>79</sup> In addition, the changes that have occurred in the cultural milieu since the birth of the metaphor offer a new range of possible understandings.

### ***2.1.3 The social functioning of metaphor***

From the above discussion of “world-building” through metaphor, one may conclude that the study of metaphor opens windows onto the conceptual world of its creators and users. But the operation of a metaphor is not restricted to the ideational sphere. A religious metaphor such as that of Woman Wisdom arises from a particular context in life which informs its content and of which it is an interpretation. In addition it offers a way of understanding reality which could impact on one’s way of living in the world. It may therefore be studied as a social metaphor, or more specifically as a religious symbol.

The relationship between metaphor and symbol needs to be considered carefully. There is considerable confusion and terminological inconsistency in the literature in this regard. The term *symbol* is sometimes used as a synonym for metaphor, but more often for the vehicle of the metaphor, which draws on non-linguistic reality. For conceptual clarity, one needs to employ social categories for social constructs, ideological categories for ideological constructs, and literary

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<sup>79</sup> This assertion is substantiated in chapter 4, where I make a detailed study of the texts in which Woman Wisdom appears.

categories for literary constructs.<sup>80</sup> The metaphor of Woman Wisdom is a literary construct. I understand a *symbol* to be an icon which serves as a component within a belief system used to structure and provide meaning to the conceptual world of a community, in other words, as an ideological construct. A theory of how symbols function to order reality within a particular culture and worldview is a social construct. A literary metaphor is a literary phenomenon to be understood within the universe of the text. The category of “symbol” includes non-linguistic icons. But a literary metaphor may also function as a symbol beyond the confines of its text. It does so when it occupies a place in the conceptual construction of reality.<sup>81</sup> As Crocker [1977:46] notes, figurative language provides the semantic conditions through which actors deal with social reality.

Geertz [1975:90] defines religion as a system of symbols which acts to establish powerful, pervasive, and long-lasting moods and motivations in people by formulating conceptions of a general order of existence and clothing these conceptions with such an aura of factuality that the moods and motivations seem uniquely realistic. From this perspective, religion functions in a legitimating way; both society and religion are human creations bringing order to existence, with religion providing the general justification, in terms of universal order and meaning, for the form which society takes in immediate social experience. Religious symbols therefore act to order experience, expressing the values of the community

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<sup>80</sup> This perceptive suggestion is made by Davies [1989:253] in his discussion of the problems associated with reconstructing the social world of the apocalyptic writers.

<sup>81</sup> As has been mentioned already, Geertz [1975:91] defines a symbol as any object, act, event, quality or relation which serves as a vehicle for a conception.

and synthesising the ethos and worldview<sup>82</sup> of that community. Geertz [1975:91] defines a symbol as any object, act, event, quality or relation that serves as a vehicle for a conception. The conception is then to be understood as the meaning of the symbol. Symbols express a community's reality, but they also shape and transform that reality. They provide on the one hand a picture of the way that things are, but on the other hand point to the idealisation of how things should be. To this end they can be viewed as a synoptic formulation of the perceived character of reality, or as a template for producing reality [Geertz 1990:95]. The literary metaphor of Woman Wisdom may also be regarded as a religious symbol in this sense - for the sages Woman Wisdom sums up something of what is known about the way the world is and indicates something of how one ought to relate to and live in that world. In particular, Woman Wisdom both reflects and legitimates the role of the sage and scholar in Jewish society.

## 2.2 METAPHOR AND HYPOSTASIS

In arguing that Woman Wisdom is best understood as a metaphor in Sirach, I am countering the oft-made assertion that she has been hypostatized in this work.<sup>83</sup> Unfortunately the term *hypostasis* is

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<sup>82</sup> Geertz [1975,127] defines ethos as the tone, character, and quality of a people's life, its moral and aesthetic style and mood; it is the underlying attitude toward themselves and their world that life reflects. Worldview is "their picture of the way things in sheer actuality are, their concept of nature, of self, of society. It contains their most comprehensive ideas of order."

<sup>83</sup> This claim is made by Pearson [1987:546], Whybray [1965:11,21] Ringgren [1947:113], Montgomery [1962:52] and Hengel [1974:275-282, 287-289]. It may be

generally loosely applied, and its precise sense is often not clear. Schriffen [1997:195-199] provides a very helpful brief history of the term ‘hypostasis’ and a review of its modern usage. The noun corresponds to the middle and passive form of the verb ὑψίστημι with primary meaning ‘to stand under as a support’. Initially it was used primarily in a scientific context, generally in the sense of that which settles out, i.e. a precipitate or sediment. In the philosophical context ὑπόστασις appears first in Stoic writings, where in the work of Posidonius it means ‘actualised being’ and is used in contrast to οὐσία which means ‘substance, being or existence’ in the sense of ultimate being. Since hypostasis refers to actualised being, it possesses a certain individuality. It is not matter in itself, either in a finite state or as an underlying substance; rather, it is matter in a state of actualisation. Later on Plotinus uses the same term to designate his Three Primary Hypostases, the One, νοῦς, and World Soul (although properly speaking, the One is prior to hypostasis since by nature it is alone and simple). Origen in similar vein spoke of three primary hypostases, Father, Jesus the Son, and the Holy Spirit within the one substance of the Godhead. While Jesus was of the same ultimate substance as God, his earthly expression / realised being / hypostasis is different from that of the Father. Mowinckel [1928:2065] sees a hypostasis as a divine being half-independent, half regarded as a form of revelation of a higher deity, which represents a personification of an attribute, an efficacy, a part etc of a higher god. Ringgren [1947:8] defines it as a ‘quasi-personification of certain attributes proper to God occupying an intermediate position

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what Sandelin [1986:49] intends when he claims that there are two different concepts of wisdom in Sirach: ethical conduct and instruction, and a personal being.

between personalities and abstract beings'. Witherington [1994:37-38] takes 'hypostasis' to mean some sort of power or lesser divinity that is an extension or agent of a greater god, or comes forth from a higher divine being and takes on something of a life of its own. The hypostasis is therefore a way in which an aspect of the divine is able to exist and actualise itself in the world. The function of this manifestation or actualisation is to exist in an intermediary position between the divine and the human. Pearson [1987:546] states that in modern scholarship in the history of religions "hypostasis" is used as a designation for various mythic objectifications or personifications of divine qualities, gifts or attributes or of abstract concepts of human existence, *whereby such entities assume an identity of their own [italics added]*. For conceptual clarity, I believe it is important that we differentiate clearly between personification as a purely literary device where personal qualities, abilities or actions are assigned to a non-personal entity and hypostatisation, which is the process of regarding a concept or an abstraction as an independent, real entity. The essential characteristic of a hypostasis is that it is regarded as a real subsisting subject. I argue that Woman Wisdom has not been reified in Sirach, but remains a literary figure. In other words, the subject of the passages in which Woman Wisdom appears is not some feminine entity, but the wisdom which is the tenor of the metaphor.

In restricting Woman Wisdom to a literary figure in Sirach, I do not rule out the possibility that Sophia becomes a quasi-independent persona in Jewish thinking, for a metaphor has the potential for being literalised and thus hypostasised. In fact, this process does seem to have occurred. The various texts dealing with Woman Wisdom fall somewhere along a



continuum between pure literary device and fully-fledged hypostasis. Deutsch [1996:20-21] concludes after a synoptic study of the Second Temple Jewish texts dealing with Woman Wisdom that it is not clear whether some texts represent solely a literary personification or whether Wisdom there has achieved a kind of quasi-independent status. She suggests, however, that in most texts the metaphorical process has gone beyond personification and Wisdom has acquired the property of personal entity, thus rendering concrete God's wisdom. She does not believe that the result has become a separate divinity, although it is difficult to establish clear boundaries between personification, hypostasis, and divinity. As has been mentioned, many scholars assume that already in Ben Sira's writing Woman Wisdom has crossed the boundary from personification to hypostasis, but I believe that to read Sirach in this way is anachronistic.

I am working with the assumption that hypostatisation is a point in the development from personification to a fully fledged independent divinity. Ringgren [1947] has provided a careful defense of this hypothesis, with illustrations from the ancient Near Eastern pantheons. He suggests that Wisdom followed the same path in Judaism, but that her development stopped short of the creation of an independent goddess because of monotheistic constraints [Ringgren 1947:192]. An alternative view is set forward by Lang [1986:126-136] who postulates that Wisdom began life as a Hebrew goddess, patron of the wisdom schools, and that in the process of editing the book of Proverbs she was demythologised to conform to the monotheistic context of the canon. The movement is thus in the opposite direction. Deutsch [1996:21] also suggests the possibility that a goddess might lie behind Woman Wisdom, necessitating the

persistent subordination of Wisdom to God and the insistence that she had been created by him. Even if one were to accept Lang's hypothesis (which, although intriguing, lacks hard evidence)<sup>84</sup> it does not alter the fact that Ben Sira would have read Woman Wisdom in Proverbs as a literary figure, and not as a goddess. One could perhaps look to a hypothetical Hebrew goddess to understand the vehicle of the metaphor in Proverbs, but such a goddess, if she ever existed, is so shadowy a figure and too well buried by subsequent developments in Israelite religion to offer much help in understanding Woman Wisdom as she appears in Sirach.

### 2.3 PERSONIFICATION AND METAPHOR

Personification is a form of metaphor that gives personal attributes to an animal, object or concept [Deutsch 1996:9]. In other words, it treats the non-personal as personal. Lakoff and Johnson [1980:25-26, 33-34] call 'ontological' a metaphor which uses an object or substance as the vehicle for understanding our experiences, and describes as perhaps the most obvious ontological metaphors those where the physical object is further specified as being a person – personification. The power of

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<sup>84</sup> Lang admits that the biblical material cannot be used to show the presumed polytheistic background of the texts in Prov 1-9 since any polytheistic literature produced by Israel is lost, and all traces of goddess worship have been expunged from Proverbs. The evidence he puts forward comes from a papyrus found in Elephantine, and Aramaic version of the Assyrian story of Ahiqar [Lang 1986:130-131]. It is clear that the producers of the document were polytheists, but there is no hard evidence that they came from polytheistic *Jewish* circles. One would expect evidence for a Semitic goddess of Wisdom worshipped in Palestine to come from Palestine.

personification is that it allows us to comprehend a wide variety of experiences with non-human entities in terms of human motivations, characteristics, and activities. Personification is a general category that covers a wide range of metaphors, each picking out different aspects of a person or ways of looking at a person.

Since we have no experience of genderless persons, a convincing personification will inevitably be gendered. Blenkinsopp [1995:43] traces Wisdom's personification as a woman to the grammatical gender of חכמה. This usage permitted the introduction of a range of affective language into the common stock – the language of union, erotic desire, affection between spouses, and the like.

I suggest that a pure personification of an abstract noun draws solely on the intrinsic or essential characteristics of the property being personified, or on attributes that a person who exhibits the property would be expected to have as a result. But it is also possible to strengthen the impact of the personification by fleshing out the picture with more concrete, individual characteristics. For example, a personification of Greed could be represented as voracious, wealthy, and constantly dissatisfied. But when Greed is also portrayed as a stockbroker, the simple personification is being expanded through the use of an additional vehicle. When confronted with 'Greed as Stockbroker', it would not be sufficient to say we have a personification of Greed. The vehicle domain would have to be explored to unpack the meaning of the metaphor. Personified Wisdom does not simply portray the intrinsic characteristics of the abstract noun 'wisdom' expressed in 'humanised' terms. Other

vehicles are also brought into play. Therefore I speak of Woman Wisdom as metaphor and not simply personification.

## 2.4 METAPHOR CLUSTERS

Throughout this discussion I have referred to Woman Wisdom. From that appellation one might conclude that wisdom is consistently portrayed as a woman in the chosen texts in Sirach. In fact, this is not the case. The imagery used to describe Wisdom includes plant and river imagery, and I will argue that Wisdom is also portrayed as a chief divine agent. Ben Sira moves abruptly from one image to the next, 'mixing his metaphors'. And yet the overall impression created is a coherent one.

Lakoff and Johnson [1980:44] differentiate between coherence and consistency between metaphors. Two metaphors are consistent only when they form a single image. But even where two metaphors are not consistent, they can nonetheless 'fit together' by virtue of being subcategories of a major category and therefore sharing a major common entailment. In Sir 15:2 we have the images of Wisdom as mother and Wisdom as virgin bride. These are not strictly compatible, and yet they function effectively enough together. This is because 'mother' and 'virgin bride' are subsumed under the larger category of 'woman' – and one could perhaps expand that to 'woman in relationship to the male' – and so the metaphor lending coherence here is WISDOM IS WOMAN, with a loose use of wisdom as mother, lover, nurturer etc.

We have a metaphor cluster when several metaphors have the same tenor but different vehicles. Lakoff and Johnson [1980:96] speak of 'cross-metaphorical correspondence'. The various metaphors serve different purposes by highlighting different aspects of the tenor. Where there is an overlapping of purposes, there is an overlapping of metaphors and hence a coherence between them. Permissible mixed metaphors fall into this overlap. Since the metaphors are used together, they should not be understood in isolation; we should look for some kind of internal cohesion. For example, that fact that Ben Sira moves so easily from woman to plant metaphors would suggest something about the vehicle domain of 'woman' which is the focus of his interest. Perhaps it is the nurturing and lifegiving role of woman as mother and wife which he wishes to emphasise.

The primary factor lending coherence to the metaphors which Ben Sira employs in speaking about Wisdom is the feminine personification which underlies them all. I will show in my reading of the relevant texts how the integrity of the text is enhanced when we read Wisdom as a feminine personification of wisdom which in turn functions as the tenor for the other metaphors employed. If the feminine personification is recognised to be the unifying thread running through the multiform depictions of wisdom, several of these images take on a completely different nuance than if they were seen as simply one metaphor alongside the 'wisdom is woman' metaphor.<sup>85</sup> Sir 24:13-21 provides some

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<sup>85</sup> See, for example, my reading of Sir 6:19-20.

justification for this reading, since in these verses Wisdom in a first person speech applies to herself plant imagery.<sup>86</sup>

## 2.5 WOMAN WISDOM AS METAPHOR

### 2.5.1 *The Tenor*

In order to read Woman Wisdom as a metaphor, we need to ascertain what are the tenor and vehicle of the metaphor. In a personification, the concept being personified is referred to by name. Here it is 'wisdom'. What is meant by 'wisdom' should be clear from the context. Since Woman Wisdom is embedded in a matrix in which wisdom is spoken of in more literal terms, one would expect there to be consistency and continuity in the usage of the designation 'wisdom'.<sup>87</sup> However, several different answers have been given to the question "What is this wisdom?". (The focus of much of the discussion on this issue is Woman Wisdom as she appears in Proverbs.). Camp [1985:274] writes that personified Wisdom was the embodiment of the tradition of the sages. Blenkinsopp [1995:44] considers it an 'obvious fact' that Woman Wisdom personifies the sage's teaching and as such functions precisely to counter aberrant religious and moral conduct.<sup>88</sup> McKinlay [1996:80]

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<sup>86</sup> The common translation practice of using the feminine pronoun for wisdom throughout the poems instead of the neutral pronoun which is available in most target languages reinforces the tendency to read the texts in this way.

<sup>87</sup> Camp [1985:217] notes that in personification the abstract noun which is being personified is intended to be taken quite literally and its meaning understood to be quite clear.

<sup>88</sup> He considers the Outsider Woman to be the primary symbolic figure in Prov 1-9, and Woman Wisdom was 'created' by the sages to counter her.

on the other hand speaks of Wisdom as 'this feminine dimension of Yahweh's presence'. Marböck [1971:129f] claims that Wisdom (which he calls divine wisdom, the 'wisdom from above') is a poetic personification of God's nearness and God's activity as well as of God's personal call. Eichrodt [1967:85,89] claims that Job 28 and Prov 1-9 present wisdom as the purpose and order discernable in the cosmos and writes of Wisdom in Sir 1:1-10 that it is still the rationale of the cosmos. Von Rad [1972:242] identifies personified Wisdom in Sirach as the 'primeval order' which confronts humans objectively, a beneficent, ordering power within creation which woos humans and leads them to knowledge. Broadly speaking, the options seem to be divine wisdom (in the sense either of an attribute of God or as a manifestation of his presence), the sapiential tradition or a cosmic creative principle. Perdue [1993:79] holds the first two possibilities together. He asserts that Wisdom was understood both as an attribute of God and the sapiential tradition. Deutsch [1996:10, 16] appears to combine all the options: Divine Wisdom, working in creation and in the social order, present in Israel's history and revealed in Torah, is the tenor of the metaphor. She is immanent both in the cosmic order and in the sages' teaching.

Camp [1985:217-218] makes an interesting observation. After noting that scholars fail to reach agreement as to the first order referent of 'wisdom', she refers to the work by Mattingly who considers why some personifications fail while others succeed. He concludes as a result of his study that a personification will not take hold of its readers unless it rests on a tradition. Individual conceptions, though occasionally illuminating, lack the 'dignity and weight' of a firm and coherent tradition. If this is so then the phenomenal success which the personification of Wisdom



achieved compels us to take most seriously those scholars who point to a wisdom tradition in one form or another as the first order referent of personified Wisdom. The lack of a strong strand of tradition in Israel associating wisdom with Yahweh (or any other deity for that matter) would suggest that, even if the poet had originally intended such a divine referent, those who preserved these poems – those with whom the personification ‘took hold’ – understood a different, more traditional referent. Thus it is likely that Ben Sira read Woman Wisdom in Proverbs as representing the wisdom tradition.

To what degree does Woman Wisdom express a strictly human understanding of wisdom and to what degree does it represent a divinisation of wisdom? Camp [1985:221-2] draws attention to another feature of personification that may help us to resolve this question. Personification gives the abstract noun a sense of the ‘here-and-nowness’ without being tied to a misplaced concreteness. Personification ‘works’ because of its ability to utilise the specific, the concrete, the this-worldly to drive the mind to the universal. In precisely this manner, personified wisdom is able to point to the human wisdom tradition as a crucial source for knowledge. At the same time – by virtue of her universal and idealised embodiment of all wisdom – she reminds her readers of the ultimate source and true meaning of their knowledge and of the demand for commitment to that One. “In literarily uniting the general and the particular, the abstract and the concrete, this personification theologically unites the human and the divine” [Camp 1985:222].

I postulate that the tenor of this metaphor in Sirach is the teaching of conservative Judaism as this is distilled in the written traditions and



interpreted by the conservative sages. This tradition is not regarded as the product of human endeavour, but has its source in God. The proof for this hypothesis comes from an investigation of the meaning of ‘wisdom’ in the broader literary context, which is the subject of the following chapter.

### *2.5.2 The Vehicle*

The vehicle for the personification is feminine, but is its domain “real” women - flesh and blood female human beings – or a divine feminine figure? The question of the vehicle of Ben Sira’s metaphor is complicated by the fact that he did not originate this symbol but has inherited it from the tradition. Following Camp [1985:79-147] I accept that the original domain of the vehicle in Proverbs was literary presentations of human women. But Ben Sira’s depiction of women generally is not positive and limits his ability to develop the metaphor beyond the terms of attraction and desire. Wisdom as lover is an important image in Sirach. What is particularly instructive, however, are his own transformations and additions to the vehicle. I attempted to show elsewhere [Rogers 1996:150-4] that the features in Ben Sira’s depiction of Wisdom which go beyond Proverbs could be borrowed from the goddess Isis. Deutsch [1996:22] also argues that Wisdom in Sir 24 reflects the cult of Isis. Conzelmann [1971:230-243] has argued for dependence of Sir 24 on depictions of Isis in much stronger terms, claiming that Sir 24:3-7 is a hymn of Isis that has been taken over without alteration.<sup>89</sup> However I will now argue that one of the primary

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<sup>89</sup> Several other scholars have postulated links between Isis and Dame Wisdom in Sir 24. Jacob [1978:254] sees likeness in form between the Isis aretalogies and Sir 24, and points to

vehicles for the representation of Wisdom in Sirach 24 is that of an angelic being.<sup>90</sup> Here the gender is not significant.

I have already intimated that the basic personification of Woman Wisdom is filled out with a cluster of metaphors. The vehicles he employs are in part dictated to him by the tradition in which he stands, but are also to a large extent determined by the meanings he intends with his complex metaphor. The metaphors he uses are predominantly wisdom as lover, hunter, angel, teacher, disciplinarian, plant, field, river. If these metaphors are to be properly understood, they must not simply be viewed in isolation; we must take cognisance of the fact that they occur in clusters which have some kind of internal cohesion.

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the chronological nearness of these texts. But he does not elaborate on this and admits the possibility of Mesopotamian models as an alternative background. Blenkinsopp [1983:143] states, on the basis of formal and thematic similarities, that Wisdom was in all probability modelled on Isis or perhaps a Syro-Palestinian counterpart like Astarte. Hengel [1974:158] remarks on 'unmistakable parallels' between the statements made by wisdom about herself in Sir 24 and the predicative statements in the Hellenistic Isis aretalogies.

<sup>90</sup> This is not to deny that Isis imagery was used by other Jewish writers in their depictions of Wisdom. For example, there are close parallels between Isis and Sophia in the book of Wisdom [Kloppenborg 1982:57-84].

## CHAPTER 3: WISDOM IN SIRACH

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An overview of Sirach's presentation of wisdom – what it is, how it is acquired and the benefits it bestows – will help us to locate the tenor of the metaphor cluster associated with Woman Wisdom within its wider literary context. It is universally agreed that the concept of 'wisdom' is a multifaceted one, and notoriously difficult to define with precision. So the question of what Ben Sira means by the term חכמה, its synonyms and cognates, is pertinent.

### 3.1 THE CONCEPT OF 'WISDOM'

Crenshaw [1976:3-4] has noted that definitions of wisdom are as varied as the scholars proposing them. For von Rad [1975:418], wisdom is “practical knowledge of the laws of life and of the world, based on experience” and is concerned with the task of mastering life by discerning an order underlying events. Crenshaw's [1976:3] own attempts at definition display an awareness of the different levels at which this concept operates. He distinguishes between family, court and scribal wisdom with regard to their respective goals, stance and methods. He recognises nature wisdom which is an attempt to master things for human survival and well-being; juridical and *Erfahrungsweisheit* with the focus upon human relationships in an ordered society; and theological wisdom which is concerned with theodicy and affirms God as ultimate meaning. MacKenzie [1983:16] also differentiates various 'levels' of wisdom. Originally, it is simply skill or technology, the ability to adapt or control sectors of material reality for the advantage of

humankind. At a higher level it is used of social relations, meaning tact or diplomacy. The term is further elevated when it is applied as an attribute of God. Finally, wisdom becomes revelation as God communicates his wisdom to some of his creatures.<sup>91</sup> Writing of the term 'wisdom' as it is used in English, Fox [1993:116] describes wisdom as an ethical use of intellect. It is the good sense to take the long view and judge things by moral as well as practical criteria and the sagacity to discern the best ends as well as the best means. It also entails the will to pursue those ends, for we would not call one wise who knew the right course but did not take it. He notes that חכמה includes wisdom of this sort, but it is also broader in that it includes things like magic and the craftsman's skill.

Part of the complexity of the discussion is due to the fact that 'wisdom' designates an attitude, a faculty, a body of knowledge, and a type of literature. It has also been linked with a specific tradition within Israel and Judah. Perdue [1993:73] identifies three primary ways in which the sapiential tradition perceived wisdom: wisdom as an epistemology or way of knowing; wisdom as discipline; and wisdom as world-construction. Wisdom as epistemology involved a body of knowledge, ways of obtaining and understanding this content (memory, sense

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<sup>91</sup> Rylaarsdam [1946:55-6] had also discerned four distinct ways in which the term 'wisdom' is used in the Wisdom Literature. 1. an individual's understanding of life and the rules he has obtained by the use of all his natural endowments, mental and physical; 2. the accumulated lore of the past, the rules for life and living produced by the sages and taught to successive generations; 3. an element in God, an eternal and divine possession created before the beginning and never wholly comprehensible by men; 4. a special divine gift granted by God to men, subsequent to and apart from their creation. It is not seen as a result of their use of their natural faculties, but as a special grace.

perception, reason, experience, reflection), and the process of teaching and learning by which the body of knowledge is transmitted and received. Wisdom as discipline has to do with the embodiment of sapiential virtue. It aims at the formation of character through study, reflection and the practice of justice and piety. Perdue [1993:77] claims that the sages' search for wisdom represented and intended or at least desired convergence of confession, piety and knowledge. Wisdom as world construction is wisdom as the exercise of theological and sapiential imagination to construct a symbolic universe in which the sages lived and understood and interpreted life [Perdue 1993:79].

Fox [1993:116] identifies two modes in which wisdom in all domains can exist. It can exist as a faculty and as knowledge. As a faculty חכמה is an intellectual potential close to our concept of intelligence, and it is realised in common sense, practical skills and learning ability. חכמה can be exercised as the faculty of reason, that is, the capacity for orderly thinking whereby one derives true conclusions from premises. חכמה also exists as knowledge, that which is known, the communicable content of knowledge. The successful imparting of the teacher's חכמה as knowledge to pupils also imbues them with the חכמה as faculty needed to make the right decisions and act correctly in new situations.

It is generally asserted that Israel's wisdom was existential wisdom. This suggests that the central activity of the sages was observing reality in order to formulate and test hypotheses, rather than the assimilation and perpetuation of book learning. Fox [1993:122] does not agree that the

wisdom of the sage is empirically based in the first place.<sup>92</sup> Although the teaching of the sages certainly derive in part from experience, they do not present their experience as the source of new knowledge, and, outside theodicy, rarely adduce specific individual perceptions as the source of a doctrine. At most a sage may make general reference to his life experiences in order to strengthen his ethos (e.g. Sir 34:9-12). In brief, if one asked a sage why he knew something, he would say “Because I learned it” rather than “Because I saw it”.

Collins [1977:139-140] has contrasted sapiential and apocalyptic understandings of the acquisition of wisdom. Both sage and apocalypticist see wisdom as a gift of God. But when the sage is given wisdom, he is given an ability to understand. His knowledge follows from the use of his natural reasoning. By contrast the angelic revelations in the apocalypses give specific knowledge, in the form of visions and prophecies of particular events or heavenly realities. Sapiential revelation is immanent, channelled through the natural human processes of thought, but apocalyptic revelation is ecstatic, and conferred from the outside. For apocalyptic thinkers, wisdom and order are not found on earth but in the angelic world and must be made known through heavenly revelations. This is in direct contrast to the sapiential tradition which is based on the premise that wisdom can be found in all creation.

Wisdom literature is commonly divided into two broad categories – pragmatic wisdom and reflective or theological wisdom. This

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<sup>92</sup> He regards Qohelet as unique within the Hebrew corpus in that he bases his wisdom on personal observation.

categorisation is often linked with evolutionary theories of wisdom, where early wisdom is seen as a largely secular concern to master life. This wisdom then underwent a process of 'theologisation' to bring it more in line with the mainstream of Israelite religious thought.<sup>93</sup> This division into pragmatic and theological wisdom, if not too sharply drawn, is helpful for distinguishing two types of concerns addressed within the literature. In the first case, there is a concern for mastery of life in practical ways. The sages address issues such as wealth, debt, friendship, honour, and work. Here their insights tend to be encapsulated in aphorisms. But in addition to this they also reflect on more abstract questions, such as the nature of wisdom,<sup>94</sup> wisdom's relationship to God and to the created order, and theodicy. Broadly speaking, the book of Sirach contains two types of material - sections of aphorisms arranged topically, and hymnic sections which contain sustained theological reflection. It is likely that we will meet with differing usages of the concept of wisdom in these 'practical' and 'theological' sections.

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<sup>93</sup> See Eichrodt [1967:83-85], Crenshaw [1976:24-25].

<sup>94</sup> Michael Fox [1997a] highlights the importance attached to the concept of wisdom itself in the opening chapters of Proverbs. He claims that the wisdom thinking reflected here differs from Egyptian and Mesopotamian wisdom literature in that wisdom itself is singled out for praise, as opposed to other virtues being praised by being called 'wise', and the pursuit of wisdom itself, not merely right living, is enjoined. This indicates that wisdom has intrinsic and not merely instrumental value.

## 3.2 WISDOM IN SIRACH

### 3.2.1 *The Greek Prologue*

The concept of wisdom in the Prologue appears to be primarily a literary and a pedagogic one and has a religious valence. The grandson calls the study of Jewish written traditions, pre-eminently as these are contained within the Law, Prophets and other writings, παιδία καὶ σοφία. Wisdom in this sense is gained through study and passed on through teaching and writing. Blenkinsopp [1995:20] has noted that the Prologue takes for granted that the written tradition determines the direction future developments will take. It is in these terms that the grandson commends the value of his grandfather's work. The goal of the wise person should not simply be to learn for himself, but also to pass on to others the truths attained. This Ben Sira did by writing his own book of wisdom, which the grandson also designates as παιδία καὶ σοφία. The effect of living according to wisdom is that one lives in conformity with the Law. This is equally true for the study of the Law, Prophets and other writings and for the study of Sirach. Wisdom is not presented here as one among several branches of Jewish tradition, or as a tradition apart from the legal and prophetic traditions, but the whole of Jewish Scripture is described as 'wisdom and instruction'. The acquisition of wisdom is described in terms of study of the written traditions, the effects of gaining wisdom is seen in terms of piety, and the extent of the literature that comprises this wisdom is regarded as in some sense open-ended, since Sirach is also designated 'wisdom and instruction'. We need to look at Ben Sira's own



work to see to what extent this concept of wisdom corresponds with his own.<sup>95</sup>

### ***3.2.2 Programmatic and autobiographical statements***

There are a few passages in which Ben Sira writes on a personal note of his own experience with wisdom and explains the fact and purpose of his writing.

#### *Sirach 50:27-29*

In Sir 50:27-29 Ben Sira himself sets out the purpose of his book. He terms the contents of his book מוסר שכל ומושל אופנים (insightful instruction and timely proverbs).<sup>96</sup> The way to wisdom is through concerning oneself with these things and laying them to heart. If the instruction that Ben Sira gives is carried out, his students will find themselves to be wise and strong enough for anything, because it will have set them in the path of the fear of the Lord. Thus Ben Sira also sees wisdom at least partly in terms of understanding and knowledge which may be set down in writing and taught. But wisdom is more than intellectual knowledge – it must be actualised in right living, which is evidenced by piety. When one puts wisdom into practice, one has a successful and meaningful life. Ben Sira is setting forth his own writing

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<sup>95</sup> Van Leeuwen [1993:31] also highlights the literary and learned character of wisdom in the grandson's Prologue and in Ben Sira's work itself, with primary sources in the law, prophets and "other books". He directs attention to Sir 24:23, 33; 38:24; 39:1-3; and 44-50. His thesis is that the sapiential prelude to Ben Sira's synthetic wisdom was the scribal activity of the final redactors of the Tanakh.

<sup>96</sup> The Greek is παιδείαν συνέσεως καὶ ἐπιστήμης ('instruction in understanding and knowledge').

as a source of wisdom that should be diligently studied, and which will bring blessing and is closely tied up with the fear of the Lord.

*Sirach 39:1-11*

Ben Sira's description of the activity of the scribe in 39:1-11 may be read as an autobiographical, if idealised, sketch. It gives a good indication of his understanding of the mechanics of the pursuit of wisdom. The scribe devotes himself to pious observance and to study. The object of his study is the obvious 'wisdom sources' - the wisdom of the ancients, proverbs, parables, and the mysteries of God - as well as the texts of other traditions - prophecy<sup>97</sup> and the Law. Rüger [1984:66] reads 39:1 as a reference to "*enseignement écrit*" and 39:2-3 as a reference to "*enseignement oral*" (to borrow terminology anachronistically from the rabbis). 'The Law of the Most High', 'the wisdom of the ancients' and 'the prophets' (39:1) probably recalls the Torah, if not the Writings and Prophets, as canonical collections [Sheppard 1980:17 n68]. The designation "wisdom of the ancients" may seem unsuitable for the whole of the category we now label "Writings". But, as Rüger [1984:66] points out, of the books known to Ben Sira that could have fallen into this division (Psalms, Job, Proverbs, Qohelet, Ezra-Nehemiah. 1 and 2 Chronicles), three (or four if one includes Psalms) of the seven are aptly called 'wisdom', making it a reasonable title for the whole collection. The scribe's interest in the prophecies would be that of learned interpretation, an important activity in an era where prophetic material have become authoritative [Grabbe 1998:530]. What are the 'discourses

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<sup>97</sup> In 46:1 Ben Sira refers to Joshua as a prophet, or at least as the successor to Moses in the prophetic office. This may suggest that those books we classify as 'Former Prophets', which includes the book of Joshua, are included in the 'prophecies'.

of the famous' to which he also devotes attention? Perhaps this includes foreign literature, though Snaith [1974:192], like Rüger [1984:66] interprets it as a reference to the oral law which was taught as the *sayings of famous men* and was later recorded as the Mishnah. The fact that Ben Sira himself was acquainted with foreign wisdom and drew on its insights<sup>98</sup> suggests that this does include foreign literature. The scribe looks beyond the surface, busying himself with the enigmas and hidden meanings of proverbs and parables. This involves close, careful, diligent study. The picture here is reminiscent of the opening verses of Proverbs. Sheppard [1980:17] notes that 39:1-3 present Scripture as the proper object of wisdom study by one who exercises the skill of the sage as found in Prov 1:3-6. The book of Sirach with its frequent allusions to diverse parts of the present Old Testament is the product of a mind involved in precisely such activity.

The scribe's labours also include working for rulers and travelling (39:4). The service rendered to the great is not a means to wisdom, but rather a result of it. Stone [1987:578] regards the social position and status as the reward offered to the sage for his devotion to his vocation. The reference to travels suggests that wisdom is gained through experience as well as through study. In 34:9-11 Ben Sira explicitly states that travel and the trials associated with it expand one's experience and hence one's

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<sup>98</sup> This is shown in Sanders [1983:27f]]. Even though he disagrees with many of the parallels cited by Middendorp [[1973:8-24], Conzelmann [1971] and Pautrel [1963], he concludes [p 54] that Ben Sira used Theognis consciously and directly, as well as occasionally employing an image of saying which probably originated with one or other Hellenic writer. Sanders [1983:61-106] also explores Sirach's relationship to Egyptian wisdom texts, and notes some dependence.

understanding and ability.<sup>99</sup> Wisdom is therefore not purely a matter of book learning, but may also be gained through experience. This does not necessarily imply that the data of wisdom is empirically gained. It could simply be making the valid observation that wide experience increases a person's ability to apply appropriately the theoretical wisdom gained through study in concrete situations.

Religious observance is as important as diligent study in the pursuit of wisdom. The scribe does not simply need intellectual qualifications, but also religious and ethical ones. He rises early to seek God and also to confess his sins, because ultimately it is only as a divine gift that he will receive wisdom (39:5-6). Only if God graciously rewards his efforts by filling him with the spirit of understanding, will he be enabled to formulate and communicate wisdom of his own. Stone [1987:578-9] stresses that Ben Sira does not portray the scribe as a purely secular functionary; there is no distinction drawn between the 'wisdom' characteristics of the scribe and the 'religious' ones. "His wisdom is accompanied by and expressed in prayer and is granted to him by God. It is to that extent inspired wisdom."

When the scribe has acquired wisdom for himself, he will make it known to others. His reward will be an excellent reputation and a name that lives on after him - a priceless treasure in Ben Sira's estimation. We see here how human effort and divine gift are both indispensable for the gaining of wisdom. They are not placed in opposition, but work together

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<sup>99</sup> Sir 51:13 also links Ben Sira's travels with his quest for wisdom, though it must be noted that Ben Sira sought out wisdom *before* he embarked on his travels.

synergistically. In 51:13-30<sup>100</sup> Ben Sira figuratively describes his own quest for wisdom. It began in his youth, was passionately and diligently performed, and involved a commitment to holiness and piety. The responsibility of the one seeking wisdom is emphasised, but wisdom's acquisition is once again portrayed as God's gift to the diligent.

*Sirach 24:30-34 and 33:16-18*

Ben Sira writes at the end of chapter 24 of his own contribution in the spreading of knowledge of wisdom and the law. He likens his teaching to prophecy, which implies some claim to divine inspiration.<sup>101</sup> The fruit of his labours in wisdom - which must be identified with the book he produces - is to be made available to all who seek wisdom. To give to his own teaching the status of wisdom in a context where wisdom has been identified in some way with the Law is to make profound and exalted claims for his work.

The meaning of 33:16-18 is clear when these verses are read in conjunction with the description of the sage's activity in 39:1-11. They demonstrate Ben Sira's awareness of the tradition in which he stands. He gleans from the tradition through devoted study, and through incorporating its insights into his own teaching. By God's grace he has been able to produce wisdom writing himself which he can offer to those who seek learning. His own work is offered as a continuation of the sacred tradition.

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<sup>100</sup> This poem is dealt with in depth in the following chapter.

<sup>101</sup> Collins [1997:53] however identifies the specific point of comparison with prophecy here to be that Ben Sira's teaching remains for future generations.

### 3.2.3 *Sirach as 'wisdom'*

Since Ben Sira offers his book as an education in wisdom (50:27-29),<sup>102</sup> its content must tell us something of what he understood by 'wisdom'. It is significant that much of the material in Sirach could be classified as 'practical wisdom'. There is teaching on a wide range of subjects including friendship, rearing children, what one ought and ought not be ashamed of, pride and humility, speech, and the dangers posed by women. His aim here is to instill a knowledge of how to live right in every area of life. His primary goal seems to be the avoidance of shame and the preservation of a good name. Wisdom therefore continues to be successful living in the world. It is a human characteristic which must be practiced by human beings. But wisdom is also right thinking. We have seen that Ben Sira placed great stress on academic study in the quest for wisdom (39:1-3). Di Lella [1993:135] discerns these two basic senses in which wisdom and its cognates are used in Sirach. Theoretical wisdom educates the intellect through study and reflection, reading and travel, and by listening to the elders and avoiding the foolish. Practical wisdom educates the will to make proper choices in life. He adds further that in Sirach it is chiefly practical wisdom that enables a person to be in right relationship with God and with other human beings. Di Lella does, however, acknowledge that at times Ben Sira does not distinguish clearly between theoretical and practical wisdom or else implies both meanings e.g. in 38:24-39:11. I do not find it helpful to draw this distinction too

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<sup>102</sup> The invitation to lodge in his house of learning (51:23) is usually taken literally as an invitation to join Ben Sira's school. But it is quite possible that he is speaking figuratively of the book which he has written.

sharply. I consider theoretical and practical wisdom as defined by Di Lella to be simply two aspects of a single concept – the knowledge of how to live right that is gained through education of the intellect and worked out in wise living.

### ***3.2.4 'Wisdom' in the theological passages***

Ben Sira's understanding of wisdom is set out more explicitly in a series of poems about wisdom which are dispersed throughout the book, occupying key positions (1:1-10, 4:11-19, 6:18-37, 14:20-15:10, 24:1-33, 51:13-30). These poems, together with hymns in praise of the God of creation (16:24-17:13, 18:1-14, 39:12-35, 42:15-43:33) provide more sustained theoretical and theological reflection on the nature of wisdom itself and serve as a hermeneutical framework for the pragmatic considerations that make up the bulk of the book. I will make some reference to the teaching of these passages here, but an in-depth study of the wisdom pericopes is the subject of the following chapter.

The association of wisdom with the Lord is unambiguously proclaimed in the opening lines of the book: wisdom is said to originate with the Lord and to be with him forever. Wisdom in its fullness is accessible and known only to the Lord who alone deserves the appellation 'wise'. The Lord's activity with respect to wisdom is described in terms reminiscent of Job 28 – he made, saw and assessed her. Even Wisdom's association with the created world is the result of the Lord's activity with respect to her – he pours her out and gives her as a gift (1:9). This activity places

wisdom at one and the same time in proximity to God and to the created order.

Although the root of wisdom (its essence?) is beyond human ken, wisdom does not remain completely inaccessible, because she is poured out on the creation and given as a gift to those who stand in a special relationship to the Lord (1:9, cf. 43:33). In this poem, it is not a particular manifestation of wisdom that is being spoken of – it is *all* wisdom (1:1). This wisdom appears to be at the same time a universal phenomenon – it is poured out on *all* God's works – and a more particularistic manifestation – it is specifically given to the ones who love God. Wisdom here is spoken of in abstract terms as an entity distinct from but related to both the Lord and his creation, but her ontological status is not clear. She is described as pre-existent and eternal.

The hymn in praise of the works of God in creation (42:15-43:33) also expounds on the Lord's wisdom in the context of his creation. Humankind lives in a universe whose order is the manifestation of wisdom and the effect of God's creative command (cf. 16:24f). The Lord's wisdom is demonstrated by his creation which is referred to as *גבורת חכמתו* "the mighty deeds of his wisdom" (42:21). The Lord can search out the abyss and the human heart. He is perfect in wisdom and knowledge. In 43:33 Wisdom is given by the Lord the creator to those who fear him. This conclusion to the hymn shows a similar movement to Job 28 with its conclusion in v 28, where the inaccessible wisdom is made accessible in part through the fear of the Lord. The same message is conveyed through the juxtaposition of Sir 1:1-10 and 1:11-30.



Just as there is a tension in Ben Sira's thought between the universal and particularistic aspects of wisdom, so he recognises that wisdom has a hidden and a revealed aspect. Wisdom is manifest in all of creation, revealed within the law and accessible as a gift of the Lord to the pious who diligently seek her, but in her totality or essence she remains ultimately known only by the Lord (1:2-3; cf. 11:4b; 18:1-7; 43:27-33). The quest for wisdom ought not to entail speculation into mysteries that are beyond what has been revealed. The aspect of wisdom which is hidden – so clearly referred to in 1:1-9 - is not the concern of the wise man (3:21-24). There is a mistrust of speculative philosophy, or perhaps of esoteric knowledge. This is not to say that the answers to the questions sought in these pursuits would fall outside of the domain of wisdom, but it falls outside the wisdom which is given as a gift to the faithful, and therefore it ought to be left alone. Ben Sira is here re-iterating the idea found in Job 28 that there is an inaccessible aspect to wisdom, but there is also another aspect which has been made available to human beings, and it is with the latter that one must work. To strive for the former is presumptuous and indicative of sinful pride. The attempt to gain knowledge through dreams is also dismissed as futile (34:8). Dreams are a thoroughly unreliable guide, in contrast to the Law and wisdom. The inaccessibility of wisdom is bound up with humanity's inability to fathom the creation (1:2-3) and to grasp fully the wonders of God or to penetrate his mysteries (18:2-7). Even the accessible aspects of wisdom are hidden until they are revealed to the seeker (4:18, 39:3, 7b, 51:19-20). Wisdom is hidden unless diligently sought and finally revealed and received. This is true even though Israel has been given an objective repository of wisdom in the Torah.

Ben Sira differentiates between true and false wisdom in 19:20-30. Cleverness or the accumulation of knowledge is not true wisdom if it is used in the service of wickedness. Wisdom is fundamentally a practical matter of fearing the Lord and observing the law and not simply a theoretical matter of training the mind and acquiring skills [Di Lella 1993:147]. Ben Sira does countenance the possibility that one can have only a little understanding and yet fear the Lord, and he claims that this is better than to be abounding in intelligence and yet to violate the law. He thus acknowledges that there is a human faculty of intelligence which can be put to good or bad use. But for him wisdom is more than just the exercise of one's faculty of intelligence; it is the exercise of intelligence in conformity with the Law and with the fear of the Lord. The uselessness of teaching a fool (22:9-10 cf. 21:14) suggests that one's prior disposition is a necessary prerequisite to gaining wisdom. Not everyone is teachable. It is not clear what it is that makes one a fool in the first place. It is probably not a lack of intelligence (for surely the one of little understanding who fears the Lord (19:24) would not be classified as an unteachable fool), but an ethical disposition which makes one incorrigible. From the account of the creation of human beings in Sir 17:1-11 it appears that human beings were all given understanding and the natural capacity for wisdom, including moral discernment. Obviously, not all become wise. Since Ben Sira goes on to speak of sin, one might conclude that one's moral disposition affects the attainment of wisdom.

Although Sir 1:1-10 does not deal explicitly with the question of how one acquires wisdom, its final stich does hint at a pre-requisite; one

places oneself in a position to become a recipient of wisdom by loving the Lord. The poem extolling the fear of the Lord (1:11-20) elaborates on this by closely linking fear of the Lord and wisdom. The former is described as the beginning, fullness, crown and root of wisdom. This appears to be a development on the more particularistic theme introduced in 1:10b. The faithful (whom context suggests are those who fear the Lord) stand in a very close relationship with wisdom – she was created with them in the womb and she will continue to cling to their descendants (1:14). In 1:26 the way to acquire wisdom is plainly stated: if you want wisdom, keep the commandments and the Lord will give her to you. Chapter 2 sets out more clearly what it means to fear the Lord – those who fear the Lord do not disobey his words, but keep his ways and are filled with his law. They prepare their hearts and humble themselves before the Lord (2:16-17). Wisdom is therefore closely bound up with a correct attitude toward the Lord, and has a strong ethical valence. The worthless, haughty, impious and liars will not find wisdom (15:7-8). Wisdom, keeping the commandments and fearing the Lord are all intrinsically related – “The whole of wisdom is fear of the Lord, complete wisdom is the fulfilment of the Law” (19:20). The close correspondence between one’s relationship to the Lord and to Wisdom is given expression in Sir 4:14: “Those who serve (wisdom) serve the Holy one; those who love her the Lord loves”. When Ben Sira answers the question “How does one become wise?” he does not appear to be working with wisdom as a universally-defined construct, but is closely associating it with adherence to the Jewish faith. The question of whether Gentiles can be wise is not directly addressed.

The acquisition of wisdom is a combination of aptitude, diligence and gracious gift. Discipline is required if one is to gain wisdom. In practical terms, being a wise person involves appreciating proverbs (3:29). As in the book of Proverbs, the lover of wisdom is characterised by an attentive ear. Wisdom is revealed in wise, opportune speech (4:23-24). In 6:18-37 Ben Sira speaks of the quest for wisdom in figurative terms, and then turns to a more literal description of the quest. The theme of initial difficulty and ultimate reward is picked up several times in this passage. The acquisition of wisdom is a lifelong quest which requires great diligence and perseverance, but the rewards are considerable. Wisdom must be actively sought; it is not passively acquired. One needs to give one's mind to the search for wisdom, learn through listening, attend the gathering of the elders, attach oneself to a wise person and plague him constantly with vigilant attention, and pay attention to shrewd proverbs. Similar advice is given in 8:8-9 where the student is to listen to the talk of the wise and be conversant with their proverbs, and also to hold in high regard what he hears from the elders, because they are the repositories of a valuable tradition. This short section once again locates the acquisition of wisdom in the activity of listening to and learning from wise people and those who are older and pass on the traditions (here probably meant generally as the wisdom that previous generations have acquired). In his emphasis on the importance of listening and reflecting on the teachings of the wise, Ben Sira mirrors the pedagogic understanding of Prov 1:1-6. A certain attitude is demanded of those who would acquire wisdom: they must be humble as befits one who fears the Lord, and they must be ready to learn from the experience and training of others, especially the elders of the community. The key role that discipline plays in the search for wisdom indicates again that the idea of

wisdom as gracious gift is not intended to absolve humans of the responsibility to acquire wisdom. But in addition to this careful listening to and learning from other wise men, there is the injunction to busy oneself with the Lord's commandments. As one reflects on the Law, the Lord himself will strengthen the mind and grant the wisdom that is being sought (6:37). Therefore even the learning gained through study is a gift from God. Boccaccini [1991:86] states that Wisdom is 'the fruit of a synergy between human beings and God'.

In Sir 15:1 the successful seeker after wisdom is characterised as the one who fears the Lord and who is practised in the Law. Apparently it is by applying oneself to both sacred and 'mundane' tradition that one meditates on wisdom, studies her ways and ponders her secrets (14:20). All of this reflective, studious activity requires great investments of time, to the extent that Ben Sira believes that those engaging in a trade or craft do not have at their disposal the leisure time required for the acquisition of wisdom (38:24). He does recognise a kind of wisdom in the skill of the artisan, but he differentiates this from the wisdom that may be acquired by the scribe (38:31).

Another passage describing the activity of the student of wisdom is Sir 16:24-25. The student is exhorted to listen and to gain knowledge by applying his whole mind to the sage's words. The sage's task in turn is to pour out by measure the knowledge that he has, and to impart it in a careful way. Within the context, the content of this carefully expounded knowledge is a description of God's work in creation - how everything has been made with a carefully prescribed function that is perfectly carried out. In particular, this knowledge involves an understanding of

how God has created human beings, the powers and abilities that he has given them, and the way that God deals with human beings according to both his justice and his mercy.

For what are those who acquire an education in wisdom equipped? In 8:8-9 the benefit of learning from what other wise men say is that one will acquire the training required to serve before the great, and will learn how to think and to give a timely answer. Here the picture of wisdom and its work is very much the 'old wisdom' of Proverbs. In his comments on trades other than that of the scribe, Ben Sira enumerates what the artisan is not equipped to do (38:31-34). This list is indicative of what Ben Sira believes are the functions and attributes of those who do have the leisure time to pursue wisdom. These are participation in the council, and on the judicial bench, the grasp of the law, a reputation for culture and sound judgement, and the invention of maxims.

Wisdom offers abundant rewards, described in terms reminiscent of Proverbs. She is like a mother or an extravagant hostess, bestowing happiness, life, honour, and the Lord's blessing (4:11-19). Di Lella [1993:145] points out that the blessings of wisdom enumerated in Sir 15 are what the faithful were taught to expect from their loyalty to the covenant: a life of honour and respect without shame (15:4-5, 21:17); great happiness and joy in the present life and immortality through children who will ensure a lasting good name (15:6 cf 37:26, 39:9-11, 41:11-13, 44:14, 46:11d and 49:1).

### 3.2.5 *Wisdom and Law*

The identification of Wisdom and Law in Sirach has often been noted. In his monograph on Law and Wisdom, Schnabel [1985:89 n443] claims that wisdom and law have been completely identified in Sirach, and asserts that this complete identification is also recognised and acknowledged, though not discussed extensively, by the vast majority of scholars. But terminological imprecision plagues his work.<sup>103</sup> He gives the philosophical and logical definitions of ‘identity’ and admits that in this form it cannot be applied to the relationship. Hence he is willing to speak also of ‘correlation’, by which he means ‘an identity in diversity’ [Schnabel 1985:90-91]. What is meant by this last phrase is not made explicit. Strictly speaking, if one posits an identity between Wisdom and Law, then what is true of Wisdom must be true of Law, and *vice versa*. In other words, the terms ought to be completely interchangeable. Boccaccini [1991:81] is representative of the scholars who note that the relationship between Wisdom and Law is actually an asymmetrical one. To simply say that Wisdom and Law are identified is to flatten a complex relationship. The question of how Wisdom relates to Law in Sirach is crucial for an understanding of the nature of Wisdom in this work. If the concepts were identified in the sense that they are identical and therefore completely interchangeable with each other, then Wisdom in Sirach

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<sup>103</sup> For example, Schnabel [1985:74] says of 1:26 that “It is true that, in one sense, wisdom is more comprehensive than the Torah since it is the personal gift and presence of God” but goes on to say that “this verse also implies that being wise *equals* the keeping of the law” [italics mine]. Several of the verses adduced by Schnabel [1985:69-79] to demonstrate the ‘equation’ of Wisdom and Law are constructed with these concepts as matched terms in a parallelism e.g. Sir 34:8. But the relationship between matched parts in parallel lines is



would be completely nationalised. Hengel [1974:138-9] perceives this strong nationalisation in Sirach, for he claims that Ben Sira has identified wisdom and pious observance and that in practice wisdom and the law have become one. I believe this is an oversimplification and therefore a distortion of the teaching of the book.

Before we examine the relationship between the two concepts in Sirach, the meaning of ‘law’ in Sirach must be ascertained. It is not self-evident that terms such as *torah* refer to the Law of Moses. It is generally accepted that in the Hebrew Proverbs the word ‘torah’ is not a direct reference to the Mosaic Law, but has as its referent the teaching of parents and teachers [Cook 1999:1, following Gese 1989:71]. Levenson [1987:565-7] discusses the concept of Torah as found in Psalm 119, one of the wisdom psalms, and maintains that the author there does not think primarily of the Pentateuch when writing of torah, commandments etc. In fact, the psalm lacks any trace of book consciousness<sup>104</sup> and there is no reason to assume that torah for this psalmist is limited to the Pentateuch or even dominated by it or any other book. Levenson believes that the use of terms like ‘commandment’ in this psalm is close to that of Proverbs where *מצוה* and its synonyms indicate the counsel of a sage rather than juridical or cultic norms. The torah of a sage refers to prudent advice that enables his disciples to succeed in the world. Levenson [1987:570] argues for three sources of torah recognised in Psalm 119.

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seldom as simple as ‘equation’. This is too simplistic a reading of the dynamics of parallelism.

<sup>104</sup> Levenson [1987:565] suggests that if the psalmist’s Torah had been written the exigencies of the acrostic format would have made reference to a book and to writing, and also to Moses, all the more likely. But there are no such references.



There is the received tradition passed on most especially by teachers but including perhaps some sacred books now in the Hebrew canon, cosmic or natural law and unmediated divine teaching. This is not to deny the importance of 'biblical' books for the psalmist. By demonstrating the use that the author makes of biblical allusions Levenson concludes that these writings hold a kind of normative status for him and provide the language with which to formulate significant statements. Nevertheless Psalm 119 never identifies Torah with Pentateuch. Ben Sira is a representative of the sapiential tradition, though chronologically later than Hebrew Proverbs and Psalm 119. To what extent does he reflect the understanding of Torah outlined above?

Schnabel [1985:30-39] has made a study of the words תורה, מצוה, משפט, חוק, דבר יהוה, νόμος, ἐντολή, κρίμα and λόγος κυρίου as they occur in Sirach.<sup>105</sup> He identifies between fifty-three and fifty-six references to the Mosaic Law.<sup>106</sup> Noting the way in which these terms for law are used, Schnabel [1985:41-43] points out that, unlike Proverbs, Ben Sira never uses the different terms for law in genitive construction with father, mother or wisdom teacher. By contrast they occur in genitive construction with 'Most High' or 'Lord' (19:17; 23:23,27; 29:11; 38:34; 39:8; 41:8; 42:2; 44:20; 49:4). He lists 8 passages where law terms are linked with God's covenant (17:11,12; 24:23; 28:7; 39:8; 42:2G; 44:20;45:5). The terms תורה, דבר יהוה and especially חק sometimes designate the order which God imposed upon creation (11:17H;

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<sup>105</sup> He works from the Hebrew where that is extant, and only concerns himself with the Greek where there is no underlying Hebrew available.

14:12,17; 38:22; 41:1-3; 42:15-43:33) but these instances do not make up the majority of cases where these terms appear. Schnabel [1985:46-49], building on Marböck [1971:86ff], concludes that the function of law in Sirach is as a norm for moral and social behaviour. To keep the law and commandments is to comply with God's will.

It is instructive to note, in the light of the frequent references to law and commandment, how little explicit mention is made of the content of the Law. The few references to the cultic law include Sir 7:31, 35:1-7 and 45:17 (tithes and sacrifices). There may be references to the content of the Pentateuchal legal material in Sir 28:6-7 (cf. Lev 19:17-18), Sir 19:17 (cf. Lev 19:17) and 29:1,9. Sir 3:1-16 is an elaboration on the command to honour one's parents, and the promise attached to that command in the Decalogue (Deut 5:16, Ex 20:12). Collins [1997:47] recognises in Sir 4:1-6 echoes of the social laws of Deut 15:7-11. He notes however that Ben Sira pays scant attention to the ritual commandments of Leviticus. Their observation is arguably taken for granted, since at no point does Sirach suggest that any of the Torah is obsolete. Sandelin [1986:49] concludes that, since Ben Sira never deals with the commandments of the Lord in any detail, although he mentions them often, the Mosaic law does not have a dominant position in Ben Sira's ethical teaching. His ethics generally follow the tradition of the Wisdom literature. I concur with this observation, since the verses quoted above as evidence that Ben Sira draws on some legal material could also be shown to reflect the teaching of Proverbs. Sanders [1983:7] thinks that 35:1-9 (with its

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<sup>106</sup> The clearest of these are Sir 24:23 and 45:5 which link the law explicitly with Moses and / or Sinai.

reference to cultic law) is an expansion of Prov 21:3, filled out with a reference to the theme of Prov 15:8. Honouring one's parents and the benefits of that in terms of long life is also an important theme in Proverbs. In addition, Proverbs picks up on the shame of dishonouring one's parents, which is an important component of Sirach's treatment of the topic in 3:1-16. The social laws of Deut 15 mentioned above are also echoed in Prov 3:27-28. It thus appears that even where Ben Sira gives some content to 'the commandments', his teaching is in line with the sapiential ethics of Proverbs. Collins [1997:70] takes the discussion on adultery in Sir 23:16-27, where Ben Sira does not call for a literal fulfilment of the law in the punishment of the guilty parties, as an apt illustration of the focus of Ben Sira's interest in matters of Law. "Sirach's concern is with conformity to the tradition in principle, with the attitude of reverence, rather than with legal details."

One must not underestimate the importance of the Mosaic Law in Ben Sira's thinking. He often mentions it, and it plays a much greater role in his thinking than in Hebrew Proverbs (cf. Cook 1999 on the Law of Moses in LXX Proverbs). We have seen that Ben Sira names the Law as one of the primary objects of study for the scribe (39:1). But, as Levenson [1987:567-8] notes, great though the scriptural influence on Ben Sira was, his book is hardly a collection of scholia on the Hebrew bible. Most of Sirach is a collection of maxims and poetic essays on proper behaviour, in the style of the Hebrew bible but without direct citation of it and presented through the prism of Ben Sira's own theology. The Law is not for him the single source of all truth, as can be seen from the fact that he does not attempt to adduce scriptural proof for his teachings, nor does he set out to provide scriptural exegesis. Collins

[1997:37] concurs with this. He describes Ben Sira as a wisdom teacher who makes extensive use of the Torah without pretence of authoritative interpretation of the kind that he reserves for the priesthood. I suggest that the Law's importance for Ben Sira lies in the fact that it is a symbol for that which is distinctive of Judaism. He encourages and exhorts his readers to live in conformity with that tradition. It is the matter of obedience and devotion to the Law that concerns him more than the technicalities of how specific stipulations are to be applied.

The fact that Ben Sira is not overly concerned with technicalities in the Law may suggest that he did not perceive the threat to the Jewish Law to be acute. There were, as there had always been, those who forsook the Law, but there was not a life-and-death struggle to uphold the Law in the face of severe opposition. J Cook [1999:11] has drawn attention to a change that the Greek translator of Proverbs introduced into the text at Prov 28:4b. Where the Hebrew reads "those who keep the law struggle against them", the LXX has "those who love the law build a wall around them". This exegetical tradition of the Law as a wall surrounding the righteous is also found in the roughly contemporary Letter of Aristeas (paragraph 139). There it is made clear that Israel was given the Law, described as impregnable palisades and walls of iron "to the end that we should mingle in no way with any of the other nations, remaining pure in body and spirit, emancipated from vain opinions.." [Hadas 1973:157]. The view of the torah as a surrounding wall or fence is well-known in Rabbinical tradition. Cook notes that there is no reference anywhere in Sirach to this rabbinic exegetical tradition. I think it is significant that Ben Sira does not reflect this way of thinking at all. Although he stresses the importance of keeping the Law and not forsaking it, he does not see

the Law as that which keeps Israel pure by promoting a sharp distinction between them and the Gentiles. This may be a subtle clue to Ben Sira's position *vis-à-vis* Hellenism. He does not feel so threatened by 'outsiders' as did the translator of LXX Proverbs who probably wrote a little later in Palestine [Cook 1997:326-7]. The provenance of the Letter of Aristeas in the Diaspora would also explain the heightened need to differentiate sharply between Jew and Gentile. Lebram's [1968:181,189] suggested reason why Ben Sira omitted any reference to Ezra points in the same direction. He posits that Ben Sira did not appreciate the parochial attitude of Ezra who wanted to keep Israel pure by erecting a fence around the Law.<sup>107</sup>

We turn now to an examination of the relationship between Law and Wisdom. Studying the Law and keeping the commandments is the means to acquiring wisdom because in obedience to the Law one places oneself in a position to receive from God the gift of wisdom (1:26, 6:37, 15:1). Obedience to God's law and commandments is in itself the hallmark of true wisdom (33:2-3). Sir 19:20 expresses the relationship in categorical terms: "The whole of wisdom is fear of the Lord; complete wisdom is the fulfilment of the Law". In the context of Sir 19:20-30 which compares true and false wisdom, this verse places wisdom firmly within the framework of pious religious observance. It claims that the person who fulfils the Law and fears the Lord acts with complete wisdom. Nothing that leads one to break the Law can be construed as true wisdom. The implication need not be that the *content* of Wisdom and Law respectively

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<sup>107</sup> Lebram [1968:189] places Ben Sira in the priestly circles over against the 'purifying' circles of the Hasidim, of which Ezra was a forerunner.

are identified in a one-to-one correspondence (i.e. that the Law alone is the locus of wisdom). In this regard it is significant that *fulfilling* the law and *keeping* the commandments is most often linked with *acquiring* wisdom. We have seen that Ben Sira does not limit the search for wisdom to a study of the Law (3:29; 6:33-35; 8:8; 9:14). Still, as Rylaarsdam [1946:31] has stated, “the Law has become the touchstone by which to measure the results of the search for wisdom”. The link between wisdom and law is also cemented by the relationship of both to the fear of the Lord. Fearing the Lord is closely bound up with keeping the commandments (2:16; 23:27; 32:14-16), and we noted above that Ben Sira does not believe that the person who spurns the fear of the Lord can be wise. Sir 1:11ff expounds on the intimate relationship between wisdom and fear of the Lord. Following wisdom teaching in the end leads to the same goal, and is based on the same principles of reverence for God that one finds in Torah [Witherington 1994:85]. Di Lella [1993:143, 146, 147] sums up the teaching of Sirach on this point: practical wisdom for Ben Sira is first and foremost a life that reflects the fear of the Lord by living in fidelity to the law.

There are several indications that Wisdom and Law are not identical in Sirach. Boccaccini [1991:89] notes that wisdom is portrayed as eternal.<sup>108</sup> It has historically become immanent in the law. He also suggests that in Sirach the law, unlike wisdom, has neither autonomy nor function beyond the relationship between human beings and God. Wisdom however has a degree of autonomy in relation to God as his eternal

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<sup>108</sup> But cf. Rylaarsdam [1946:38] who claims that Divine Wisdom and the law are co-extensive and co-eternal. He does not justify this statement.

possession, and to all of creation, which is its manifestation. The Law is an already-given gift, which everyone may obey, but Wisdom remains something to be sought after, but not granted to all by virtue of its autonomy with respect to the relationship between human beings and God. Commenting on 16:24-17:24 and then 42:15-43:33 and 45:5 Boccaccini [1991:93-94] says “In a cosmos ordered by certain rules, the law is the certain rule that governs the relationship between God and humankind in history..... The error of identifying wisdom with the law is once again confirmed. The law, which is the manifestation of wisdom in history, in the cosmic context is but one of the rules that God in his wisdom has established to govern creation.” Marböck [1971:68f, 89-94] posits that since wisdom is seen as the ordering principle in the world, or as the universal cosmic law, and the law is seen as part of God’s order of creation, and as the ordering principle for human life, wisdom and law are correlated in their common universalistic orientation. The law revealed to Moses was implicit in creation from the beginning and so it is the supreme actualisation of the natural law. Against this Schnabel [1985:79-80] objects that it is a mistake to postulate *a priori* the cosmic and universalistic perspective of the Israelite law. He argues that the universalistic dimension of the Law expanded by later writers was not the cause but the result of the identification of Law with wisdom. Although legal terms are used to describe the order of creation (41:2-4, 11:17; 14:12,17; 38:22), this does not mean that when Ben Sira speaks of the Law in relation to wisdom that he has in mind a cosmic ordering principle. It only proves that legal terms can be used in more than one sense.



The content of Sirach gives us an indication of how Law and Wisdom were related in practice. The sage has not ceased to draw on traditional Wisdom in favour of a Wisdom limited to Torah. We have seen that Ben Sira draws on the accumulated wisdom of the sapiential tradition, both within and beyond Israel's borders. To the old source Ben Sira has simply added further sources of Wisdom - the Torah, but also the prophets and other sacred traditions [Witherington 1994:94]. Sirach is not purely, or even predominantly, the product of Torah exegesis.

How then should one describe the relationship between Law and Wisdom in Sirach? Levenson [1987:568] writes that Ben Sira viewed the Pentateuch as the Jewish particularisation and the supreme exemplification of something larger – Wisdom – but did not seek to limit Wisdom to the Pentateuch or the other sections of the Hebrew bible. Boccaccini [1991:89] speaks of the law as the historical manifestation in Israel of a pre-temporal wisdom. Similarly, Witherington [1994:86] believes that one might almost speak of Wisdom becoming incarnate or concrete in Torah. For Blenkinsopp [1995:47] cosmic and co-creative wisdom was represented as finding its social embodiment in torah. Collins [1997:61] claims that Torah is accredited as a valid concretisation (even as the ultimate concretisation) of universal wisdom. There seems to be some consensus that Sirach presents Law as an actualisation of the universal Wisdom in the life of Israel. I find helpful the analogy from modern linguistics of the relationship between the deep structure of language and an historically occurring language. Law gives expression to Wisdom, and is thus in its entirety characterised by it. But



Wisdom exists before and beyond it, and can never be fully exhausted by it.<sup>109</sup>

There is Old Testament precedent for linking Law and Wisdom, especially Deut 4:6-8 and Ps 1, 19 and 119.<sup>110</sup> In Deut 4 Law is the primary category, and it is said to have the quality or nature of 'wisdom'. Collins [1997:54] also notes that Ezra 7:14 compared with 7:25 equates the law of God and the wisdom of God. "At least from the time of Ezra onward, there was a tradition of education in the Torah, an activity associated with the Levites in Chronicles. To speak of the Torah as wisdom in this context does not imply that the instruction was at all related to the book of Proverbs or the teaching of the sages. When Sirach identifies wisdom and the law, however, he is in effect introducing the Torah of Moses into the wisdom school, and thereby attempting to combine two educational traditions." Ben Sira has therefore taken a significant step.

Most scholars look for the motivation behind the close association of Wisdom and Law in the conflict with Hellenism. Thus Hengel [1974:138-9] writes that by this identification 'wisdom' becomes the exclusive gift of God to Israel, providing the possibility of repudiating an alien autonomous ideal of wisdom which refused any association with

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<sup>109</sup> I borrow this analogy from Fox [1997:630] who uses it to explain what he means when he describes personified Wisdom in Prov 1-9 as a 'universal'. "To use an analogy from modern linguistics, we might say that the limitless teachings that humans can shape, learn, and transmit are *generated* from the transcendent wisdom in the same way as an infinity of possible utterances can be 'generated' from the deep structure of language."

<sup>110</sup> Psalm 119 has been discussed above.

the law. For Rylaarsdam [1946:30, 38] the identification was a strategy to consolidate the spiritual and cultural resources of the nation in the context of a struggle for the survival of Israel's faith in its integrity. The correlation of Wisdom and Law is often seen as a means of domesticating wisdom and putting it firmly within the mainstream of Jewish thinking [Blenkinsopp 1983:130ff; Schnabel 1985:90-91]. Witherington [1994:76 n2] turns this on its head and finds the motivation in Ben Sira's aim of promoting a Torah-centric orientation for his readers by closely connecting it with Wisdom. Marböck [1971:93f] maintains that Stoic philosophy provided the impetus for combining Law and cosmic wisdom. In this way the Law achieves an ancient dignity, authority and universality which would present it as of equal rank to the Stoic law of the cosmos. Schnabel [1985:87] points to historical motives for the identification: when the sages are concerned with studying the Torah, then the identification of the two makes sense. I suggest that the phenomenon of an emerging written canon and the importance attached to interpreting that tradition was a key factor in connecting Law and Wisdom so closely on a literary level. When diverse traditions are read together as 'scripture' it is natural to use some kind of 'harmonising hermeneutic'. For Ben Sira who is steeped in the sapiential tradition, wisdom remains the primary category, and provides the hermeneutical tool through which to read the sacred texts. The challenge of Hellenism probably lies behind the impetus to consolidate the tradition and therefore offers a second-level explanation for the phenomenon. I noted in chapter 1 that Ben Sira is not concerned to combat Hellenism as a philosophical system. What he does strive to combat is the divorcing of the quest for wisdom from religious observance and ethical living. The Law defines the moral and religious dimensions of life for Ben Sira.

Observance of the Law is therefore indispensable for an education in wisdom.

### **3.2.6 Summary**

Wisdom in Sirach is not a unidimensional concept. The ‘instruction in wisdom’ that Ben Sira offers consists largely of advice on how to live life successfully in order to avoid shame and win a lasting good name. Wisdom in this sense is something that can be taught and learned. It is not simply a body of knowledge, though, since it must be actualised in right living. The way to acquire wisdom is through attentive listening to and learning from those who are already wise. But the acquisition of wisdom also involves careful study of the written traditions and religious observance. Wisdom is at the same time the result of diligence on the part of the student and a gracious gift of God. The conscientious and godly student places himself<sup>111</sup> in a position to receive God’s gift of wisdom.

The Lord is wise, and wisdom characterises his works. Wisdom is thus also seen as an attribute both of God and of the creation. Boccaccini [1991:82] notes that for Ben Sira wisdom is not just the faculty of rational analysis; it is ‘a deep and universal knowledge of things’; and in this sense is possessed only by the Lord. The sage is able to discern something of the wise ordering of creation as the Lord reveals it to him. There is a hidden and a revealed aspect to wisdom, and the wise person does not occupy himself with the former. Wisdom has both a universal

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<sup>111</sup> Ben Sira, in line with the culture of his day, does not countenance the possibility of a female student of wisdom.

and a particularistic dimension. The first is in view when Ben Sira reflects on the wise ordering of creation. The particularistic dimension is the focus of his ethical reflections where obedience to the commandment is stressed, and is enhanced by the inseparable association between Wisdom and Law. The Law is seen to be a precipitate of Wisdom – Wisdom finds concrete expression in the Law of Israel.

This mixing of the various senses of wisdom in Sirach is not a result of conceptual opaqueness on Ben Sira's part. It is preferable to explore interpretations of his work that can assign significance to this 'imprecision'. One such interpretation is given by Marböck [1971:104]. He believes that the juxtaposition of theological and religious interpretation of Wisdom to 'profane' advice (e.g. Sir 4:23-24, following on Wisdom's speech to those who love her) conveys a double message. Wisdom in the theological sense of God's presence, of intimacy and communion with God,<sup>112</sup> is not separate from the world, but is to be found in the midst of everyday life. At the same time this world receives a midpoint, a secret centre: the Wisdom of Israel's religion.

### 3.3 WOMEN IN SIRACH

I intimated above that Ben Sira is often accused of misogyny. Several scholars have made a study of Sirach's presentation of woman. The monograph by Trenchard [1982] takes a very negative view of Ben Sira's depiction of women. Trenchard [1982:169] concludes that Ben Sira

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<sup>112</sup> We will evaluate Marböck's reading of the referent of Wisdom in the following chapter.

alters, rearranges and supplements traditional material to reflect negatively on women beyond the implications of his sources. But to a large degree Trenchard's arguments hinge on the distinction he has made between traditional material which Ben Sira has incorporated into his work and additions or alterations original to Sirach. While it is probably safe to assume that the book incorporates both traditional material and Ben Sira's own compositions, the task of actually differentiating the one from the other is complex and the results can only be tentative, since Sirach itself provides no explicit indicators to guide the exegete here. Camp [1991:1-39] has investigated the place of women within Ben Sira's symbolic universe, and McKinlay [1996] and Collins [1997:64-73] devote some space to discussing Sirach's depictions of women, based on more straight-forward readings of the text. All concur that Ben Sira's view of women is not positive, and that it is more negative than Proverbs, one of Sirach's primary precursor texts. It is not my intention to discuss Sirach's view of women in detail. I will make a few salient remarks in light of my aim, which is to sketch the system of commonplaces associated with the concept 'woman' in Sirach.

In the first place, Sirach is written from a distinctly male perspective and with a male audience in view, a fact that does not set it apart from predecessors such as Proverbs. This perspective and intended audience is obvious in the passages about women, which focus on the woman's affect on men. Thus the good wife is described in terms of the benefits that accrue to her husband (26:1-4),<sup>113</sup> and daughters in terms of the

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<sup>113</sup> The same may be said for the positive picture of the woman of valour in Prov 31:10-31, where her activities are said to benefit her husband and earn him praise at the city gate.

anxiety they cause to their fathers (42:9-14). In an androcentric text, woman can be utilised as a symbol for that which is ‘other’.<sup>114</sup>

Ben Sira’s comments about daughters are particularly crude (Sir 26:10-12). He is paranoid about the potential shame that a daughter can bring on her father (42:9-14). Collins [1997:72] calls Ben Sira’s anxiety about daughters ‘extreme’. The imagery of ‘daughter’ is never used as a vehicle for wisdom. At the opposite end of the spectrum, mothers are seen to occupy a position deserving honour (3:1-16, 7:27-28, 41:17). ‘Mother’ is paired with ‘father’ in almost every instance to designate ‘parents’.<sup>115</sup> In Sir 25:13-26:27 Ben Sira treats the good and bad wife, devoting more than twice as many verses to the bad as to the good. In this context, he makes the radical statement that no wickedness is like the wickedness of a woman (25:19) and lays the blame for sin at the feet of a woman (25:24). This is the first extant reference we have to the tradition that blames Eve for the beginning of sin and the resultant penalty of death [Trenchard 1982:81].<sup>116</sup> The good wife brings honour to her husband. It is interesting to note that the beautiful wife is set firmly within the home (Sir 26:16)! Her homemaking activity is seen to be very important for a man’s stability (36:24-27). A wife is considered to be her husband’s possession (36:24).

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<sup>114</sup> “For a patriarchal discourse in which the self is defined as male, woman qua woman is the quintessential other.” [Newsom 1985:148].

<sup>115</sup> The only time ‘mother’ appears without its male counterpart is in the depiction of Wisdom as mother in Sir 15:2.

<sup>116</sup> Collins [1997:68] notes that in Sir 41:3-4 death is simply the decree of the Lord, with no implication of punishment. He suggests that Sirach’s inconsistency on this matter shows only that his argumentation is influenced by the immediate context in which an issue is raised,

Ben Sira warns his readers against giving their soul to a woman (Sir 9:2), and warns them against getting involved with any women who are ‘off limits’ – the prostitute, singing girl, virgin, married woman (9:1-9). Ben Sira’s pre-occupation with honour and shame have been noted [Camp 1991, 1997; Botha 1997]. His negative assessment of women can be explained on the basis of his concern to avoid shame coupled with the recognition that women, despite their subordinate position in a patriarchal society, have the potential to wreck a man’s reputation. In order to guard his good name, a man must keep a tight rein on his wife and daughters, and also on the expression of his own sexuality. Women are thus a perennial danger. On the positive side, a good wife can enhance a man’s honour. In this context, Woman Wisdom can be an unambiguously positive figure, because there is no danger that she will bring disgrace on those who seek her.<sup>117</sup> Thus he can urge his students to pursue Wisdom, even though he warns them against women (19:2; 25:21).

Before we move on to look at references to angels in Sirach, a few comments about the use of gendered imagery are in order.<sup>118</sup> One cannot

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<sup>117</sup> Contra Camp [1997:184] who believes that since Wisdom in Sir 24 by being textually embedded between passages on the adulteress and the bad wife, “on one level, female Wisdom cannot escape the possibility of shame posed by all women”.

<sup>118</sup> These observations are largely due to reflection sparked off by the insights of M Williams [1988:4-7] on the use of gendered imagery in texts. I am not in complete agreement with his assessment of personified Wisdom in Sirach. He does not consider the female gendered imagery used of Wisdom in Sirach to be an image of the feminine. He notes that Ben Sira compares Wisdom to both a mother and a wife (15:2, 4:11), yet the point of the extensive Wisdom imagery in Sirach is not a point about motherhood, or the female role, or



assume that wherever Wisdom is spoken of in feminine pronouns that the vehicle 'woman' is being called into play. A noun that is lexically gendered is only gendered in a significant sense when it is more explicitly gendered in the text. For example, the feminine gender of 'wisdom' is exploited in the imagery of Sirach 4, 6, 15 and 51, but it does not play a significant role in Sir 1:1-10 and chapter 24.<sup>119</sup> In other words, not every instance of Wisdom personified in feminine pronouns is a picture of 'wisdom as woman'. We have to be particularly careful about ascribing importance to the gendering of an image when the author has inherited the image from an already existing tradition, as is the case here. Then the gendering is inherited as a given along with the rest of the symbolism. While Ben Sira's view of women is instructive, it does not predetermine the meanings he seeks to convey through the 'wisdom as woman' metaphor. The nature of the relationship between the roles depicted in the imagery and the perspective of the author on social gender roles is not straightforward or predictable. This is particularly true in the case of an inherited metaphor.

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even gender at all, but rather about wisdom. With that I agree. But he goes on to state that the female gendering of Wisdom is essentially incidental, providing metaphorical colour, but no profound message; the real message about Wisdom that is intended has to do with the rewards resulting from obedience to the divine instruction found in the Torah (6:18-31, 15:1-8, 24:1-34, 51:13-30). He is correct in that the subject of the metaphor is not the feminine, but he under-estimates the importance of the vehicle in conveying the meaning of the metaphor.

Does this assessment fit in with my understanding of vehicle and tenor of metaphor, or does one have to give more weight to the gendering?

<sup>119</sup> This statement is substantiated in my exegesis in chapter 4.

### 3.4 ANGELS IN SIRACH

One of the primary vehicles of the Wisdom metaphor that I identify in chapter 24 is ‘angel’. It is therefore helpful to consider Sirach’s teaching on angels generally. Angels may be defined as “heavenly beings distinct from God and from human beings, who exist to serve God as messengers, as the heavenly congregation at worship, and as agents of the divine will fulfilling a variety of other functions” [Carrell 1997:14]. A cursory reading of Sirach reveals that angelology does not play a major role in the teaching of the book. This fact is particularly striking when Sirach is compared to a writing such as Qumran Sapiential Work A which imagines a correspondence between the angels’ existence in the heavenly court and the life of the wise / righteous on earth [Harrington 1997:33]. A comparison with the prominence of angels in Daniel and *1 Enoch* creates the same impression. Schniedewind [1995:62] has noted that the mediation of a divine revelation by an otherworldly being to a human recipient is one of the principal characteristics of apocalypses.

Cullman [1951:193] boldly states that the “abundantly attested late Jewish belief that all peoples are ruled through angels” is found in Sirach, as well as in Daniel and the Book of Enoch. Unfortunately, he gives no references to substantiate this claim. He probably has in mind Sir 17:17, which Russell [1964:246] interprets as echoing the teaching that the Gentile nations have angels to rule them, whereas Israel has the Lord. This interpretation takes ἡγουμένον as a reference to angels. But against this Carr [1981:31] points out that in Sir 41:17 ἡγουμένος undoubtedly refers simply to a human prince, and there is no obvious

reason to suggest that it does not mean the same in Sir 17:17. He goes on to offer a perfectly satisfactory interpretation of this verse without recourse to the idea that each nation has its own angel.<sup>120</sup>

Sir 17:32 is sometimes read as a reference to angels. Skehan and Di Lella [1987:285] state that the hosts are the sun, moon and stars, but suggest that Ben Sira probably also had in mind the angels. Argall [1995:136-137] claims that the hosts are the luminaries and their leaders. He takes the lesson of the hymn in 16:26-17:32 to be that both luminaries / angels and humankind are given commands and prohibitions, possess the freedom to do good or evil, and will be punished or rewarded as they deserve. This reading seems to hinge on translating 16:27c-28 as a report of God's commands to his works ("They were not to ...") instead of as indicative statements about their absolute obedience to the divine word and reading 17:32a as "He himself *holds accountable* the hosts of highest heaven" (Argall, italics added). This reading presupposes that the Jewish tradition of an angelic revolt in heaven lies behind Ben Sira's argumentation here. But it is also possible to read this piece quite differently. Sir 16:27-28 reads more naturally as a series of descriptive statements about how God's works obey him (the Greek uses the indicative)<sup>121</sup> and ἐπισκοπέτομαι in 17:32a is better 'to inspect, look at observantly'. I discern here no reference to a rebellion by the stars (or the angels supposedly controlling them). Boccaccini [1991:93] describes Sir

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<sup>120</sup> "Indeed the writer's emphasis upon God's direct awareness of man's behaviour would seem to discount the need for intermediaries. Civil order, which is conducive to good morals, is the gift of God, and Israel, being a theocracy, has God as its king. There is no reference here to an angel of the nations" [Carr 1981:31].

<sup>121</sup> The Hebrew for these verses is not extant.

16:24-17:24 as an unfolding of the divine order from the immutable cosmos to mutable human beings “whose freedom and responsibility are brought into action within the equally certain and defined limits represented by the law and the application of retributory justice”. Further evidence against reading here any reference to a rebellion of the luminaries and their angels comes from Sir 42:15-43:33 where the immutability and obedience of all creation is again stressed. Boccaccini [1991:90] reads this passage as a refutation by Ben Sira of the apocalyptic view that the angels who guide the stars chose to refuse the role and place assigned to them by God (Cf. 1 En 75:1, 80:6, 82:4-20). I therefore take this verse to be a reference to sun, moon and stars, and not to angels.

This is not to say that angels are entirely absent from Sirach. Sir 42:17 speaks of the angels (קְדוּשֵׁי אֵל) as those who praise God and recount his marvels. Even they are not able to exhaust the wonders of God’s works. Sir 45:2 compares Moses to the angels. The implication is that they occupy a position of great glory, and the status of Moses is augmented by stating that he has been made their equal. In mentioning an angel massacring the Assyrians in Sir 48:21, Ben Sira is simply repeating his source (2 Kings 19:35).

Olyan [1993:28-29] draws attention to an interesting verse in the Hebrew Sirach that refers to angels. This angelic reference is not preserved in the Greek translation. What makes this reference particularly relevant is the fact that it appears to be the result of exegesis on Ben Sira’s part, since the reference to angels is absent in the biblical passage to which he

refers. In Sir 48:9, which is only extant in MS B, it is written of Elijah that

[.....]א ובגדודי הנלקה בסערה מעלה<sup>122</sup>

Ben Sira's description of Elijah's ascent into heaven is based upon 2 Kings 2:1,11 which reads in the Massoretic Hebrew text (v 11)

והנה רכב־אֵץ וסוסי אֵץ ויפרידו בין שניהם ויעל אליהו בסערה השמים

The Greek Sirach follows the biblical text more closely:

ὁ ἀναλημφθεὶς ἐν λαίλαπι πυρὸς

καὶ ἐν ἄρματι ἵππων πυρίνων

The Hebrew Sir does not mention the chariots and horses. These are clearly subsumed under **גדודי אש** – “bands / troops of fire”. The writer is probably drawing upon the images of other angelophanic texts where chariotry is specifically associated with angels to fill out his picture of Elijah's ascent, as well as upon texts using military language to describe angels, and texts where angelic figures are described as fiery in appearance. Such texts are Ps 68:18, 103:20-21 and 104:4. Olyan [1993:29 n57] gives references to show that the military term **גדודים** is a common designation for angelic beings in later hekalot and rabbinic texts. This indicates that ideas about angels were not unknown to Ben Sira. In his writing he shows familiarity with the exegesis that was going on in the Second Temple Period where angels were read into passages in the Scripture that did not explicitly mention them:

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<sup>122</sup> Vattioni [1968:261], who bases the Hebrew on his polyglot on Lévi's edition, gives more of the second distich – ובגדודי אש מ[רום]. This discrepancy is due to Beentjes' policy of omitting all consonants that he considers to be illegible in the manuscripts and not offering any reconstructions of gaps in the text [Beentjes 1997:2]. The important word for this discussion is, however, undisputed – ובגדודי.

From this brief survey of references to angels in Sirach, we conclude that angelology does not play a major role in the writer's conceptual framework. But he does assume their existence. This leaves open the possibility that he is free to draw on angel imagery as a vehicle for speaking about wisdom. If Ben Sira were concerned with detailing the names and functions of the angels and if they played a prominent role in his conceptual scheme, he would probably not have chosen to speak of Wisdom in these terms unless he actually conceived of her as being an angel. Instead, 'angel', like 'woman' is simply one of the pictures available to him as he seeks to convey in images his conceptualisation of wisdom.

## CHAPTER 4: THE WISDOM POEMS

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In this chapter I look at each of the poems in which personified Wisdom appears. There are a number of questions for which I seek answers. What is the 'wisdom' spoken of here (the tenor of the metaphor)? What images are used to describe wisdom (the vehicles)? Is her gender significant? What is the message conveyed through the use of the metaphor? Is Wisdom a mediatrix here? I intend to show how the strategy of reading Woman Wisdom as a metaphor – or, more precisely, as a feminine personification filled out by a cluster of metaphors - elucidates the text and unlocks its meaning.

### 4.1 SIRACH 1:1-10

#### 4.1.1 *Translation*

I have translated from the Greek text of Ziegler [1980:128-9], since the Hebrew is not extant. Sir 1:1-10 forms a distinct textual unit. Marböck [1971:22] notes that this unit is concisely formulated and theologically dense in comparison to the diffuse presentation of variations on the theme of the fear of the Lord that follows (Sir 1:11ff).

- 1 All wisdom is from the Lord  
and is with him for eternity.
- 2 The sand of the seas and the drops of rain  
and the days of eternity who can number?
- 3 The height of heaven and the breadth of the earth  
and the depth of the abyss who can trace out?
- 4 Before all else wisdom was created



- and thoughtful intelligence from eternity.
- 6 The root of wisdom, to whom has it been revealed?  
And her subtleties, who knows?
- 8 One is wise, exceedingly awe-inspiring  
seated upon his throne.
- 9 The Lord, he created her  
and saw and numbered her  
and poured her upon all his works
- 10 with all flesh according to his gift  
and he lavished her on those who love him.

#### 4.1.2 Notes

v 1. *from eternity* The Greek reads εἰς τὸν αἰῶνα, the Syriac has

ܐܘܢܐ ܕܥܝܢܐ while the Latin takes a mediating position with *fuit*

*semper et est ante aevum*.

v 3 *the depth of the abyss*. The Greek reads καὶ ἄβυσσον καὶ σοφίαν – “the abyss and wisdom”. Against this

the Syriac has ܕܘܝܐ ܕܥܝܢܐ – “great ocean” and the Latin

reads *et profundum abyssi*. Although most witnesses preserve the reference to wisdom found in the Greek, I have chosen to follow the

Latin to which meaning the Syriac is closely related. (In Sir 24:29 ‘sea’

and ‘great abyss’ are used as a word-pair in the synonymous parallelism of the verse). Heaven, earth and sea / abyss form a familiar triad, but

wisdom is out of place. I understand this verse to be referring to knowledge inaccessible to human beings as a way of underlining the

inscrutability of wisdom. The questions lead one to the conclusion that

wisdom is unfathomable, and the force is diminished if wisdom is mentioned as one among *several* things beyond human ability to grasp.

v 9 Marböck [1971:20], Von Rad [1972:241] and Skehan and Di Lella [1987:136] place κύριος at the end of verse 8 and render verse 9 as a distich instead of the tristich of Ziegler. Because tristichs are infrequent in Sirach, scholars tend to suggest alterations when they do appear.

The Syriac has ܡܒܠܐ – he investigated her – where the Greek reads

αὐτὸς ἔκτισεν αὐτήν – he created her. The connection with Job 28:27 is apparent from the next two verbs in this verse: εἶδεν καὶ ἐξηρίθμησεν. The Greek most probably reflects the original Hebrew since it is likely that in the transmission process a verse which contained an allusion to a biblical text could be altered so as to reflect that reference more literally.

v 10 *those that love him*. The Syriac and a subgroup of Greek manuscripts have ‘those that fear him’. This reading is argued for by Haspecker [1967:51-53] and followed by Marböck [1971:21] and Von Rad [1972:241]. However, the theme of fearing the Lord is continued in the subsequent verses while that of loving God is not suggested elsewhere in the context, making it more likely that ‘those who fear him’ could have been substituted for the original reading ‘those that love him’ than *vice versa*. Skehan and Di Lella [1987:137] note that the GII

addition to v 10<sup>123</sup> continues the idea of ‘those who love him’, implying that this was the reading in the Greek when the expansion was made.

### 4.1.3 Commentary

Marböck [1971:22] provides a helpful analysis of the literary structure:

Verse	1. Statement
	2. Question
	3. Question
	4. Statement
	6. Question
	8. Statement as answer
	9. Development
	10. Development of 9c

The subject of the poem is wisdom that has its origin in God and is given as a gift to human beings. The structure has been well chosen to convey this thought. The fundamental statement in v 1 declares God to be the source and seat of wisdom from eternity. The pointed questions of vv 2-3 underline the inaccessibility of wisdom to unaided human beings. The one who is unable to penetrate the mysteries of the cosmos cannot claim to have mastered wisdom. Human beings cannot fathom the intricacies of the created realm, and yet, the statement in verse 4 informs us, Wisdom was created before all these things and has been in existence from eternity. Who then, the following verse asks, can hope to understand *her* subtleties? The answer is finally given in the statement of verse 8. Only one is truly wise – the Lord. This idea is further developed. The Lord is

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<sup>123</sup> Love of God is ennobling wisdom to those to whom he appears he apportions it that they might see him.

the source of wisdom; it is fully accessible to him and open before him, and he has bestowed it on his creation. It may be acquired by human beings only as the generous gift of God. The recipients of God's gift of wisdom are spoken of first in universal terms (πάντα τὰ ἔργα αὐτοῦ, μετὰ πάσης σαρκός) and then more narrowly as 'those that love him.' The movement of the poem is thus the movement of wisdom from God to human beings, an idea already suggested by the preposition παρὰ in v 1a. In the opening verse, all wisdom is with (μετ') the Lord, and in v 10 it is with (μετὰ) all flesh according to his gift. The two uses of the preposition form an *inclusio*, emphasising the direction of the movement of wisdom from God to all creation and to humanity in particular.

Throughout this poem wisdom is the subject of no verb other than εἰμί (v 1b). It is either simply present (with the Lord and with all flesh vv 1 and 10) or is the object of God's activity – he creates, sees, numbers and pours out wisdom and lavishes it on his favoured ones. The nature of wisdom's origins with the Lord is made explicit: twice it is stated that it was *created*. In verse 4 the creator is not named, but in verse 9 he is identified as the Lord. The fact that Wisdom is created before all things gives her priority over all creation, but nevertheless makes her part of the created reality and therefore subordinate to the creator. Most scholars, including Marböck [1971:32] and Skehan and Di Lella [1987:138] believe that the concept of wisdom's eternity can be traced back to Proverbs 8 where repeated temporal references to the creation in negative terms (Prov 8:24-25) underline wisdom's existence at the beginning. In that passage the Lord's initial action with respect to Wisdom is expressed

by the verb **הָנָה** whose meaning is ambiguous.<sup>124</sup> This account of Wisdom's origin reflects the nuance chosen by the translator of Septuagint Prov 8 to render the ambivalent **הָנָה**. In verse 9 in Sirach the Lord is said to have seen (**εἶδεν**) and numbered (**ἐξήριθμησεν**) wisdom. Verse 2 asked who is able to number (**ἐξαριθμήσει**) the sand of the seashore, the drops of rain and the days of eternity. The idea conveyed in counting these entities is of complete knowledge of the secrets of the cosmos, which is reinforced by the question of the following verse. When God is said to number wisdom, then, it implies that he has an intimate knowledge and complete understanding of it. This interpretation is confirmed by the question of v 6 to which v 9 offers an answer: "The root of wisdom, to whom has it been revealed and who knows her subtleties?"

How are we to understand verse 9c – 'and poured her upon all his works'? Von Rad [1972:156] interprets this clause as a description of a real cosmological process – the bestowal of something special on creation. Hengel [1973:288] finds in these words remarkable echoes of the Stoic world reason that fills the earth. Perhaps God pours out wisdom upon all his works by creating them in a manner which reflects his own wisdom, so that there is rational purpose manifest in the cosmos. Since verse 10 is a development of verse 9, it goes some way toward explaining it. The 'pouring out' of wisdom is the bestowal of a generous gift on every living thing. Marböck [1971:26f] has noted the similarity in

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<sup>124</sup> See Scott [1965:71-72], Vawter [1980:205], Ringgren [147:101-102], Lang [1986:63-64], Boström [1990:51-54] and Baumann [1996:116-118] for discussions on the meaning of this term in Prov 8:22.

structure and vocabulary between Sir 1:1-10 and Sir 18:1-14. The second passage deals with the mercy of God. The Lord is patient with human beings and showers his mercy upon them, and his mercy reaches all flesh. Clearly the idea is that God acts with great mercy in his dealings with all people. When God bestows his mercy on humanity, he does not give them something external to himself; rather his actions toward them are characterised by mercy. Elsewhere in the Old Testament God speaks of pouring out his Spirit on all people (Joel 3:1), or on the house of Israel (Eze 39:29). Once again, the Spirit is a gift of God, but God does not give a 'thing' – he gives himself by coming to human beings with a manifestation of his power and presence. These references suggest that we need not think of the wisdom that is 'poured out' as an entity given by God – it could be that which characterises his actions toward and within his creation. The working of wisdom and God's own action form an inseparable unity. This interpretation is an intriguing possibility. However, the difference between the way Sir 18 speaks of God's mercy and the way wisdom is described in the verses preceding 1:9c should not be overlooked. Before wisdom is 'poured out', it is first of all created, and then seen and numbered. The imagery underlying this description is of an entity other than God with respect to which God can act. This does not, however, preclude the possibility that it is a description of the nature of God's activity, since that can be objectified and spoken of in these terms.

What is the 'wisdom' being spoken of in these verses? Boccaccini [1991:82] defines it as 'a deep and universal knowledge of things'. That certainly is the impression created by the rhetorical questions of verses 2-3. Here we do not have a picture of 'book' wisdom to be gained through

study. This is a wisdom that is bound up with the mysteries of the cosmos, and bestowed by the creator on his creation. Wisdom is some kind of universal construct. That wisdom is closely connected to the Lord does not compromise its universality, since the Lord is the creator of everything, and not simply the God of the nation Israel. But the Lord of the universe is in a special sense the Lord of Israel. Similarly, the wisdom which is poured out on all his works is given in particular to those who stand in special relationship to him. Wisdom is spoken of both as an attribute of God (v 8) and as an entity independent of him (v 9-10), but this is a manner of speaking, and cannot be taken literally to imply that wisdom has independent ontological existence.

How exactly is Wisdom being ‘imaged’ here? Although this poem is invariably included in the list of poems on personified Wisdom in Sirach, I actually discern little if any personification here. A person is generally not ‘numbered’ or ‘poured out’. A person may have ‘subtleties’ (πανουργεύματα), but so does the impersonal cosmos, and to speak of wisdom’s ‘root’ is not to personify the former. The personification in these verses is at best inchoate. This is not to suggest that this passage is unimportant for an investigation of Ben Sira’s depiction of Woman Wisdom. It will be shown that other poems on Wisdom where the personification is explicit contain links with this poem, especially verse 6. This encourages the reader to read the fuller personification back into this opening poem, and to trace out personified Wisdom’s silhouette even where she is described in terms reminiscent of a material substance. Since this poem in isolation does not show any clear personification of

wisdom, the question of the significance of the gender of the wisdom figure does not arise.

Does this poem build to present wisdom as mediating between God and humanity? We have noted the movement of wisdom from being with the Lord to being with humanity. This movement is not a spatial translocation, since wisdom is with the Lord εἰς τὸν αἰῶνα and thus does not cease to be with him when he bestows it upon his creation as a gift. The converse may therefore be true – that where wisdom is bestowed, there the presence of God is. We have seen how the Lord's pouring out wisdom on all flesh can be understood analogously with the pouring out of God's mercy on all flesh referred to in Sir 18:1-14 (especially vv 11-12). If this analogy is accepted, then wisdom may be seen as a manifestation of God's active presence within his creation, and hence as a mediator of God's presence to his world. Wisdom is not active in this passage; she does not bridge any gap between God and humanity. If there is any gap to be bridged, it is God himself who does the bridging by means of the gift of wisdom. Wisdom is firmly tied to the Lord: she is his, with him, from him, created by him, known by him, bestowed by him. As regards her relationship to humanity, she is beyond them, and yet given by God as a gift to those who love him. This is a 'programmatic statement'; it places wisdom in the context of the Lord's exclusive rights to her and makes clear that wisdom is a gift that is given as a function of one's relationship to God.



## 4.2 SIRACH 1:11-30

Although wisdom is not the primary topic of this poem, personified Wisdom plays a prominent role. I therefore include it among the ‘Wisdom poems’.

### 4.2.1 Translation

The Hebrew of this text is not extant, so I translate from the Greek [Ziegler 1980:129-132]. The Greek, minus the GII additions, has 21 bicola. I follow the strophic divisions indicated in Ziegler. Di Lella [1997:115-118] provides an aesthetically pleasing and coherent strophic division of the poem. But he begins with a poem of 22 bicola, since he includes verse 21 which is marked by Ziegler as a GII addition.

- 11 The fear of the Lord is glory and exultation  
and gladness and a crown of rejoicing
- 12 The fear of the Lord delights the heart  
and gives gladness and joy and length of days.
- 13 The one who fears the Lord will be well at the end  
and in the day of his death he will be blessed.
- 14 The beginning of wisdom is to fear the Lord,  
and indeed with the faithful in the womb she is created
- 15 Among human beings she has made a nest, an eternal foundation  
and to their seed she is entrusts herself
- 16 The fullness of wisdom is to fear the Lord  
and she intoxicates them with her fruits.
- 17 Her whole house she fills with desirable things  
and her storehouses with her produce
- 18 The crown of wisdom is the fear of the Lord  
making peace and perfect health to flourish.
- 19 Knowledge and discerning comprehension she rained down  
and the glory of those who hold her fast she exalted
- 20 The root of wisdom is to fear the Lord

- and her branches are length of days<sup>125</sup>
- 22 Unjust anger cannot be justified  
for the weight of his anger is his downfall.
- 23 Until the opportune time the patient man will hold out  
and afterwards gladness will break forth for him.
- 24 Until the opportune time he will hide his words  
and the lips of many will narrate his discernment
- 25 In the treasuries of wisdom are learned sayings  
but an abomination to the sinner is piety
- 26 If you desire wisdom, keep the commandments  
and the Lord will convey her to you
- 27 For wisdom and instruction are the fear of the Lord  
and his delight is faithfulness and gentleness
- 28 Do not be unsubmitive to the fear of the Lord  
and do not approach him with a double heart
- 29 Do not be a hypocrite before people  
and over your lips keep a watch.
- 30 Do not exalt yourself lest you fall  
and bring dishonour on yourself.  
Then the Lord will reveal your secrets  
and in the midst of the assembly he will cast you down  
because you did not approach the fear of the Lord  
and your heart was full of deceit.

#### 4.2.2 Notes

1:17 Most Greek manuscripts, the Syriac and the Latin have the third person feminine singular pronoun “*Her* whole house...” (Italics mine). The reading of MSS *O L-694*, followed by the Armenian is αὐτῶν –

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<sup>125</sup> Di Lella [1997:116, 119] includes verse 21:

(φόβος κυρίου ἀπωθεῖται ἁμαρτήματα, παραμένων δὲ ἀποστρέψει πάσαν ὀργήν – The fear of the Lord drives away sins, and where it abides it will turn aside all wrath.) This gives him the twenty-two lines to make up his acrostic. He acknowledges, however, that it is a GII addition. I therefore omit it.

“Their whole house”. Although this second option has less textual support, Skehan [Skehan and Di Lella 1987:142] and Di Lella [1997:116] opt for it because they believe it conforms better to the imagery of the passage.

**1:19** I have omitted 19a – καὶ εἶδεν καὶ ἐξηρίθμησεν αὐτήν. It is not found in several Greek manuscripts. Since it is identical to 1:9b and makes the verse into a tristich, it is probably not original. Ziegler [1980:130] brackets it.

**1:21f** Syr has twelve bicola completely different from the Greek in place of 1:21-27. Skehan [Skehan and Di Lella 1987:142] suggest that they were improvised to fill a gap in the *Vorlage*.

**1:30** Greek has a negative statement in 30e “Because you did not approach the fear of the Lord”. Latin and Syriac omit the particle of negation. Skehan [Skehan and Di Lella 1987:142] and Di Lella [1997:118] believe that the Οὐ is a gloss due to a misunderstanding of the verse.

### **4.2.3 Commentary**

The subject of this poem is the fear of the Lord. The concepts of wisdom and fear of the Lord are woven together throughout the poem. The effect is to further define the wisdom of Sir 1:1-10 in terms of a moral and

religious disposition. The overall message of Sir 1 is similar to Job 28<sup>126</sup> where wisdom is shown to be the exclusive property of God and in its essence and entirety unknowable by human beings. And yet there is a wisdom which has been given to human beings: through fearing the Lord and shunning evil, human beings may attain to some measure of wise living in the world (Job 28:28).<sup>127</sup>

Ben Sira has provided an exuberant expansion on the biblical theme “The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom” (Prov 1:7, 9:10, Ps 111:10). He begins by enumerating the benefits of the fear of the Lord (vv 11-13) and then relates this concept to Wisdom as its beginning, perfection, crown and root. The statement of these relationships is followed in each case by some further comments on Wisdom (vv 14-21). There is a logical connection between the relationship stated and the elaboration that follows. When the fear of the Lord is called the *beginning* of wisdom, the text goes on to describe Wisdom’s coming-into-being with the faithful, and also her continuation with them and their descendants (vv 14-15). The fear of the Lord as the *fullness* of wisdom is elaborated with reference to her intoxicating and filling those who fear the Lord (vv 16-17); the *crown* of Wisdom is associated with the glorious rewards she bestows (vv 18-19); and the metaphor of Wisdom as tree implied by mention of the *root* of Wisdom is continued in the image of Wisdom’s branches (v 20). Verses 22-24 do not appear to be closely connected to

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<sup>126</sup> Sir 1:9 is an allusion to Job 28:27, indicating that this chapter forms a part of the background to Ben Sira’s thought here.

<sup>127</sup> Job 28:28 is regarded by many scholars as not original. The masoretic reading is, however, backed by a solid textual tradition [Zerafa 1979:154] and it is extremely likely that it served as the conclusion to the poem in the form in which it was available to Ben Sira.

their context. Di Lella [1997:126] describes them as “observations and warnings about how to live out the fear of the Lord”. The poem then returns to the subjects of wisdom and fear of the Lord. Wisdom, fear of the Lord and keeping the commandments are indissolubly linked (vv 26-27). Di Lella [1997:122] refers to this as part of the ‘great Deuteronomistic equation’:<sup>128</sup> to fear the Lord = to love the Lord = to serve the Lord = to walk in his ways = to keep the commandments / Law = to worship the Lord = to be wise.<sup>129</sup> The acquisition of Wisdom is seen here to be the result of a synergistic effort between God and human beings (v 26).

What is wisdom here? Since it is so closely connected with the fear of the Lord, it is not only a matter of understanding, but is also a moral disposition. Collins [1997:46-7] notes that fear of the Lord entails patience (v 23), discipline, trust, humility (v 27) and sincerity (vv 28-29). It is primarily an attitude of reverence for God and respect for received tradition, and as such it is constitutive of wisdom. The wisdom in these verses is the practical wisdom that enables one to live correctly (which is not the same as secular know-how) rather than knowledge of the secrets of the cosmos. This is not to imply that wisdom in Sir 1:1-10 and Sir 1:11-30 are two distinct entities. The wisdom that is demonstrated in fearing the Lord and keeping the commandments is a distillation in the sphere of human existence of the universal wisdom which characterises the whole of God’s creation. Fearing the Lord puts one in the position to be the recipient of the gift spoken of in 1:10.

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<sup>128</sup> Deut 4:5-6; 6:1-5,24; 8:6; 10:12,20; 13:5; 17:19; 31:12-13.

<sup>129</sup> These terms are often linked in Sirach: Sir 2:7-10,15-17; 4:11-16; 15:1,13; 19:20; 21:11; 23:27; 25:6,10-11; 27:3; 32:14,16; 33:1 34:14-18, 40:26-27.

Although wisdom is not the primary focus of this poem, the figure of personified Wisdom makes her first unveiled appearance in vv 15ff. It is difficult to form a mental picture of v 14b where Wisdom is created with the faithful in the womb.<sup>130</sup> But the meaning is clear – she is with them from the very beginning. It is also implied that the wisdom that characterises the life of the faithful is a gift from God, for it is safe to assume that he is the one who created her. Verse 15 continues the image of Wisdom being a close companion. The idea of her establishing a resting place for herself with human beings leads into the picture of vv 16b-17. Here Wisdom is the lavish hostess, plying her guests with sustenance to the point of intoxication. As was noted above, there is uncertainty as to whether Wisdom fills her own house and storehouses with abundant food, or whether she stocks the house of the Godfearers. McKinlay [1996:148] recognises this as a reference to Proverbs 9 where Woman Wisdom prepared her feast of life-giving food. Here her preparations are evident again as she stocks her home with food. I do not agree with Di Lella [1997:116 n11] that the idea of Wisdom filling the houses of the Godfearers conforms better to the conceptual imagery than does the picture of Wisdom filling her own house. Wisdom does not fill her house for her own benefit, but in order to act as the extravagant hostess. She does not simply supply food to those who live elsewhere; she has made her dwelling with the faithful (v 15-16) and gives her gifts in the context of a relationship. It is interesting that in 32:13 it is God who intoxicates (μεθύσκειν) with his good things.

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<sup>130</sup> Is Wisdom like a twin? Perhaps the difficulty arises from attempting to read personified Wisdom into this verse. It could be that wisdom is still conceived of abstractly here.

Ben Sira also employs agricultural imagery. It is introduced obliquely in verse 18 where peace and health are said to *flourish* and in v 19a where Wisdom ‘rains down’ knowledge and discerning comprehension. In verse 20 Wisdom is imaged as a tree, with fear of the Lord as its root and long life as its branches. With this metaphor Sirach points to the fear of the Lord as that which anchors and sustains wisdom and long life as that which issues forth from wisdom. The image also connotes the fecundity and stability of wisdom. The root of wisdom (ρίζα σοφίας) was mentioned in Sir 1:6, but its connotations in that context are very different. There the root of wisdom is that which is hidden and inaccessible – the part ‘below the surface’ as it were. I do not think that Ben Sira claims that to fear the Lord is the root of wisdom in that sense. Nevertheless the lexical correspondence and the close proximity of the verses do invite the reader to connect the two ideas. The effect is once again to remind the reader that although wisdom in its essence and entirety is beyond human ken, yet there is a sense in which wisdom has been made accessible to human beings. Although only God is wise in an absolute sense, human beings can become wise if they walk the path of the fear of the Lord and obedience to the commandments.

Ben Sira does not exploit the feminine gender of Wisdom – it is incidental to the metaphor of Wisdom as host and obviously does not feature in the metaphor of wisdom as tree. There are no specific indications here to suggest that Wisdom mediates in the relationship between God and humanity, but the message of the passage is consonant

with the idea. By connecting wisdom with fear of the Lord, Ben Sira pulls it firmly within the orbit of a relationship to God.

### 4.3 SIRACH 4:11-19

#### 4.3.1 Translation

This poem is preserved in Hebrew Ms A, with 4:21-22 also found in Ms B.

- 4:11 Wisdom teaches her sons  
and admonishes all who understand her
- 12 Those who love her love life  
and those who seek her will gain favour from the Lord
- 13 Those who take hold of her will find glory from the Lord  
and they will encamp in the blessing of the Lord
- 14 Those who minister to her minister to the Holy One  
and those who love her, the Lord loves.
- 15 “The one who obeys me will judge truly  
and the one who listens to me will dwell in the inner chambers<sup>131</sup>
- 17 For in disguise I will walk with him at first  
and I will test him with trials  
until a time his heart is filled with me
- 18 I will relent and lead him  
and will reveal to him my secrets
- 19 If he turns aside then I will abandon him  
and I will bind him with fetters  
If he turns aside I will turn my back on him  
and I will deliver him to destruction

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<sup>131</sup> 16 If he remains faithful, he will inherit her; his descendants will remain in possession of her



### 4.3.2 Notes

**4:11** Wisdom here is חכמות, the form found in Prov 1:20 and 9:1.

**4:14a** שרת, “to minister to, wait upon” is used in the cultic sphere.

**4:14b** The Hebrew here – ואלהו במא ויהא – is not intelligible. Argall [1995:58 n149] suggests the reconstruction ואהלו מבואיה which he renders “(even) his (God’s) tent is her place of entry”. He bases this restoration on the Syriac “his tent” and the notion of Wisdom’s ‘entries’ mentioned also in 14:22. He suggests that the line became mangled because of the daring identification of the tent of meeting (4:14b) with Wisdom’s bridal chamber (4:15b). I have translated from the Greek.

**4:15** Hebrew has Wisdom speaking in the first person; in Greek the third person singular is used. “truly” – The Hebrew is אמת. The Syriac reads “truly”, taking the vocalisation of the word to be אמת. The Greek ἔθνη is based on a different vocalisation of the consonants – אמת defective spelling for “nations” (cf. Num 25:15). Since Sirach does not conceive of an eschatological judgement in which the righteous will judge the world,<sup>132</sup> in what context would the wise judge the nations? Collins [1997:15] suggests that the point being made is that those trained in wisdom will rise to positions of authority. Skehan and Di Lella

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<sup>132</sup> This idea is found in works which have a concept of the resurrection and eschatological judgement – Wis 3:8 and 1 Cor 6:2.

[1987:172] note that LXX Prov 29:9a expresses a similar idea: “A wise man shall judge nations”. I prefer to read אָמַח.

**4:16** This verse is lacking in MS A. It is found in Greek and Syriac.

**4:17** The Greek has five stichs here. Skehan [Skehan and Di Lella 1987:169-70] rearrange the order. I have given the three stichs of Ms A.

**4:17b** The verb here is 3ms – יבחרנו. But who would the subject be? As it stands it is not Wisdom, either speaking directly as the context seems to require, or being spoken of in third person, since it is the masculine singular. Either the reading is to be amended, or else could it have the Lord as subject?

**4:19** This could contain a doublet. Skehan [Skehan and Di Lella 1987:170] claims that Ms A preserves two corrupt forms of the verse.

### **4.3.3 Commentary**

The poem can be divided into two major sections based on the change of person in verse 15. Verses 11-14 speak of Wisdom in the third person and enumerate the rewards that accrue to those who love, seek and take hold of Wisdom. Wisdom then speaks in vv 15-19. After stating what the one obedient to her will gain, she details her educational strategy of subjecting the student to trials before entrusting her secrets to him.

The feminine personification of wisdom is explicit here. Verse 11a depicts her as a teacher of 'sons', which is generally taken to imply that Wisdom here is pictured as a mother [Skehan and Di Lella 1987:171; Argall 1995:58]. But the wisdom teacher also has 'sons'. 'Son' is a common designation for a student throughout Sirach. Camp [1997:181] notes that although the image is occasionally cast in specifically female terms, 'her' main role here and in chapter 6 as a rigorous disciplinarian sounds more like the attitude of a father/ teacher than a loving wife or even mother. The verse immediately preceding this poem that speaks of the relationship between the righteous and God as that of son and mother (4:10) was the effect of reinforcing the idea that Wisdom is a mother to her sons. God is said to be more tender than a mother to the one he calls 'son'. Even if Wisdom is imaged as a mother here, it is her teaching and disciplining role rather than her tender nurturing that is highlighted. She is to be obeyed and listened to (v 15).

In order to gain Wisdom's rewards, the student must love her, seek her and take hold of her. Although these or similar verbs are used in the Hebrew Bible with the Lord as their direct object (e.g. Deut 4:29; 11:22) the feminine personification underlying these verses suggests the context of courtship for these actions. The successful student woos and wins Wisdom. Argall [1995:59] suggests that the reference to the 'inner chambers' in 4:15b may be an allusion to the bed chamber (חדר cf. Cant 1:4, 3:4). Wisdom's wariness and unwillingness to entrust herself to the student before she has convinced herself of his genuineness and his love for her (vv 17-18) also fit the context of courtship [Irwin 1995:558]. Irwin also draws attention to the similarity between the wariness of

Wisdom with a new student and that recommended in the search for a true friend (6:5-17, esp. v 7). Just as the wise person will not entrust himself too readily to another until he has proved that person's genuineness, so Wisdom waits until the newcomer proves himself worthy of her friendship. Wisdom wants as friends those who will become like her (cf. 6:17). The idea of ministering to Wisdom (שרת v 14a) does not fit the courtship or friendship context so well. It has cultic overtones.

The feminine personification is thus filled out in several ways. Wisdom is mother / teacher and she is also lover and friend. The composite picture of Woman Wisdom is of a woman to be sought and found, but one who has authority over the seeker and to whom the seeker must submit. The dominant role that Wisdom plays in the relationship with the one who seeks her is not what one would expect of a bride. I suggest that Wisdom here is primarily depicted as a teacher, but her gender allows Ben Sira to make her the object of eager pursuit too.

Wisdom is closely associated with the Lord here. The student is to direct his efforts toward wisdom, but the reward to the student comes from the Lord. As the student moves toward wisdom, the Lord moves in favour toward the student. The same movement is suggested in the Greek of v 14b where the Lord loves those who love Wisdom. The reason why pursuit of Wisdom brings blessing from the Lord is given in v 14a – in serving Wisdom one is serving the Lord.

That equation has already been hinted at in Sir 2:1. Sir 2 is an exhortation addressed to those who would come forward as disciples of Wisdom [Calduch-Benages 1997:137]. The similarities between chapter 2 and the Wisdom poems in chapters 4 and 6 are illuminating.<sup>133</sup> Serving Wisdom and serving the Lord both involve testing (2:1,4-5 cf. 4:17). The student is to be patient and faithful through trials, and is to continue to trust in and cling to the Lord / Wisdom (2:2-4,6 cf. 4:13,17-18). Disaster awaits those who turn aside and abandon the Lord / Wisdom (2:7,12-14 cf. 4:19). Another important conclusion that we can draw from reading these two passages together is that serving Wisdom is not held out as the means to serving God because God in himself has become inaccessible. In chapter 2 Ben Sira speaks directly of the student's relationship to the Lord, and it is to the Lord himself that the student is to cling (2:3). Wisdom in 4:11f is thus not a 'distance-bridging' construct between God and humanity.

The juxtaposition of 4:10 and 4:11 with the *mot crotchet* 'son(s)' and the shared imagery of 'mother' invite the reader to draw some connection. The just person whom God calls his son is now addressed by Wisdom as her son. Although, strictly speaking, these verses are to be read independently of each other, one cannot escape the subtle implication that those who stand in special relationship with God are also closely related to Wisdom.

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<sup>133</sup> Haspecker [1967:217 n9] writes that Sir 2:1-5, 4:17 and 6:18-22 are basically identical. The school of wisdom is the same as the school of fear of God. If students through testing learn to fear the Lord, they will attain Wisdom. In the same way, the student who has learned the teachings of Wisdom through testing is actually serving the Lord (4:14).

Argall [1995:59] states that the language of disguise / revelation refers to a common theme in angelophanies. For example, Raphael is sent to Tobit disguised as Azarias (Tob 3:17; 5:3-13; 12:11-22). This is an intriguing suggestion in the light of my reading of Sirach 24 where I argue that angel imagery is used for Wisdom. Calduch-Benages [1997:142] notes similarities between God's presence with Israel in the wilderness wanderings (Deut 8:1-5) and Wisdom's presence with the student. As the Lord walked with his people, now Wisdom walks with her disciple without him realising it. The Lord guided and protected his people and also tested them with hard trials to see what was in their heart without withdrawing his protection. Wisdom behaves in a similar way, putting her travelling companion to the test without abandoning him. The comparison is interesting, but tentative. However, when this poem is read together with Sir 24, which obviously alludes to Israel's wilderness period, the link becomes more probable.<sup>134</sup> If Ben Sira did have Israel's wilderness wanderings in mind when he penned 4:17ff, the point would be that Wisdom's teaching methods are like the Lord's, the point which is made when Chapters 2 and 4 are read together. When these two suggestions – that Wisdom may be pictured as an angel, and that there may be an allusion to the wilderness wandering – are taken together, then the possibility is raised that there is adumbration here of the picture of Wisdom in Sir 24. It remains, however, only a tentative possibility for which I can offer no concrete substantiation.

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<sup>134</sup> There are literary links between the various Wisdom poems, encouraging us to read them together. Argall [1995:58 n151] has noticed that the first person speech of Wisdom in Sir 4:15 begins in the same way in which the first person speech of Wisdom ends in Sir 24:3-22 – “Whoever obeys me..” .

The wisdom that is the subject of this poem is more than a body of knowledge. Wisdom is the personification of the whole educational process with which the sages were engaged, including but not limited to the content of their teaching. For Ben Sira wisdom is not simply a matter of acquiring knowledge. It is a disciplined way of life that requires the formation of character [Collins 1997:48]. Hence the importance of trials. The focus of this passage is on the benefits of an education in wisdom and the strategy of testing that Wisdom employs. The content of her teaching is not set out. Although Wisdom and the Lord are closely associated, the metaphor of Wisdom is not another way of speaking about the Lord. That is not the point of v 14. Sir 4:11-14 teaches that if one wants to serve the Lord and gain his blessing, then one must embrace wisdom. Wisdom is the means to a relationship with God. And God deals with human beings on the basis of their relationship to wisdom.

#### **4.4 SIRACH 6:18-37**

##### ***4.4.1 Translation***

Most of this poem is extant in Hebrew. Ms A has verses 19-22, 26-33, and 35-37, with 27:5-6 inserted between 6:22 and 6:26. Ms C preserves 6:18b-19, 28, 35, and 2Q18 has the line endings of 6:20-22, 26-31. In the Greek this is a 22 line poem which divides naturally into three strophes, each of which is introduced by the vocative ΤΕΚΝΟΝ (Hebrew בְּנוֹ). It will be shown that each strophe exhibits thematic coherence. The limits of the poem are demarcated by an *inclusio*: חכמה in the first bicolon and

יִחְכַּמְךָ in the last. I have made my translation from the Hebrew where possible. Italics have been used to indicate passages for which the Hebrew is not extant.

- 18 *My son, from your youth embrace discipline  
and as you grow old you will attain Wisdom.*
- 19 As ploughing and reaping, draw near to her  
and await the abundance of her crops  
because in her cultivation you will work a little,  
and tomorrow you will eat her fruit.
- 20 A steep path is she to the fool  
the one who lacks understanding will not persevere in her.
- 21 She will be like a burdensome stone upon him  
and he will not hesitate in casting her aside.
- 22 For Discipline, as her name, so is she  
and she is not obvious to many.
- 23 *Listen, my son, accept my advice  
and do not reject my counsel.*
- 24 *Put your feet into her fetters  
and your neck into her noose.*
- 25 Stoop your shoulder and carry her  
and do not be vexed at her bonds.
- 26 *With all your soul draw near to her  
and with all your strength keep her ways*
- 27 Search out and seek, look for and find  
and when you grasp her, do not let her go.
- 28 For in the end you will find her resting place  
and she will be transformed into delight for you
- 29 Her net will become your strong foundation  
and her rope, garments of fine gold.
- 30 Her yoke will be an ornament of gold  
And her bonds a purple cord.
- 31 As garments of glory you will wear her  
and put her on as a crown of splendour
- 32 If you wish, my son, you will become wise  
and if you set your heart you will become prudent
- 33 If you are willing to listen, *you will gain*  
and incline your ear, you will be instructed
- 34 *Stand in the assembly of the elders*



- and whoever is wise, attach yourself to him*
- 35 Be eagerly inclined to hear every meditation  
and let no wise proverb escape you
- 36 If you see someone with understanding, seek him diligently  
let your feet wear away the threshold.
- 37 Attend to the fear of the Most High  
and on his commandments meditate continuously  
Then he will instruct your heart  
and he will give you the wisdom you desire.

#### 4.4.2 Notes.

18 Only the last half of 18b is extant in the Hebrew.

19 Here I follow the Hebrew as preserved in Ms A rather than the Greek which reads ‘as ploughing and sowing (σπείρω). The Syriac also points to קצר rather than זרע as the underlying Hebrew.

20 The Greek τραχεῖά ‘rough, rugged’ suggests the image of a path which is difficult to travel. A similar picture is painted by the Hebrew word עקובה, which may be translated as ‘deceitful’, but also refers to a crooked or steep place.

21 Greek reads λίθος δοκιμασίας ἰσχυρὸς – a heavy testing stone.

22 Greek has σοφία while Hebrew Ms A has the synonym מוסר. Skehan and Di Lella point out that the word מוסר can also be taken as the *hoph'al* masculine singular participle of the verb סור, meaning ‘to turn aside, depart, withdraw’. By a play on her name, then, it is appropriately

said of מוסר that 'she is not obvious to many'. This makes it more likely that מוסר and not חכמה appeared in the original.

MS A places 27:5-6 between 6:22 and 6:26.

25 This is v 26 in the Hebrew A manuscript according to Beentjes [1997:28]. Skehan [1987:192] suggests that the בתחבולתיה ('by her wise counsel') of Ms A is a confusion from בחבלותיה

26 This is v 25 in Di Lella's translation

27 The Greek has καὶ γνωσθήσεται σοι for the ומצא of the Hebrew

29 Here I read the Hebrew רשחה in preference to the Greek πένδα

33 Hebrew omits anything after לשמע. I have completed 33a by recourse to the Greek ἐκδέξῃ

35 שיחה is often used of *pious* meditation, but is not necessarily so. The Greek adds θείαν to force a 'religious' reading.

37 Greek has προστάγμασιν κυρίου for the Hebrew ביראת עליון. The Syriac agrees with the Hebrew.

### ***4.4.3 Commentary***

Ben Sira exhorts the student to pursue wisdom diligently in a manner reminiscent of the father-to-son instructions found in Proverbs 1-9. He makes use of a variety of metaphors to describe the quest, its initial difficulty and its abundant rewards. Following this figurative description, Ben Sira gives practical instructions for gaining wisdom. This involves listening to and learning from the wise and reflecting on the Lord's commandments. He concludes with a statement about the Lord's involvement in the process. The greatest difference between Prov 1-9 and Sir 6 is the emphasis Sirach places on the initial difficulty of the task, and the recognition that to foolish and wise student alike, the first steps in the quest are burdensome. The point that Ben Sira makes is that the wise student will realise that this difficulty is temporary. He can see through the initial difficulty to the greatness of the reward, something the fool is unable to do.

The images in this passage range widely – fields and stones, fetters, nets, yokes and bonds, garments of glory and a crown. The agricultural metaphor of verse 19 is clear. Wisdom is a field which the student is to cultivate in anticipation of an abundant crop. The picture of the fool unwilling to persevere on a difficult path and eager to throw off a heavy load is also unambiguous. Caldich-Benages [1997:144] points to the Greek sport, common among young men, of lifting heavy stones in order to prove their virility as the background to this image. The general message of verses 24 and 25 is also evident, though the precise picture of wisdom used here is open to various readings. Webster [1998:70] notes

that this image is drawn from the realm of hunting if translated ‘put your feet into her net and your neck into her noose’ with Skehan and Di Lella [1987:190], or from the realm of slavery if translated “Put your feet into her fetters and your neck into her collar” with RSV and NRSV. In either case, the imagery evokes a sense of helpless entrapment and powerlessness. In verse 25 the imagery is of a yoke with its leather straps. These two images – of hunting and the yoking of animals – have a degree of coherence, since both involve restraining an animal. The student is urged to submit willingly to domination by wisdom, to give up his freedom and enter into her service. Service of wisdom appears initially to be restrictive and burdensome, but that is not to deter the student from committing himself to her. In verses 26-28 the imagery shifts to that of courtship. Argall [1995:62] demonstrates how all the verbs in v 27 are intelligible in a courting context. “Search” (דרש) and ‘seek and find’ (בקש ומצא) appear in the concluding acrostic which presents Ben Sira’s relationship with Wisdom in terms of a Love Story. The final verb pair, “take hold of and do not let go” (חזק *hif.* and רפה) is used in the context of a Love Story in Cant 3:4. The resting place of Wisdom (v 28) then becomes her house.<sup>135</sup> Argall [1995:62] discerns erotic overtones in the word ‘delight’ (תענוג v 28, cf. Cant 7:7-10 and Qoh 2:8). Verse 29 takes up the hunting imagery of verse 24 and verse 30 returns to the imagery of the yoke that was used in verse 25 [Skehan and Di Lella 1987:192]. The co-ordinating idea here is that of

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<sup>135</sup> Di Lella [Skehan and Di Lella [1987:194] reads vv 26-28 as a continuation of the imagery of hunting, with Wisdom having become the hunted instead of the hunter. He explains verse 28 thus: “What one receives after taking hold of Wisdom is compared to the satisfaction one experiences at the end of a successful day’s hunt”. I prefer Argall’s reading. It makes better sense of verse 28.

transformation from something unpleasant or restrictive to something beautiful and valued. In verse 31 one would expect a recurrence of the courtship imagery. Argall [1995:62] demonstrates that this may well be the case. He suggests that “garments of glory” is an allusion to the wedding garment (cf. Is 61:10) and the ‘crown of splendour’ is the wedding crown (cf. Cant 3:11).

Despite the diversity of images used, two factors contribute toward an overall coherence in this poem. In the first place, the multitude of metaphors combine to give a single unambiguous message. The gaining of wisdom may appear at first to be an onerous task, and it does take commitment, but the discerning student will put in the necessary work and make the required sacrifices, because the rewards are abundant and far outweigh the initial difficulties. It is only the fool unaware of the value of wisdom who will balk at the task. The cluster of metaphors in this chapter are held together by the common thread of difficult beginnings having abundantly worthwhile outcomes for those who persevere. The metaphors are placed in the context of working toward a worthy goal. The coherence of the poem’s imagery is further enhanced by the trope of personification underlying the other metaphors. The student is told to pursue a relationship with Dame Wisdom, and the metaphor cluster explores the dynamics of that pursuit. In other words, wisdom is not seen first as someone / something to be embraced, and then as a field, and then as a stone, and so on. Instead, it is pictured throughout the poem as a feminine figure with whom the student seeks a close rapport, and the rapprochement (or lack thereof in the case of the fool) is the subject of the agricultural and other metaphors.

Let me take up each of these images in more detail. In the first place, the student is exhorted to embrace, welcome or entertain (ἐπίδεξαι) Wisdom. The seek-and-find motif is thus introduced at the beginning. There would be no compelling reason, if this poem appeared in isolation, to discern a personification of wisdom in these opening words. But the arresting figure of Woman Wisdom has already made her appearance in Sirach, and since the vocabulary used here is consonant with a feminine personification, she readily springs to mind. The courtship imagery of vv 26-28 continues this feminine personification. The student is to devote himself to wooing and winning Woman Wisdom. The phrase “draw near to her” (v 26) has been used earlier in v 19 where an agricultural metaphor is employed.<sup>136</sup> This provides a lexical link between the diverse metaphors. In verse 26 the parallel expressions “with all your soul” and “with all your strength” recall Deut 6:5 [Skehan and Di Lella 1987:194]. Ben Sira has broadened scope of love for God to include Wisdom. Verse 28 may hint at the successful consummation of the courtship. A shift occurs in verse 31, where Wisdom is the wedding apparel rather than the bride!

The figure of Woman Wisdom lurking behind the other metaphors colours our reading of them. The image of ploughing and reaping, and of awaiting an abundant harvest (v 19) takes on decidedly erotic overtones when the object of this agricultural activity is taken as Woman Wisdom, as Webster [1998:70] notes. She points out that fields, gardens, earth and soil are often associated with female fertility, and that this connection between sexuality and agriculture is not surprising given the association

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<sup>136</sup> Greek πρόσελθε αὐτῇ in both verses. The Hebrew of verse 26 is not extant, but it is likely that it would also read קרב אליה as in verse 19.

between [male] seeds being planted in fertile [female] ground, the result being [progeny] fruit. According to her reading of the metaphor, Sophia as a ploughed field “is the object of intrusive and disruptive penetration; ‘a little’ toil will open her to ‘sow’ the seeds in expectation of an abundant outcome”. In a footnote she criticises Di Lella (p 193) for not commenting on the “*obvious* erotic language” [italics mine]. She acknowledges that the larger context of this metaphor directs the meaning towards the rewards of hard work, but claims nonetheless that the eroticism used to describe Sophia overrides the simple agricultural image of a farmer plowing a field. Caldusch-Benages [1997:144] describes the relationship between farmer and his field as bipolar. It is characterised on the one hand by love, nearness, gratitude and hope; on the other hand it requires work, fatigue, sweat, continuous effort and patience. The second part of the verse (19cd) emphasises the first aspect; the work is not excessive and the harvest is around the corner. Although the idea of pursuit recedes in this metaphor, it is not absent from these verses. The student is to ‘draw near’ to Wisdom, and to ‘await’ her crops. קרב with אל can mean to advance, draw near, but also ‘to advance in order to attack’. It is significant that the preposition used here is not ל or ב which would have the first meaning unambiguously. Similarly, קוה in the pi<sup>e</sup>l can be translated ‘await’, but with the preposition ל, as here, it could also be rendered ‘lie in wait-for’. Thus even within the agricultural metaphor, there are intimations of the hunting imagery which comes to the fore in the second stanza. In 6:18-19 Wisdom is the object of pursuit, with the student as active agent.

The point of verses 20-21 is given in verse 22. The fool, and there are many who fall into this category, does not recognise the value of wisdom, and so is unwilling to walk the difficult road to attaining her. Calduch-Benages [1997:144] notes that in the imagery of these verses all the wealth of vitality and fecundity that was elicited by the agricultural metaphor has given way to the sterility and inertia of stones. The reason the fool rejects wisdom is that he is unaware of her true nature and thus is unwilling to exert himself. In contrast to the fool's reaction to wisdom's demands, the student is urged to submit willingly to any hardships that the pursuit of wisdom may bring (vs 23-25). In these verses, the pursuer and the pursued exchange places - the student is trapped by wisdom, and must willingly submit to her mastery. In verse 25, wisdom has become a yoke. The wise student will willingly carry her, unlike the fool who threw her off. The hunting and yoking metaphors evoke the self-discipline and constraint called for by wisdom [Skehan and Di Lella 1987:194].

Verses 28-31 describe how wisdom makes her true nature known to the one who has persevered with her. That which seemed to entrap and restrict becomes that which supports the student (net to strong foundation, v 29). McKinlay [1996:149] sees in these images links to the Torah and to the Israelite cult. She claims that the purple cord of vs 30 recalls the instruction of Num 15:38-39 to make tassels on the corners of one's garments with a purple cord<sup>137</sup> on each tassel, and that the garments of fine gold allude to the glorious sacred garments described in Ex 28 which were fashioned for the high priest. When this poem is read in

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<sup>137</sup> The same phrase - פתיל תכלת - is used in Num 15:38 and Sir 6:30.



isolation, these links may seem tenuous, but when these verses are considered together with the other poems about Wisdom where links between wisdom, Torah and the priesthood are made more explicit, such a reading becomes more likely. The function of the tassels was to remind the Israelites of all the commands of the Lord so that they would keep them and not prostitute themselves by going astray after the lusts of their hearts and eyes.<sup>138</sup> Wisdom's constraints therefore remind the student of the obligations of the law, and keep him faithful to it by protecting against temptation. Verse 30 is thus a subtle precursor to verse 37. Skehan and Di Lella [1987:195] interpret the message of these verses thus: "The wise, because of their fidelity to the Law, will enjoy the splendour of royalty and the glory of the high priesthood."

The final stanza (vv 32-37) resorts to more literal expression, and has as its theme the exhortation to seek Wisdom by various means. Ben Sira has spoken poetically of embracing discipline, cultivating wisdom and drawing close to her. How practically is this to be done? The pursuit of wisdom is an activity chosen, committed to, and diligently worked at. There is an attitudinal prerequisite - the student must *want* wisdom, he must set his heart on attaining it (vv 32-33). As the imagery has made clear, it is desire that will motivate the student to persevere. Once this basic mindset has been adopted, the student must accept the counsel of the sage who urges him to pursue wisdom (v 23). Thus he accepts the authority and acts in obedience to the one who upholds the tradition. The application demanded of the student includes listening to wise people

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<sup>138</sup> Webster [1998:71] and Skehan and Di Lella [1987:194] also pick up this allusion. In their interpretation of it the latter give it a distinctly anti-hellenistic slant: Wisdom's 'bonds' are the 'purple cord' that reminds the faithful Jew to remain steadfast to the Law of Moses and not to stray after the allurements of Hellenistic learning and culture.

and wise discourse. Clearly wisdom is gained through learning from those who are recognised as wise. Perseverance is also required - once wisdom has been obtained, one must hold on to it if one is to reap the reward (vs 27f). Finally, the student is to reflect on the law of the Most High. This last instruction is not tacked onto the passage as an afterthought, but forms a climax. In the first place, the allusion to Numbers 15:38 in the second stanza has paved the way for this association of wisdom with meditation on the Lord's commandments. Secondly, the chiasmic pattern found in both 37a and b underscores the importance of the point made.

37a התבוננת : יראת עליון :: מצותיו : הנה

37b יבין : לבך :: אשר אויתה : יחכמך

A more literal translation of 37b is: "And he will instruct your heart; and what you desire, he will make you wise". The parallelism between the inner paired items is not as close as in 37a, although as Skehan and Di Lella [1987:195] note, אשר אויתה is an activity of the heart, and therefore does match לבך in the first colon.

Ben Sira points first to the teacher (himself), and then to the company of the elders and the discourse of any prudent person, and finally to the law of God as the place where wisdom can be learned. From that we may conclude that the content of wisdom at the very least includes his own counsel, the teaching of the wise, and the law of God. His own teaching will simply be a particular manifestation of the teaching of the wise in general, but how are the teaching of the wise and the commandments of God related? The poem does not answer this question, but we are told elsewhere in Sirach (39:1-3) that reflection on the Law was to form a

significant part of scholarly activity. This reflection was to mould the sage's thinking and provide the substance of their conversations (9:15).

The learning process is not portrayed as empirical. The student is not exhorted to experiment and come to knowledge through a process of trial and error. Nor is he told to reflect upon his experiences and glean wisdom from that. Instead, he is directed in his quest for wisdom to the traditions as taught by the sages and contained in the law. The activity required of him is listening and reflection.

The metaphor cluster does not speak about the content of wisdom - that is expounded in the literal statements. The subject of the metaphors is the search for wisdom and the various phases in the relationship between student and wisdom. It is noteworthy that attention is focused throughout on activity *vis-à-vis* Wisdom, first human and then divine. Wisdom is represented as a desirable goal and as the object of human search. In verses 18-19 wisdom is the object and "my son" the active subject. Even in relationship to the fool (vv18-19), wisdom does not act but is reacted against. So too in the verses which describe the obligations placed upon the student by Wisdom (23-25), it is not wisdom who is seen to be active, but the student who is actively to subject himself to her rigours. Wisdom is again the object of the student's actions in verses 26-27, and she then becomes the reward given to the successful searcher (vv 28-31). In verse 36 the son is the subject of the verb, and the law and the commandments are the objects. In the final verse, the Lord becomes the acting subject, with wisdom the object and student the indirect object.

This importance of the affective, attitudinal dimension of wisdom is highlighted here. It is clear that wisdom is not just a body of knowledge. It is also a disposition which the student is to adopt - a passion for learning and discovery. This passion is to be channelled into hard work and must be maintained through determination and willpower. The idea of a passionate quest for wisdom is well served by the feminine personification underlying the sequence of metaphors. Webster [1998:71] concludes that the effect of engendering Wisdom with feminine pronouns, particularly within an image of agricultural fertility, is to stimulate carnal passion which Ben Sira restricts to the context of Law and discipline. By personifying wisdom, Ben Sira provides a healthy alternative for desire and stimulates the appetite to 'seek' the Law. The only qualification I add to her assessment is to question the assumption that the object of research to which Ben Sira directs his reader can be summed up without remainder by "the Law".

There is nothing here to suggest that wisdom mediates a relationship with God. In fact it is the converse – the Lord grants a relationship with wisdom. Wisdom is sought and wisdom is gained by human beings. The human effort is a prerequisite, but it is not the ultimate cause of the success – wisdom is found only because the Lord gives it. God informs the mind through the activity of meditating on the commandments, and this ability to reflect on God's law with an informed mind is equated with the gaining of wisdom.

## 4.5 SIRACH 14:20-15:10

### 4.5.1 Translation

The entire poem is extant in the Hebrew (Ms A), with 15:1-10 also preserved in Ms B.

- 14:20 Blessed is the man who meditates on wisdom  
and who gives heed to understanding.
- 21 Who directs his heart in her ways  
and ponders her paths,  
22 pursuing her while searching  
and who lurks by all her entrances.
- 23 Who peeps through her window  
and listens at her doors.
- 24 Who encamps around her house  
and fixes his tent-ropes in her wall.
- 25 Who pitches his tent next to her  
and dwells in an excellent dwelling.
- 26 He makes his nest in her branches  
and in her branches he lodges.
- 27 Seeking shelter in her shadow from heat  
and in her refuge he dwells.
- 15:1 Whoever fears Yahweh does this  
and the one who handles the law will obtain her.
- 2 And she will draw near to him like a mother  
and like a youthful bride she will receive him.
- 3 She will feed him bread of insight  
and water of understanding she will give him to drink.
- 4 He will lean on her and not totter  
and in her he will trust and not be ashamed.
- 5 She will exalt him above his companions  
and in the midst of the assembly she will open his mouth.
- 6 Joy and gladness he will find,  
she will cause him to inherit an everlasting name.
- 7 Worthless men will not obtain her  
and arrogant people will not see her.

- 8 She is far from scoffers  
and liars do not remember her.
- 9 Praise is not becoming in the mouth of the wicked,  
because she is not allotted to him by God.
- 10 By the mouth of the wise praise will be said  
and he who governs her will teach her.

#### 4.5.2 Notes

**14:21b** The Syriac reads  $\text{מַלְּבָּלֶיהָ}$  “in her paths”, while the Greek has ἀποκρύφους. On the strength of the Syriac, Marböck [1971:105], Rickenbacher [1973:75], Sandelin [1986:28] and Skehan [Skehan and Di Lella [1987:263] amend the Hebrew from  $\text{וּבַתְּבוֹנִתֶיהָ}$  to  $\text{וּבַתְּבוֹתֶיהָ}$  “and on her paths”. This would make the parallelism in the verse clearer, as is the case in verse 20.

**14:22a**  $\text{בַּחֶקֶר}$  I have read this as a preposition with the infinitive. If taken as a noun,  $\text{חֶקֶר}$  is the object of searching. Sandelin [1986:28] translates it substantively, as “a searching mind”. The Greek reads  $\omega\varsigma \text{ ἰχνηυτῆς}$ .

**14:24b** Where Hebrew has  $\text{יִתְרָיו}$  “his tent-ropes”, Greek has the singular  $\text{πάσσαλον}$  “peg” and the Syriac the plural  $\text{ܡܘܠܘܬܐ}$  which presupposes the Hebrew  $\text{יִתְרוֹתָיו}$  (perhaps written as  $\text{יִתְרָיו}$ ?).

**15:6** Heb Ms A has  $\text{יִמְצֵא}$  and Ms B has  $\text{תִּמְצֵא}$ .

**15:10a** Reading **בפי חכם** with Ms B instead of the **בפה חכם** found in Ms A, since this term matches **בפי רשע** in verse 9.

### *4.5.3 Commentary*

This poem divides neatly into two stanzas. The first stanza (14:20-27) is introduced by a macarism reminiscent of Ps 1. It details the student's pursuit of wisdom using hunting and courting imagery. In the second stanza (15:1-10) Wisdom moves toward the student as a mother and young bride, offering him sustenance and support. Boccaccini [1995:87] describes the passage as literally the result of a simultaneous movement of human beings toward God (14:20-27) and of God toward human beings (15:2-8). The respective points of departure are in the person who seeks wisdom and in God, who offers wisdom to the righteous as mother and bride. He notes that this symmetrical movement converges in the affirmation of 15:1, the central verse in both its content and its location in the text. In this verse Ben Sira expresses the decisive moment of synthesis of fear of God, human intelligence, practice of the law and the gift of wisdom. I agree broadly with Boccaccini's assessment of the literary structure of the poem, except that God is not given the explicit role that he suggests. There is a simultaneous movement of the student and Wisdom toward each other, and the place of meeting is stated prosaically in 15:1, but the student is not said to be in search of God, and God is not identified as the one who gives Wisdom (except perhaps indirectly in v 9). The concluding verses of the poem (15:9-10) contrast those who have gained wisdom and those who have not in terms of their ability and fitness to praise God and to teach it (wisdom?) to others.

The poem opens with a reference to *meditating* (הגה) on Wisdom, a verb that was used to close Sirach 6:18-37, although the object of meditation there is the commandments of the Most High. Argall [1995:63] views this as a deliberate linkage that ties the beginning of one poem to the ending of another, inviting the reader to recall the discourse in Sir 6:18-37. There is also correspondance between these two poems in the imagery employed. In both the student is to pursue wisdom, and his pursuit will be rewarded with the blessings that come with the attainment of wisdom.

The opening verse is a literal statement proclaiming the happiness of those who devote themselves to the diligent and prolonged study of wisdom. The mention of wisdom's ways and paths in v 21 leads into the motif of following Wisdom to the place where she lives [Argall 1995:65]. Camp [1997:181] writes that Sir 14:20-27 begins with animal imagery for Wisdom, shifts to Wisdom as house (though not without sexual innuendo)<sup>139</sup> then concludes with the metaphor of the tree. I do not concur with her assessment of the imagery used here. In vv 22-27 wisdom is personified as a woman whom the student is intent to win. Although the search for wisdom is described in terms reminiscent of hunting (v 22a), the object of this 'hunt' is not an animal, but a woman. The references to her entrances, windows and doors refer to Wisdom's abode, and not to Wisdom herself. Wisdom is the woman who inhabits the house. Only in v 26 does the metaphor shift from Wisdom as Woman



to Wisdom as tree. There is a progression from following Wisdom's paths to observing her dwelling to camping next to her and finally to making home within her branches. The intrusive persistence with which the seeker pursues Wisdom reflects Ben Sira's instruction in 6:36 to seek out a wise person and wear away his threshold with one's feet. It is interesting that the behaviour of the seeker after Wisdom in these verses is the same as that of the stupid, ill-bred man in Sir 21:23-24 who peeps inside someone's home and eavesdrops at the door! The implication is that the acquisition of Wisdom is so important that even decorum may be thrown aside in the interests of attaining her. So passionately does the seeker desire Wisdom that he willingly makes a nuisance of himself. The imagery of these verses was probably suggested by Prov 8:34 where Woman Wisdom pronounces a blessing on the one who listens to her, watching at her doors and waiting at her doorway. The picture of a lover gazing through the window of the beloved's house is found in Cant 2:9, confirming that the imagery is congruent with a love story setting. The intensity and singlemindedness of the quest for wisdom is highlighted. In these verses the gender factor is exploited to the full in that Wisdom is portrayed as the object of strong male desire [McKinlay 1996:146]. The metaphor of personified Wisdom as tree highlights her sheltering, nurturing and supportive qualities. These associations are picked up again in the metaphors of the second stanza, where Wisdom is woman and wife. In line with the shift in the Wisdom metaphor from woman to tree, the vehicle whereby the student is described changes from hunter /

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<sup>139</sup> She does not explain or substantiate this comment. Perhaps she considers the tent peg to be a phallic symbol. Niditch [1989:43-57] has explored the phallic connotations of the tent peg in the story of Jael and Sisera.

suitor to a bird building its nest and finding shelter in the tree.<sup>140</sup> The metaphor of Wisdom as a tree is one which Ben Sira inherited from the tradition (Prov 3:18). He employs it several times (cf. Sir 1:16-20, 24:13-17)

The picture of Wisdom's house is part of the stock of images associated with Woman Wisdom in the tradition (e.g. Prov 8:34, 9:1). The house of the wise person is a teaching locale in Sirach (6:35). Sandelin [1986:33] has associated the house of Wisdom with the Temple in Jerusalem. He offers the following supporting arguments. Firstly, there is a fairly high proportion of words connecting Sir 14:24f with Num 1:50-2:2.<sup>141</sup> (This second text contains the instruction to the Levites to be in charge of the Tabernacle and the arrangements for the Israelites to set up camp around the Tabernacle). Secondly, the word שֹׁכֵן, found in Sir 14:25,27 is used also for the dwelling of the Lord in Deut 12:5.<sup>142</sup> Thirdly, in the Hebrew Bible the verb רָצַד (14:22) only occurs in Ps 68:17 in a passage which refers to the mountain of God with its temple. The words חֵלוֹן קִיר and פֶּתַח also occur in descriptions of the Temple of the Lord in 1 Kings 6:7 and Eze 40:41. Having made this connection, Sandelin [1986:34] sees a

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<sup>140</sup> Webster [1998:71] gives a highly erotic interpretation to the imagery of 14:22-27. She reads vv 26-27 as a continuation of the metaphor of courtship and writes of vv 26-27: "He penetrates her locative, visual, auditory space to climax in the midst of her". I confess that I cannot see such blatant eroticism in this passage.

<sup>141</sup> For example, the words חֲנָה and סְבִיב occur together in some instances eg Ps 34:8 and Jer 50:29. But only in Num 1:50 - 2:2 do we find a combination of these with אֹהֶל and a derivative of שֹׁכֵן. (Num 1:53 and 2:2) – compare Sir 14:24f.

<sup>142</sup> Here he follows Rickenbacher [1973:76].

link between Wisdom imagined as a figure present in her house (Temple) and the Lord as present in his dwelling and concludes that Woman Wisdom represents the Lord in the Temple just as the Name of the Lord does in a number of texts (e.g. 2 Sam 7:13, 1 Kings 8:16-20, 29; Ps 74:7). He also sees a parallel between Wisdom and the targumic *Memra*, “God’s personal and active encounter with his people”, and the Rabbinic concept of the *Shekhinah*, the Divine Presence. Although it would support my own reading of Sir 24, I cannot agree with Sandelin’s reading of this passage. Sandelin’s method is to look for words or combinations of words used in Sirach that occur only once or very seldom in the Hebrew Bible, and to assume that Sirach’s use of those words or combinations constitutes an allusion to the biblical passages in which they occur. I consider such ‘connections’ to be too flimsy (cf. Cook 1997:249-258). To present a convincing case that Ben Sira intended a text to be read against the background of a scriptural text, one would need to show much closer affinities between the two texts, such as obvious structural similarities and common imagery. As regards his last point, surely these are words one expects to find in descriptions of any building!

The association of wisdom with the Law and with the fear of the Lord in 15:1 does not impact upon the way Wisdom is described in the following verses. When Ben Sira reverses the direction of movement in the second stanza so that Wisdom comes to meet the student, he uses the metaphors of wisdom as mother and wisdom as youthful bride. The combination (which on one level seems incompatible) of mother and lover was also used in Sir 4:11-14. There is an overlap between these two images in that both are feminine and define the woman in terms of her loving

relationship with a man (son or husband). There are also certain qualities which both embody. Ben Sira's focus is on the loyalty, nurture and support associated with these vehicles (v 3-4). The progression from the first stanza is evident. There the student wooed Wisdom until he made his home with her. Here he is in an established relationship with her and part of her household (or she part of his?!). In the Psalms it is God in whom the faithful trust and are not ashamed (Ps 22:6; 25:2), an idea reiterated in Sir 2:10; here it is Wisdom (15:4). McKinlay [1996] points out that in these verses Woman Wisdom is defined in reference to the man. All her acts of kindness are directed towards the man and her relationship with him is the framework for her gifts. The point she makes is that the feminine in Sirach is always defined in terms of the male. The angle that I find instructive is that Ben Sira draws on the paradigm of personal relationship when he describes the quest for and benefits of wisdom.

The close similarity between Sir 14:20ff and Ps 1 has been noted [Marböck 1971:107f; Sandelin 1986:30; Skehan and Di Lella 1987:263; Collins 1997:49]. Both begin with a macarism and then compare the righteous and the wicked, devoting the bulk of the discourse to the first category and contrasting the two types sharply at the end. Rickenbacher [1973:79-82] recognises a similar structure in Jer 17:5-8, although here the order of the righteous and the wicked are reversed. Sandelin [1986:30] asserts that Ben Sira is using a traditional literary device when he describes the relation between Wisdom and the wise and wicked. Wisdom occupies the same place in Sir 14-15 as the Lord does on Ps 1 and Jer 17:5-7. While Ben Sira may indeed be drawing on a traditional literary device, there are no indications in the text that he wants his

readers to read this poem against the background of Psalm 1. The imagery of the tree shared by all three passages is too common to imply a connection between them. In any case, in Ps 1 and Jer 17 it is the righteous who are like a tree, whereas in Sir 14 Wisdom becomes a tree for the one who finds wisdom. Therefore one cannot infer that Ben Sira has given to Wisdom the place assigned to God in his sources. In Ps 1 the righteous person meditates (הגה) on the law of the Lord (Ps 1:2) while in Sir 14:20 the object of meditation is wisdom. But the suggestion that for Ben Sira meditation on Wisdom involves meditation on the Law does not require that we read Ps 1 and Sir 14:20ff together. We noted above that the verb הגה links the end of one wisdom discourse (6:37) and the beginning of the next (14:20), and in Sir 6:37 the object of meditation is the commandments of the Most High. The subtle implication is that meditation on the commandments is meditation on wisdom. This association is borne out by Sir 15:1.

The statement in Sir 15:1 makes clear that the fear of the Lord and the study of the Law constitute (at least in part) the successful quest for Wisdom. Structurally, the student's pursuit of Wisdom (14:20f) and Wisdom's approach to the seeker (15:2f) meet at this point in the discourse. Di Lella [Skehan and Di Lella 1987:264] writes that this statement reiterates Sirach's teaching that wisdom is available to those who fear the Lord by keeping the Law. But 15:1b does not actually state that it is those who *keep* the Law who overtake Wisdom. It is those who 'grasp / handle' (תפש) the Law.<sup>143</sup> This probably refers to study of the law to the level of great proficiency in its application. The importance of

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<sup>143</sup> The only other place where the expression תופש תורה is found is Jer 2:8.

the correct ethical and religious disposition in the quest for Wisdom is spelled out in 15:7-9 where those who cannot take hold of her are described. These are all people who are not characterised by fear of the Lord and reverence for the Law.

The wisdom that is the tenor of the metaphor in these verses is clearly the same as the wisdom of Sir 4:11-19 and Sir 6:18-37. Each of these passages deals with an *education* in wisdom. This is made explicit in Sir 6:32-37 which decodes the story of the pursuit of woman wisdom as the commitment to learning wisdom by listening to sages and by reflecting on the Law. In 14:20 wisdom is that which can be studied and meditated upon. Sir 15:1 makes the now-familiar connection between fear of the Lord, the Law and Wisdom. The knowledge that is the content of wisdom cannot be divorced from the fear of the Lord which is the attitudinal dimension of wisdom. Here Wisdom is not associated with *obedience* to the Law, but with *proficiency* in the Law. Di Lella [1993:144-5] discerns in this poem a masterful synthesis of theoretical and practical wisdom. The first stanza describes the singleminded zeal with which the student is to pursue theoretical wisdom. The second stanza affirms that only the practical wisdom which is fear of the Lord can enable one to obtain theoretical wisdom. The foolish can never come to practical wisdom for the simple reason that they are sinners.

## 4.6 SIRACH 24:1-34

### 4.6.1 Translation

This poem is not extant in the Hebrew so I translate from the Greek [Ziegler 1980:236-241]. I follow the strophic divisions used by Skehan [Skehan and Di Lella 1987:327-329].

- 1 Wisdom declares her own praises,  
in the midst of her people she proclaims her worth;
- 2 in the assembly of the Most High she opens her mouth  
and in the presence of his hosts she proclaims her worth.
  
- 3 I came forth from the mouth of the Most High  
and like a mist I covered the earth.
- 4 I pitched my tent in the heights  
and my throne in a pillar of cloud.
- 5 The vault of heaven I encircled alone  
and in the depth of the abyss I walked.
- 6 In the waves of the sea and in every land  
and in every people and nation I ruled.
- 7 With all of them I sought a resting place  
In whose inheritance should I lodge?
- 8 Then the creator of all commanded me  
the one who created me fixed a place for my tent.  
He said: "In Jacob pitch your tent  
and in Israel take your inheritance.
- 9 Before the ages, from the beginning, he created me  
and through the ages-I will certainly not cease to be.
- 10 In the holy tent I ministered before him  
and thus in Zion I was established.
- 11 In a city beloved as me he gave me rest;  
in Jerusalem is my authority.
- 12 I took root in a glorified people  
In the Lord's portion is my inheritance.
- 13 Like a cedar on Lebanon I have grown tall  
like a cypress on Mount Hermon;



- 14 Like a palm tree in Engeddi I have grown tall  
and like the rose bushes of Jericho  
like a fine olive tree in the foothills  
like a plane tree I have grown tall.
- 15 Like cinnamon and fragrant acacia  
and like choice myrrh I give forth perfume  
like galbanum and onycha and stacte  
and like the smoke of incense in the Tent.
- 16 I spread out my branches like a terebrinth  
and my branches are glorious and graceful branches
- 17 Like a vine I sprout pleasure  
and my blossoms bear fruit of glory and wealth
- 19 Approach me, you who desire me,  
and from my fruits take your fill
- 20 for the memory of me is sweeter than honey  
and inheriting me is sweeter than the honeycomb.
- 21 The one who eats of me will hunger for more  
and the one who drinks of me will thirst for more.
- 22 The one who obeys me will not be ashamed  
And the ones who work with me will never sin.
- 23 All this is the book of the covenant of God Most High  
the Law that Moses commanded us  
an inheritance for the congregations of Jacob.
- 25 It brims, like the Pishon, with wisdom  
And like the Tigris in the days of the new crops,
- 26 It overflows, like the Euphrates, with understanding  
and like the Jordan at harvest time,
- 27 It floods, like the Nile, with instruction  
like the Gihon at vintage time
- 28 The first human did not know her completely  
nor has the last succeeded in fathoming her
- 29 for deeper than the sea are her thoughts  
and her counsel, than the great abyss.
- 30 And I, like a rivulet from a river  
and like a watercourse running into a garden,
- 31 I said, "I will water my plants,  
And I will irrigate my flower bed".  
But see! This rivulet of mine became a river  
And my river became a sea.
- 32 Again I will make instruction shine forth like the dawn  
and shine them out far and wide



- 33 Again I will pour out teaching like prophecy  
and give it as a legacy to all future generations.
- 34 Know that not for myself alone have I toiled,  
but for all those who seek her.

#### 4.6.2 Notes

**24:2** The Jerusalem Bible translates “in the presence of the Mighty One”. The singular  $\delta\upsilon\upsilon\acute{\alpha}\mu\epsilon\omega\varsigma$  is used frequently in the LXX to render **צבאות**, hence the translation “in the presence of his hosts”.

**24:14d** Syriac adds “beside the water”. This reading is followed by Skehan [Skehan and Di Lella 1987:329]. This addition would bring the stich in line with the other stichs in vv 13-14 that each mention a location for the tree.

**24:27a** The Greek has  $\delta\acute{\omicron}\ \acute{\epsilon}\kappa\pi\alpha\acute{\iota}\tau\omega\upsilon\ \acute{\omega}\varsigma\ \phi\acute{\omega}\varsigma$  “shine like a light”. But this imports imagery from later in the text (v 32) and interrupts the river imagery. I have therefore followed the Syriac which mentions the Nile at this point. The Greek probably reflects a confusion between the Hebrew words **אור** (light) and **יֵאֹר** (Nile).

**23:34** Skehan [Skehan and Di Lella 1987:330] believes that this verse does not belong here, but that it has been dislocated from its proper place as 33:18. It is not present at the end of Sir 24 in the Syriac.

### 4.6.3 Commentary

Sir 24 consists of three distinct units. The first section (vv 1-22) is a first person speech by personified Wisdom. The two opening verses act as an announcement and an introduction to Wisdom in the third person before her own words commence in v 3. In vv 3-7 Wisdom speaks of her origins with God and her wanderings through the cosmos. This section is characterised by verbs of movement of which Wisdom is the subject. The question of a dwelling place for Wisdom in v 7b marks the transition to the next subsection (vv 8-12) in which Wisdom receives a command from her creator to settle in Israel. Here she ministers before the Lord in the Tabernacle. Wisdom has completed her cosmic wanderings and found a home in Israel. The verbs in these verses conjure up pictures of rest and settlement. Wisdom's speech in Sir 24:3-22 is the second of two such speeches in Sirach, the first occurring in 4:15-19.<sup>144</sup> The use of the phrase "He who obeys me" at the beginning of the first speech and the conclusion of the second provides a subtle link between them. This speech is followed by a six-line stanza in which Wisdom and Law are identified (vv 23-29). The transition is marked by the prosaic statements in v 23 which interrupt the poetic style of the preceding verses. The final stanza (vv 30-34) describes Ben Sira's own functioning as a wisdom teacher. The second and third stanzas may be viewed as Ben Sira's commentary on Wisdom's speech.

In Sir 24:1-2 the location of Wisdom's speech is described by two phrases – ἐν μέσῳ λαοῦ αὐτῆς (v 1b) and ἐν ἐκκλησίᾳ ὑψίστου (v 2a). The second phrase clearly locates her

<sup>144</sup> In the Hebrew. The Greek does not have Wisdom speaking here.

in the heavenly council, implying that she is imagined as a heavenly, angelic being [Collins 1997:50]. Who are 'her people' (v 1b)? Smend [1906:216] took this as a reference to the heavenly assembly, but most commentators accept that it is a reference to Israel among whom Wisdom settles in vv 8-12.<sup>145</sup> Since Wisdom's speech occurs after the events that she narrates in vv 3-12 (i.e. after she has made her dwelling in Jacob), I prefer the second reading. She speaks, then, on both earthly and heavenly levels simultaneously. The readers of Sirach do not merely 'overhear' Wisdom; they are directly addressed. This is clear in vv 19-22, where the ones addressed are not the angelic assembly, but human seekers after Wisdom. The idea that Wisdom is heard in heaven and on earth simultaneously is consonant with the movement of Wisdom in Sir 1:1-10 where Wisdom has her origins with God, is given to his creation (particularly his loved ones) and yet remains with the Lord forever. That Wisdom praises herself in the heavenly assembly where usually the praises of God are sung highlights her exalted position.<sup>146</sup>

*1 Enoch* 42:2 also gives Wisdom a place among the angels. This apocalyptic writing, however, draws a very different conclusion about the general accessibility of Wisdom. In this writing, Wisdom went forth to find a dwelling place among human beings, but her quest was unsuccessful, so she returned to take her seat among the angels. Sirach's

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<sup>145</sup> So Skehan and Di Lella [1987:331], Witherington [1994:95], McKinlay [1996:136] and Collins [1997:50].

<sup>146</sup> Witherington [1994:95] sees in the fact that Wisdom's praises are heard in the place where only God's praises should be heard as an indication of the very strong identification between God and Wisdom.

Wisdom, in contrast, is able to boast to the other angels about how she has been settled in Israel and offers her fruits to human beings.

While some commentators have recognised the angelic imagery used of Wisdom in 24:2,<sup>147</sup> the possibility that this imagery is continued in the following verses has not, to my knowledge, been extensively explored. Wisdom is said to come forth from the mouth of the Most High (v 3). The picture of Wisdom proceeding from the mouth of God could have been suggested to Ben Sira by Prov 2:6. The implication is that Wisdom is imaged as the breath or spirit (רוח) of God, a picture which is continued in v 3b where Wisdom is said to cover the earth like a mist.<sup>148</sup> The idea expressed here may be the similar to that of Sir 1:9, but using different imagery. The link of Wisdom to spirit may also have angelic undertones. Olyan [1993:29 n56] points out that the term רוח for angelic beings is attested to in the Hebrew Bible (1 Ki 22:21) and is common in Second Temple era sources (e.g. 4QŠirŠab *passim*).

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<sup>147</sup> Argall [1995:54]; Collins [1997:30]

<sup>148</sup> Other suggestions about the imagery of this verse have been made. Jacob [1978:254] interprets this as an equation of Wisdom with the Word. Marböck [1971:59] also finds in this imagery an allusion to the creative word of Is 45:23, 48:3 and 55:11, which originates in the mouth of God and becomes active in Israel. It could be argued that to express the genesis of Wisdom in this manner prepares the reader for her identification with the book of the covenant in 24:23. The Lord spoke this covenant from Sinai (Deut 4:11-13). The Law consists of the will of God expressed in words. Perhaps Wisdom is here defined as an expression of the mind and will of God, communicated by him to Israel? However the connection between the imagery of v 3a and v 3b is not clear with this interpretation – how does a word cover the earth like a mist? Conzelmann [1971:235-236], in accordance with his claim that there is nothing Jewish about vv 3-7, seeks the background to the image of v 3 a in Egyptian theogony and cosmogony. But I will show that the imagery of the following verses is distinctly Jewish.

A case has been made for seeing Isis imagery in vv 3-7.<sup>149</sup> It is most strongly stated by Conzelmann [1971:230-243] who sees nothing distinctly Jewish in these verses. In connection with Wisdom's celestial journey he cites Plutarch (IS.Osir 372-373) where the primal god as pure Being abides, while Isis is Movement. This fact is represented mythically here as Wisdom walks the circuit of the cosmos. Isis / Wisdom creates the world and consequently rules it.<sup>150</sup> But Sheppard [1980:27ff] has shown how Sirach draws on imagery from the Hebrew bible to construct this picture of Wisdom. Since we know that Ben Sira was well versed in the Hebrew Scriptures, it is more likely that that is where he drew his imagery from.<sup>151</sup> Sheppard claims that the language used of Wisdom vacillates between Old Testament statements originally about God on the one hand and statements originally about Israel on the other. For example, God is said to dwell on high (e.g. Ps 113:4,5; Is 33:5), and led the people through the desert by going ahead of them in a pillar of cloud. Wisdom also encamps in the heights and has her throne in a pillar of cloud (Sir 1:4a).<sup>152</sup> The picture of Wisdom traversing the cosmos appears to be a composite one built up from the only three verses in Job which

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<sup>149</sup> See Rogers [1996] for a discussion of the possibility that the Isis aretologies provide the imagery in these verses.

<sup>150</sup> Conzelmann [1971:237-238] supports the link with Isis by taking μόνη (v 5a) as a technical term. It is a key motif in Isis-theology, generally used to emphasise the sovereignty of Isis. But such a common word cannot automatically be assumed to have been used in a technical sense. If Ben Sira is concerned to show the uniqueness and universal significance of the Wisdom that resides in Israel, it is a natural lexical choice.

<sup>151</sup> A problem that plagues the attempt to locate the source of Sirach's ideas and / or imagery is the dating of the Isis aretologies, which cannot be dated with any certainty to as early as the third or early second centuries BCE.

<sup>152</sup> Though there is a distinction in that while God dwells in the heavens, Wisdom only temporarily encamps on the heights [Sheppard 1980:30].

speak of God walking or treading the various reaches of the cosmos (Job 9:8; 22:14 and 38:16). Ben Sira changes the subject of this activity from God to Wisdom [Sheppard 1980:35-37]. On the other hand, even as Israel came out from Egypt and encamped in the wilderness, so Wisdom came forth and encamped in the heights. Wisdom's quest for a resting place and an inheritance mirrors that of Israel in the wilderness wanderings and conquest of the land [Sheppard 1980:38ff].<sup>153</sup> Since Sheppard's careful study it has become not uncommon for scholars to remark on the way in which Sir 24 applies to Wisdom statements that are elsewhere in the Hebrew Scriptures applied to God or to Israel [Witherington 1994:95; McKinlay 1996:137-138; Collins 1997:51]. The reason for the oscillation between the two is not explored. I believe that this seeming alternation in Sir 24:4-11 between depicting Wisdom using divine imagery and imagery reminiscent of Israel can be explained if the vehicle of the Wisdom metaphor here is seen to be the angel of the Lord whom Sirach also seems to associate with the **כבוד**.

In Judges 2:1 it is the angel of the Lord who says to Israel that he brought them out of Egypt and led them into the land promised to their fathers. Here the angel is speaking on behalf of the Lord, but it is interesting that it is the *angel* who is credited with leading the people. In the Exodus the pillar of cloud represented the presence of the Lord with Israel (Ex

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<sup>153</sup> Sheppard [1980:115] stresses that this correspondence between God and Wisdom and Israel and Wisdom is maintained at a strictly literary level. "Wisdom is never depicted as a simple incarnation by which God becomes one with Israel. Rather, she is merely associated with the pillar of cloud, which as a divine theophany, defines her place in the mystery of God's presence in the wilderness. Similarly, Wisdom's wandering is like that of Israel, though it occurs on a vastly different cosmic plane. In terms of the inner logic of interpretation, Wisdom only provides a partial clarification of the numinous in the experience of Israel."

13:21-22; 33:9-11; 40:38). In the last two references the pillar of cloud is also closely connected with the Tabernacle. But in Ex 14:19-20 there are also intimations that the angel (here called מלאך האלהים) was associated with the cloud. In Ex 23:20-23 God states that he is sending an angel ahead of the Israelites to guard them along the way and bring them to the land. This angel is to be listened to because God has placed his Name in him (v 21). (This reference to the angel that will lead the people does not have the negative connotations of Ex 33:2-3 where God says that he will send an angel in place of going with Israel himself.) In Num 20:16 there is also mention of the angel whom the Lord sent to bring the people out of Egypt. The Glory of the Lord (כבוד) also plays a part in the exodus and wilderness wanderings and is described in such a manner that it appears, like the angel, to be intimately associated with the Lord and yet also be a distinct entity. In Ex 16:10 the Glory appears in the cloud. Glory and cloud appear together in Ex 24:16-18;<sup>154</sup> Ex 40:34-35; Num 16:42. The Glory, like the pillar of cloud, is closely associated with the Tabernacle (Lev 9:6,23; Num 14:10; 16:19; 20:6). It is thus possible that the pillar of cloud and the Glory could be conflated into a single image.<sup>155</sup> I propose that in his description of Wisdom dwelling in the pillar of cloud, journeying through the cosmos and seeking a resting place, Ben Sira is employing the vehicle of Wisdom as angel of the Lord accompanying the people of Israel in their journeying toward the promised land and taking them into the land to find rest and claim their

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<sup>154</sup> Here the glory of the Lord is said to resemble a consuming fire, indicating that the cloud with which the glory of the Lord is associated is the pillar of cloud which by night appeared as a pillar of fire (Ex 13:22).

<sup>155</sup> Sheppard [1980:103] has documented instances where Sirach fuses together different texts or traditions by partial citation, paraphrase, key words or allusions.



inheritance. In his metaphor, however, he has transposed the setting to the cosmic level. Even the picture of Wisdom covering the earth like a mist and traversing the far reaches of the cosmos is consonant with Wisdom as angel / Glory of the Lord, since in Num 14:21 the Lord proclaims that the glory of the Lord fills the whole earth. There is thus a measure of coherence in the imagery of the passage.

Ben Sira is drawing on the same vehicle when he describes Wisdom as ministering in the Tabernacle and finding her rest in Jerusalem and in Zion in particular. It is said of the angel of the Lord in Ex 23:21 that God's name is in him. God chose Jerusalem and Zion as the place where his Name would dwell when the Israelites had reached their resting place and entered into their inheritance (Deut 12:5, 10-11 cf. 1 Kings 8:29). Reading Ex 23:21 and Deut 12 together, one can construct the picture of the angel in whom the Name is settling in the Temple. It appears to me, therefore, that the metaphor of Wisdom as Angel employed in the introductory verses continues through vv 3-11 where Ben Sira draws on the picture of the angel of the Lord accompanying the people of Israel to the promised land to say something about Wisdom.

What could have suggested the metaphor of Wisdom as Angel to Sirach? In Prov 8:22-31, one of the texts from which Ben Sira draws in his depictions of Woman Wisdom, Wisdom is with God as observer of the creation process, delighting before God and in his inhabitable world (v 31). In Job 38:7 the angels shout for joy as they observe the Lord's creative activity. These two texts read together could suggest the picture of Wisdom as an angel.



The picture of Wisdom ministering before the Lord in the Temple anticipates Ben Sira's description of Simeon in Sir 50:1-24. In the praise of Simeon Ben Sira uses tree similes comparable to those that he uses of Wisdom in Sir 24. Simeon, like Wisdom is like blossoms on the branches, a lily by running water, incense at the sacrifice, trees thick with fruit. His sons too are like young cedars and poplars by the stream. The Praise of the Fathers (Sir 44-50) concludes with this portrait of Simeon. McKinlay [1996:153] asks whether this office of high priest, which epitomises the temple cult, is seen as the final resting place of Wisdom. In depicting Wisdom in this way, Ben Sira could be intimating that she, like the high priest, is a mediator between the Lord and the people, between things heavenly and things earthly [McKinlay 1996:139].

Wisdom becomes increasingly particularised as the poem progresses. The image of Wisdom settled mist-like on the face of the earth (v 3b) speaks of her pervading presence. The Wisdom that walks the farthest reaches of the universe is a cosmic figure. Von Rad [1972:160] perceives legal symbolism here: the walking signifies the completion, either real or only spoken, of a legal action of possession (cf. Gen 13:17). Wisdom therefore formally assumed her proprietary rights, which cover the whole world. Verse 6 lends support to this interpretation, for it is confirmed that she rules over all nations and people. But Wisdom seeks a particular place in which to dwell, and the Lord directs her to Israel. She takes up residence there in the Tabernacle / Temple. The connection is drawn later also between wisdom and the Law. In the very concrete way, Sirach explains why the Jewish traditions should be held in the highest regard – universal wisdom has found concrete expression in Israel.

Verse 12, which describes Wisdom's settling with Israel as 'taking root', provides the bridge to the next metaphor – Wisdom as tree. This is a favourite metaphor for Ben Sira. He names a variety of trees, 'some of the finest among the flora of Palestine' [Skehan and Di Lella 1987:334] focusing repeatedly on the stature of the tree (ἀνυψώθειν - vv 13 and 14 (twice)). He gives several place names, perhaps to suggest the geography of the promised land. The reference to the smoke of incense in the Tabernacle (v 15) recalls the cultic references in v 10. The tree metaphor speaks about the prolific life-producing quality of wisdom. This particular nuance is highlighted in the references to the trees' fruit and the invitation that Wisdom gives to eat and drink of her. Verses 19-22 complement the images of fertility with the idea of sustenance by comparing Wisdom to food and drink.

Sir 24:23 begins Ben Sira's own commentary on Wisdom's speech. His introductory ταῦτα πάντα refers back to the last section of Wisdom's self-praise in particular, where she compares herself to trees, incense and food and enumerates her blessings. The benefits Wisdom has and gives are the benefits the Law provides because the Law is a written embodiment of Wisdom [Witherington 1994:86]. Although at first glance the categorical statement of v 23 appears to be identifying Wisdom and the written Law, the imagery of the rivers modifies this reading. The Eden-esque imagery of the trees is continued in the imagery of the rivers.<sup>156</sup> The rivers of the Jordan, Nile and Euphrates which appear in the promise of Gen 15:18 and the book of Deuteronomy

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<sup>156</sup> The mention of the first human v 28 also indicates that Eden imagery is being employed in this poem.

are now included in the paradise of Eden [McKinlay 1996:142]. Collins [1997:52] suggests that the comparison with foreign rivers may be significant. Wisdom was always an international phenomenon, and its character was not changed in that respect by the identification with the Jewish Law. These poetic metaphors illustrate the great wisdom of law, since the referent of vv 25-27 is the Law. The Law is a river brimful and overflowing with wisdom. The implication of this metaphor is that the Law cannot fully contain wisdom. The whole content of the Law may be designated wisdom, but wisdom keeps 'bursting the banks'. While the Law expresses Wisdom for Israel, it does not exhaust it. Conversely, the law contains wisdom in such abundance that no amount of study will be able to plumb its depths. The meaning of the Law is inexhaustible. All human beings, from first to last, are unable to fully comprehend wisdom (presumably as that is contained in the Law) (v 28-29).

Ben Sira continues the metaphor of the overflowing river in his description of his own activity (vv 30-34). In this final stanza the 'I' of vv 1-22 has been replaced by the 'I' of the sage: the universal Wisdom is now channelled through an Israelite sage. The wisdom that is channelled in the Law overflows also in Ben Sira's own teaching. When the metaphor is decoded it points to the Law as the source to which Ben Sira went to get wisdom. Ben Sira began by studying the Law in the hope that he would be able to reap the benefits of wisdom in his own life. But the wisdom that he gained was so great that he felt constrained to teach it. By claiming that his rivulet became a river and then a sea, Ben Sira is making very extravagant claims for his own wisdom, and, by implication for his book which is a distillation of that wisdom. He switches to the metaphor of teaching as light. The implications are that his instructions

are illuminating and life-giving, and probably also as widereaching in their effectiveness as the sun! He likens his teaching to prophecy. This probably means that he is claiming inspiration for his work. It is also possible that the comparison is between ‘pour our’ and ‘prophecy’. In other words, he is constrained to tell that which he knows in the same way that a prophet was constrained to tell forth the Word of God.

Personified Wisdom in this poem is not strongly gendered.<sup>157</sup> The ‘person’ of wisdom here is an angel, not a woman. In her reading of this text Webster [1998:73] assigns significance to Wisdom’s feminine gender. She writes that “Sophia, in spite of having access to universal options, is given by God to Israel as a daughter is given in marriage (24:8; also 1:10). Unlike the faithless wife in 23:22-27, Sophia will take root and bear fruit in Jerusalem (24:12; also 1:20; 6:19; cf. 23:25)”. The connection with the passage on the adulteress immediately preceding chapter 24 is ingenious. Nevertheless, I do not concur with her interpretation. The initial image of Wisdom as an angel (24:2) sets the tone for the reading of the remainder of the poem. There are no indications in the text that we are to imagine Wisdom as a woman, let alone as God’s daughter and as a bride. Wisdom is personified, not as a woman but as an angelic being. Myrrh and spice, honey and the honeycomb are images used in an erotic context in Cant 4:11 and 5:1. Blenkinsopp [1995:47] recognises erotic undertones in the invitation Wisdom issues to her proteges. He calls this “an interesting case of

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<sup>157</sup> Camp [1997:181] believes that in ch 24 Ben Sira reduces Wisdom’s personal, and thus female, qualities. She notes how he does not follow the imagery of one of his

intellectual passion expressed in the language of physical desire.” The discourse is open to such readings. However, the fact that it is not Wisdom as Woman but Wisdom as a heavenly being who meets us in these verses mutes the erotic undertones considerably.

#### 4.7 SIRACH 51:13-30

Ben Sira’s authorship of this discourse is disputed on several grounds. In the first place, the subscript of 50:27-29 appears to be the original ending for the book. More significantly, the Qumran text of this poem was found as a part of the Psalms Scroll rather than with the other Sirach material. However, its presence in the Septuagint version of Sirach implies that it was considered to be an integral part of the book from an early date [Deutsch 1982:401 n3]. I have chosen to treat it briefly here since it fits in so well with the presentations of Woman Wisdom elsewhere in Sirach. Collins [1997:53] writes that, whatever its original status, it must at least be regarded as representative of the kind of wisdom circles in which Sirach moved.

In the Qumran scroll the poem is clearly an acrostic.<sup>158</sup> The acrostic structure has not however been preserved in Ms B where these verses are

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source texts, Prov 8:22f, which states that Wisdom was brought to birth by the Lord (Prov 8:22-23). In Sir 24:3 she comes forth mistlike from the mouth of the Most High.

<sup>158</sup> It is a twenty-three line acrostic. In this type of acrostic there is a final א line. The א line begins the poem, the ל line comes in the middle, and a מ line is added at the end. The beginning of these three lines form the word *alep*, the name of the first letter and a verb which in the *pi’el* means “to teach” [Skehan and Di Lella 1987:576].

also extant.<sup>159</sup> The Hebrew text needs to be reconstructed in parts. Because the problems associated with the text are legion, I have opted to rely on the translation by Deutsch [1982:401-3]. In her reconstruction and translation she has used the Qumran text (11 Q Ps<sup>a</sup>), Ms B and the Greek and Syriac versions. She provides extensive justification in footnotes when her reading differs from Sanders [1965, 1971] and Skehan [1971].

- 13 When I was a young man, before I had gone astray  
then I sought her.
- 14 She came to me in her beauty,  
And I shall seek her until the end.
- 15 Although a flower drops in the ripening,  
grapes rejoice the heart.  
My foot has trod on level ground,  
for I have known her from my youth.
- 16 I have inclined my ear but a little,  
but I have found much instruction.
- 17 She was a nurse to me,  
And to my teacher I shall give my praise.
- 18 I meditated and grew devoted to her,  
I was jealous for good, and I did not turn back.
- 19 I burned inwardly for her,  
I did not turn away from her,  
I stirred my desire for her sake,  
And on her heights I did not weary.  
My hand opened her gates  
and I understood her subtleties.
- 20 I washed my hand in her  
and I discovered her in her purity.  
I acquired an inclination for her from the beginning,  
thus, I shall never forsake her.
- 21 My bowels throbbed like a furnace to look upon her,  
for I acquired her, a good possession.

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<sup>159</sup> The text of this poem in Ms B is to a large extent a retroversion from the Syriac [Di Lella 1966:106-147].

- 22 The Lord has given me a reward, eloquence,  
and with my tongue I shall praise him.
- 23 Turn to me, foolish ones,  
and lodge in the house of instruction.
- 24 How long will you remain in need of all these things  
and your souls in a very great thirst?
- 25 I have opened my mouth and spoken about her,  
acquire for yourselves wisdom without silver.
- 26 Bring your necks to her yoke,  
and let yourselves carry her burden.  
She draws near to those who seek her  
and the one who gives his life, finds her.
- 27 See with your eyes: I was young,  
yet I labored in her and found her.
- 28 Heed diligently my instruction from my youth,  
and thus acquire silver and gold through me.
- 29 Rejoice in my instruction,  
do not be disgraced in my songs.
- 30 Do your works in righteousness  
and he shall give you your reward in his time.

In its present position in Sirach, this acrostic forms the conclusion to the book. As an acrostic on Woman Wisdom it recalls the conclusion to the book of Proverbs (31:10-31). The poem divides into two sections. The first stanza (51:13-22) gives a metaphorical description of the sage's own successful quest for Wisdom. The second stanza invites the young to learn wisdom from the sage so that they too might acquire Wisdom. Although the highly erotic interpretation offered by Sanders [1965] has been widely criticised,<sup>160</sup> it is indisputable that love imagery is intrinsic to the poem. The sage relates how in his youth he courted wisdom and took her as his wife.

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<sup>160</sup> Goldstein [1967:307-308] in a review has proved that at several points Sanders overstated his case.



Several themes from the other Wisdom poems are taken up again here. The most obvious link is the personification of Wisdom as a woman. This poem shares with the others the imagery of Wisdom as mother, bride, teacher (4:11,17; 15:2-3) and nurturer (15:2-3, 24:20-21). The student is exhorted to submit to wisdom's yoke and carry her burden here (v 26) and in Sir 6:24-25,30. Love story imagery is also found in Sir 6:18ff and Sir 14:20ff. The rhetoric of quest and courship is found here (vv 13-14,18-19,26) and in Sir 6:27 and 14:22. The sage in Sir 51:13 had sought wisdom from his youth, something the student had been exhorted to do earlier (6:18). The labour involved in seeking wisdom is shown to be small in comparison with the greatness of the rewards (Sir 51:16, cf. 6:19f). Wisdom draws near to the one who seeks her (51:26, cf. 15:2). The Lord granted the sage eloquence as a reward for pursuing wisdom, and as a consequence the sage praises God (51:22, cf. 15:9-10 and 39:6). Therefore this acrostic, like the one in Prov 31, offers a fitting conclusion to the book.

Deutsch [1982:404-409] draws attention to the fact that the sage is the focus of this poem. The first word, אֲנִי, directs attention to him, and the remainder of the first stanza is a testimony of his experiences with Wisdom. The sage presents himself as a model for the student to follow. In the second stanza the attention of the young addressee is similarly directed to the sage. The exhortation to get wisdom is at the same time an exhortation to come to the sage for instruction. Several of the terms used by the sage in the first half of the poem are repeated in the second half where they have as their referent or subject the potential student - בַּקֵּשׁ (vv 13b, 26c) מִצֵּא (vv 20b, 16b, 26d) קִנְיָה (20c, 25b) סִמְחָה (vv 15b, 29a).



This repetition indicates that the sage extends to the potential student an invitation and a promise based on his own life experiences.

Argall [1995:70-71] postulates that the Hebrew underlying Sir 1:6 τὰ πανουργεύματα αὐτῆς τίς ἔγνω is מערמיה מי יתבונן. He supports this reconstruction with a reference to Sir 42:18, where the Greek noun πανουργεύματα is a rendering for מערם. If this is so, then there is a close correspondence between Sir 1:6 and Sir 51:19c. In the opening poem, the answer to the rhetorical questions of vv 2-3 which ask who can fathom the creation is apparently that no one other than the Lord can. But there is a shift toward the end of the poem. The Lord who created wisdom has made it accessible to those who love him. It seems to me that the answer to the question in 1:6 – “the root of wisdom, to whom has it been revealed / and who knows her subtleties?” – is ‘no one except the Lord’.<sup>161</sup> But the development in the final verses (1:9-10) suggests that the Lord in turn may choose to reveal Wisdom’s subtleties to his friends. That is the nuance picked up in 1:20 when the fear of the Lord is called the root of wisdom. The possibility is thus opened up for wisdom’s subtleties to be revealed by God to the sage. In Sir 42:18 the reference to Wisdom’s subtleties occurs within a Hymn of Praise to God the Creator. God is said to search out the abyss and the human heart and to perceive wisdom’s subtleties. But the following verse adds that God reveals the deepest secrets. Thus God allows others to perceive what he himself knows fully by means of revelation. The concluding verse of this hymn (43:33) identifies the recipients of God’s gift of wisdom as ‘those

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<sup>161</sup> Contra Argall [1995:71] who takes the answer to 1:6 to be ‘those to whom the Lord has revealed it’.

who fear him'. Argall [1995:72] equates the wisdom that God gives (43:33) with the secrets that he reveals (42:19). In Sir 51:19 the sage who has eagerly pursued wisdom arrives at the point where he perceives her subtleties. The quest for wisdom has thus come full circle. The answer to the question of Sir 1:6 now becomes 'Ben Sira and others like him'. Although wisdom cannot be fathomed by human beings (cf Sir 24:28) and it is known only to God, yet the sage may, in part at least, perceive wisdom's subtleties as God reveals them to him. Argall describes Sir 1:6 and Sir 51:19 as a question and answer which form an *inclusio* around the entire book. "The point would seem to be that *this entire book* contains the hidden things revealed to ben Sira and taught in his school" [Argall 1995:72, *italics his*].

The feminine gender of personified Wisdom is exploited to the full here. She is portrayed as the object of passionate male desire (see esp, vv 19 and 21). Wisdom comes like a bride to the sage (51:14), and he consummates his relationship with her (v 20). True to his patriarchal mindset, when the sage attains Wisdom as wife, he refers to her as a good possession (v 22)!

The wisdom personified in this passage is obviously to be understood in an educational setting. It is that which the sage learns and imparts to others. It is not simply a body of knowledge or cognitive ability but has an affective dimension too. It includes mastery of a tradition, but extends also to a disciplined life and the correct disposition, since the sage adopted and sought to inculcate a particular approach to life.

## CHAPTER 5: SYNOPSIS AND CONCLUSIONS

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### 5.1 WOMAN WISDOM IN THE WORLD OF BEN SIRA

I believe that my reading of the Wisdom metaphor makes sense in the light of the situation into which Ben Sira wrote. In Chapter 1 I identified as key characteristics of the Judaism of this period the quest for self-definition that involved competing interpretations of the tradition, the growing dependence upon written scripture, the confrontation with Hellenism, and the emergence of apocalyptic movements. I will take up each of these points briefly and relate them to Sirach's understanding of Woman Wisdom.

Ben Sira as sage and scribe was involved in the teaching and the perpetuation of the tradition. He was a conservative wisdom teacher who took very seriously his role as the source of wisdom within the community and felt compelled to pass on his wisdom to the next generation (24:33-34; 33:16-18). In an environment in which competing interpretations of the tradition are proposed, it becomes of utmost importance to legitimate one's own interpretation. This Ben Sira does by adopting the powerful figure of Woman Wisdom from the tradition and identifying her explicitly with his teaching and implicitly with himself. In Sir 51:23 Ben Sira issues an invitation to the untutored to learn from him. He has just described his own successful courtship of and marriage to Woman Wisdom, and issues his invitation to study with him as an

invitation to come to Wisdom. Sir 24:30-34 also implies that Woman Wisdom is accessible through the sage's instruction.

As the sacred writings moved to centre stage in Judaism so the role of the sage became increasingly that of scripture scholar. An education in wisdom therefore became increasingly closely connected with the study of the written tradition. Woman Wisdom in Proverbs 1-9 was an embodiment of the teaching of the sages. When the teaching of the sages became more closely aligned with the written tradition, the tenor of the Wisdom metaphor shifted accordingly. This may be one of the motivations behind the correlation of Wisdom and Law.

As I noted in Chapter 3, the threat of Hellenism is often given as the reason for the close identification of Wisdom and Law in Sirach.<sup>162</sup> Sirach is seen to be effectively excluding any foreign philosophy and culture by confining Wisdom to the Jewish Law. But I have argued that Ben Sira was not concerned to combat Hellenism as a philosophical system. What he does strive to combat is the divorce of the quest for wisdom from religious observance and ethical living which is possible in the Greek educational tradition. The Law defined the moral and religious dimensions of life for Ben Sira, thus observance of the Law became indispensable for an education in wisdom.

Among the circles that adopted an apocalyptic stance, wisdom was understood to be inaccessible to all but the elect to whom it was revealed [Argall 1995:94]. *1 Enoch* 42:1-3 recites how Wisdom sought a resting

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<sup>162</sup> Rylaarsdam [1946:30,38]; Hengel [1974:138-9]; Blenkinsopp [1983:130f].

place on earth, but found none and so returned to heaven to take her seat among the angels. Ben Sira does not share this esoteric view of wisdom. On the contrary, he believes that wisdom is present in Israel and accessible to all who desire it. Ben Sira therefore represents Wisdom as a woman who will be found by the one who eagerly pursues her. Wisdom is found in the Law which has been given to all of Israel. Even when he pictures Wisdom in the angelic assembly (Sir 24) she is not there because she has found no home on earth. She is declaring how she came to be settled in Israel.

## 5.2 A SYNOPSIS OF THE WISDOM POEMS

The Wisdom poems in Sirach invite the reader to consider them together since they have the same author<sup>163</sup> and are embedded in the same literary work. Sirach also provides subtle links between the poems. In Sir 4:11-19 and 24:1-33, the two places where Wisdom speaks, the opening statement of the first speech matches the concluding statement of the second: “the one who obeys me”. The final verse in Sir 6:18-37 and the opening verse of Sir 14:20-15:10 use the verb הנהג. In 6:37 the object of meditation is the commandments, in 14:20 it is wisdom. And the opening and concluding poems are linked by the phrase τὰ πανουργεύματα (1:6 and 51:19); the book concludes with an acknowledgement that the sage is the recipient of the revelation of wisdom’s subtleties. The poems are also linked in a more obvious way. They have the same protagonist – personified Wisdom – and they draw on a common stock of images.

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<sup>163</sup> Sir 51:13-30 is a possible exception.

The poems fall into two groups. In 1:1-10 and 24:1-34 Wisdom is closely associated with God and with the cosmos. Initially at least she is presented as a universal wisdom. In both these discourses there is a movement of Wisdom from the Lord to his creation and to his chosen ones in particular, so that she is simultaneously with God and with humanity. Although Wisdom is personified in 24:1-34, the feminine dimension of that personification does not play an important role in the discourse. The personification is inchoate in Sir 1:1-10.

The second set of discourses (4:11-19, 6:18-37, 14:20ff and 51:13-30) have an educational setting. This is made explicit in chapters 6 and 51 where the metaphor of the pursuit of Wisdom is decoded in the second part of the poem. Each of these poems uses the metaphor of courtship, along with metaphors of the hunt, the yoking of animals, and agricultural and arboreal metaphors. Common themes are the trial motif and the notion of initial difficulty yielding to abundant reward. The dynamics of the discourse in each case focus on the relationship between the student and Wisdom. The Lord is mentioned in each poem, generally as the one who bestows Wisdom on the successful seeker.

### **5.3 RESULTS AND CONCLUSIONS**

I will now outline my results in view of the working hypothesis that I adopted at the beginning of this research. I set out to show that the figure of Wisdom in Sirach is a metaphor that uses feminine imagery to speak of the tradition as taught by the sages and contained within the sacred writings of Judaism. I suggested that the Wisdom figure is portrayed

mediating a relationship with God. The point made by Sirach in this regard would not be that Wisdom is a hypostasised intermediary. Rather, the metaphor would be employed to state that the Jewish tradition which is the tenor of the metaphor mediates knowledge about God and is the pathway to genuine piety. I also suggested that Ben Sira employed the metaphor in this manner in order to legitimate his teaching and to affirm that wisdom is to be found in the teaching of the sages. Thus he reinforced the implicit claim of conservative scribal circles to be the legitimate interpreters of the tradition.

### *5.3.1 Wisdom as metaphor*

The clearest indication of the metaphorical character of the Wisdom figure is found in those discourses where Ben Sira uses the metaphor and then decodes it later in the same text. (6:18-37 and 51:13-30). Our reading has made it clear that the referent is not a 'being' called Wisdom whom the student is to woo and marry. Ben Sira does not conceive of a hypostasised Wisdom. Wisdom in Sir 24 is the favourite candidate for 'hypostatisation'. But when she is read in the context of the rest of the book, such an interpretative strategy is shown to be untenable. The correlation of Wisdom and the book of the covenant in 24:23 also militates against such a reading.

I refined my classification of Wisdom as metaphor by pointing to the personification of Wisdom as the basic trope underlying the presentations of Wisdom. The personification is then filled out with a number of metaphors. This explains why the figure of Wisdom is an easily recognisable entity in the text despite the wide range of imagery

applied to her. Woman Wisdom is not restricted to the verses that explicitly refer to wisdom as a woman. When the feminine personification of wisdom is seen to be the constant factor behind the different metaphors a reading is achieved which highlights the affective impact of the discourse. For example the metaphors of Wisdom as field gains an erotic nuance (Sir 6:19).

Not only does the personification of Wisdom draw together the various metaphors used of wisdom; it also serves to unify the concept of wisdom. The notion of wisdom in Sirach has a number of facets, all of which are taken up into the personification. Instead of referring to 'that which must be learned', 'the attitude which needs to be adopted' etc, Ben Sira can simply speak of Wisdom who unites in herself all the elements of the concept of wisdom.<sup>164</sup> The personification gives to Sirach a powerful tool for motivating the reader to embrace wisdom. The anticlimax one experiences when moving from the metaphorical to the literal passage in Sir 6:18ff is indicative of the power of the Wisdom personification.

### ***5.3.2 The tenor of the metaphor***

What is the wisdom that is personified? In the second group of discourses (4:11-19; 6:18-37; 14:20-15:10 and 51:13-30) wisdom is conceived of in an educational setting. It is that to which the sage has devoted his life, and which the student is also to embrace. Wisdom here includes a body of knowledge that must be imparted, but it goes beyond that; Wisdom is the personification of the whole educational process with which the sages were engaged. The sources of wisdom indicate its



content. The student is directed to the traditions as taught by the sages and contained in the scriptures. The teaching of the sages was not limited to the written tradition, but the written tradition, and particularly the Law had become the standard against which everything else could be judged. Ben Sira felt free to draw on a variety of sources for his wisdom, but only when what he found there did not conflict with the Jewish tradition. An important element in this education in wisdom is the willingness to accept the authority of the tradition; the learning process is not empirical. Wisdom is not limited to the cognitive, but includes the correct ethical and religious disposition. The knowledge that is the content of wisdom cannot be divorced from an attitude of reverent submission and a life of obedience to the law. Wisdom includes mastery of a tradition, but extends also to a disciplined life and the correct disposition, since the sage adopted and sought to inculcate a particular approach to life.

In Sir 1:1-10 wisdom is conceived of as universal and eternal. To possess wisdom is to have a deep and universal knowledge of things. Wisdom is bestowed by the Lord on his creation. Wisdom is similarly perceived in universal cosmic terms in Sir 24:1-7. How is this wisdom related to the wisdom of the 'educational poems'? The association of Wisdom with Law in Sir 24 gives us the key to understanding the relationship between the two. I have argued that in Sir 24 (and elsewhere in Sirach) Wisdom and Law are not simply equated. The Law is full of wisdom, but wisdom is not confined to the Law. The Law is the embodiment of Wisdom in the life of Israel. Law gives expression to Wisdom, and is thus in its entirety characterised by it. But Wisdom exists before and beyond it, and can

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<sup>164</sup> For this insight I am indebted to Camp [1985:214-5].

never be fully exhausted by it. In the same way, wisdom is universal and eternal. It is known in its entirety only to God. But there is a wisdom which has been revealed by God, largely but not exclusively in the Law, and it is this concrete expression of the universal wisdom, embodied in the tradition, which is attained and passed on by the sages. Sir 1 and Sir 24 may both be taken as programmatic passages. Here the credentials of the wisdom that is taught by the sages are established.

What then is the tenor of the Wisdom metaphor? I have shown that it is indeed the tradition as taught by the sages and contained in the sacred writings of Judaism. I can refine this even further and state that the tenor of the metaphor includes the both the content of the tradition and the disposition to live in conformity with that tradition, summed up in the fear of the Lord. This tradition is seen as the distillation of universal wisdom.

### ***5.3.3 The vehicle of the metaphor***

In Sir 4:11-19, 6:18-37, 14:20-15:10 and 51:13-30 the gender of Woman Wisdom is rhetorically important. This is true even in those verses where Wisdom is not being directly described as lover, mother or bride. Two factors contribute to this: the feminine personification that underlies the metaphors and the recurring courtship motif. In contexts where wisdom is presented as a desirable goal to be passionately and zealously sought, Ben Sira is willing to exploit the feminine gender of his inherited metaphor to the full. The pursuit for wisdom ought to engage the whole person, and the image of a desirable woman evokes powerfully a response of attraction, desire and earnest pursuit. In accordance with his

strongly androcentric outlook, however, the aspects of the feminine which he builds into his presentation are those which are defined *vis-à-vis* the male. Wisdom as Woman is the object of desire or the nurturer and giver of gifts.

Because Ben Sira thinks of women in terms of their relationships to males, the metaphor wisdom as woman does not prove as useful a conceptual tool when he wants to reflect on wisdom in and of itself or in its relationship to God. Thus in Sir 1:1-10 and Sir 24 the feminine dimension of the Wisdom figure recedes. In Sir 24 Wisdom is still personified, but as an angelic figure. Her gender becomes nothing more than a fact of grammar. Wisdom as universal ruler and priest is not wisdom pictured as a woman. There may be a hint again of the feminine when Wisdom is likened to trees and offers her fruit (24:13-22). However, I think that if a reader came to Sir 24 with no prior knowledge of the Woman Wisdom metaphor, she or he would not detect any feminine personification here. The metaphor Wisdom as angel may be an attempt on Ben Sira's part to picture wisdom in the closest possible association with the Lord and in the most exalted position possible without in any way compromising his monotheism. Angels also act as mediators in Second Temple writings.

#### ***5.3.4 Wisdom as mediatrix***

First of all, we can state that Wisdom is not a mediatrix in the sense of a go-between introduced to bridge a perceived gulf between God and humanity. In Sirach God is present and directly involved in human affairs. That is the kind of mediation one would expect from a

hypostasised figure, and that Wisdom is not. However the movement and action of Wisdom, God and human beings relative to each other in the Wisdom poems provides hints that the Jewish tradition is seen as playing a vital role in the relationship between God and humanity.

In Sir 1:1-10 Wisdom originates with God and remains with him forever. But she is also poured out on all his works and given by God as a gift to those who love him. The preposition μετὰ in v 1 and 10 forms an *inclusio* – wisdom is simultaneously with God and with all flesh. Sir 24 uses different imagery to make the same point. Angel Wisdom opens her mouth in self-praise in the presence of the angelic host (i.e. in God's presence) and in the presence of her people Israel. She then describes her journey from the mouth of the Most High into the cosmos and to her place of rest in Israel. Wisdom is given by God to human beings, but does not thereby cease to be with God. By implication, those who find Wisdom find God, since Wisdom is with God forever. In these texts God relates to human beings by giving the gift of Wisdom.

In Sir 4:11-19 as the student moves toward Wisdom, the Lord reaches out in favour toward the student. By embracing Wisdom one serves the Lord and gains his blessing. Here God deals with the person on the basis of the person's relationship to Wisdom. In Sir 6:18-37 the student pursues Wisdom and the Lord grants a relationship with Wisdom. The student and Wisdom approach each other in Sir 51:13-30 and the place of their meeting is the fear of the Lord and handling the Law (in other words, in correct relationship to God). In the concluding acrostic Wisdom is sought and found and the result of the acquisition of Wisdom

is that the Lord grants eloquence so that the wise person might praise him. In each case, when Wisdom is sought, the Lord 'moves' toward the person, either directly or by giving the gift of Wisdom. The relationship of the student to Wisdom is determinative of the Lord's relationship to the student. Conversely, it is impossible to obtain Wisdom outside of a relationship with the Lord defined in terms of the fear of the Lord and obedience to the commandments of God. The acquisition of wisdom is the result of a synergistic effort between God and the seeker.

The role that Ben Sira assigns to the Jewish tradition in the relationship between God and humanity becomes clear when we 'decode' the picture of the relationship between the various parties sketched above. God relates to human beings by revealing to them wisdom, which finds its most perfect expression in the Jewish written tradition. How a person relates to this tradition will determine how the Lord relates to that person. On the other hand it is impossible to find wisdom if one does not have the correct attitude toward God and if one does not live according to the tradition, because that tradition is God's gift of wisdom to human beings. Since all wisdom is from God, there is no wisdom outside of what God gives, and the wisdom God has given is embodied in the traditions of Israel.

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