

## **WISDOM AS MEDIATRIX IN SIRACH 24: BEN SIRA, LOVE LYRICS, AND PROPHECY<sup>1</sup>**

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### **ABSTRACT**

Sirach 24 can be read as a compendium of Ben Sira's ideology of Wisdom, bringing together the essential concepts of the book: Wisdom, Law, prophecy, and temple worship. Scholars long ago recognized the dense network of intertextual links between this chapter and other biblical texts, as well as the background of Ben Sira's image of Lady Wisdom in Hellenistic texts. One obvious biblical precedent of Sirach 24 has gone virtually unnoticed so far: the Song of Songs. This essay attempts (1) to demonstrate the close affinity of Sirach 24 with the Song of Songs; (2) to disclose the underlying ideology of the goddess as mediatrix of divine knowledge, prominent not only in the ancient Near Eastern love lyrics, but also in prophecy; and (3) to show that the book of Ben Sira, while being a product of the Hellenistic-Jewish culture, at the same time forms a part of the ancient Near Eastern heritage of early Judaism.

### **1. THE TRIPLE CONTEXT OF SIRACH 24**

Within the book of Ben Sira, chapter 24 has a prominent compositional position. Concluding the first major part of the book, which begins with reflections on the origins and essence of Wisdom (Sir 1), it also initiates the second part, which, again, ends with a praise of Wisdom (Sir 51:13–30).<sup>2</sup> The idea of Wisdom in the entire book is dependent on these three structurally emphatic passages, and this gives even chapter 24 a programmatic nature. The chapter is a poetic composition that begins with a lengthy self-praise of Lady Wisdom herself, who claims to have been

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<sup>1</sup> I wish to express my gratitude to Dr. Marko Marttila, whose presentation on Sir 24 in the Helsinki-Munich-Tartu doctoral colloquium in Helsinki, September 22, 2007 gave me the impetus to study this chapter from the point of view of love lyrics. I would also like to thank Prof. Pancratius C. Beentjes for his valuable comments on my text and Dr. Robert M. Whiting for correcting my English.

<sup>2</sup> On the central position and structure of Sir 24, see Skehan 1979, Skehan & DiLella 1987: 333–338, Marböck 1999: 41–47, Sauer 2000: 34–35, 179–180.

created before ages and now to abide in Zion (vv. 1–22). The poem continues with a third-person section on Law and Wisdom (vv. 23–29) and ends with first-person reflections of Ben Sira himself who as a teacher of Wisdom pours out instruction “like prophecy” (vv. 30–34).

In its primary context, that is, in the book of Ben Sira, chapter 24 reads like a compendium of Ben Sira’s ideology of Wisdom. It brings together the essential concepts of the book: Wisdom, Law, prophecy<sup>3</sup> – and even the temple, which is to be understood as the dwelling-place of Wisdom (vv. 10–11).<sup>4</sup>

Doubtless one of the most researched passages of the book of Ben Sira,<sup>5</sup> chapter 24 has been analyzed from a variety of points of view, such as those of the Law,<sup>6</sup> creation,<sup>7</sup> theology,<sup>8</sup> education,<sup>9</sup> scriptural interpretation,<sup>10</sup> poetic structure,<sup>11</sup> the personification of Wisdom,<sup>12</sup> the inner-biblical traditions underlying the poem<sup>13</sup> as well as its cultural background.<sup>14</sup> Since this essay began to take shape when I observed similarities between the Song of Songs and Sirach 24 and, by further reflection, found out their bearing on the question of the cultural context, it will focus on the two last mentioned aspects.

As Jessie Rogers has noted, the book of Ben Sira “is permeated with biblical allusions and phrases [...] 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.”<sup>15</sup> The second context of Sirach 24 is, thus, the set of texts that in Ben Sira’s time enjoyed an authoritative status: “the Law, the prophets, and the other writings” (Sir Prol. 9–10). One of the lasting results of previous scholarship on Sirach 24 is that its most important biblical subtext is to be found in Proverbs 8, where the personified female figure of preexistent Wisdom, created by God before ages, unmistakably serves as the model for Lady Wisdom in Sirach 24.<sup>16</sup> But Proverbs 8 is not the only source the poem draws from; in fact, scholars have disclosed a dense network of allusions to various biblical texts in Sirach 24 – for instance, to Deuteronomistic literature, several psalms, Gen 1:2, Prov 3:13–26; Job 9:8, and many other texts.<sup>17</sup>

<sup>3</sup> Sauer 2000: 185: “Gesetz, Prophetie und Weisheit finden damit zu einer großen Einheit zusammen.”

<sup>4</sup> Sauer 2000: 182, Sinnott 2005: 125.

<sup>5</sup> Cf. commentaries, the newest being Skehan & DiLella 1987, Sauer 2000 and Schreiner 2002.

<sup>6</sup> Gilbert 1974: 345–348, Lebram 1979: 108–112, Marböck 1999: 81–96.

<sup>7</sup> Gilbert 1974: 341–345, Rogers 1996, Collins 1997: 57–61.

<sup>8</sup> Marböck 1995 and 1999.

<sup>9</sup> Ueberschaer 2007: 297–305.

<sup>10</sup> Sheppard 1980.

<sup>11</sup> Skehan 1979.

<sup>12</sup> MacKinlay 1996: 133–159, Sinnott 2005: 110–141.

<sup>13</sup> Sheppard 1980: 19–71, Marböck 1999: 55–57, Beentjes 2008.

<sup>14</sup> Conzelmann 1964, Lebram 1979: 112–128, Rogers 1996: 144–147.

<sup>15</sup> Rogers 1996: 144.

<sup>16</sup> See, e.g., Skehan 1979, Skehan & DiLella 1987: 333–338, Marböck 1999: 55–56.

<sup>17</sup> See the works mentioned above, nn. 5–14, especially Sheppard 1980: 19–71.

Nevertheless, one obvious biblical precedent of Sirach 24 has thus far gone virtually unnoticed. Apart from a few passing references,<sup>18</sup> the Song of Songs has not been compared with the self-praise of Lady Wisdom in Sir 24:1–22 at all, even though – as I hope to be able to demonstrate – the allusions are as apparent as manifold.

The third context of Sirach 24 is the Hellenistic world of the early 2nd century BCE. The cultural influences on Sirach 24 have, quite understandably and with good reason, been derived from Hellenistic literature. Since Hans Conzelmann, the aretology of Isis has often been regarded as a prototype of the self-praise of Lady Wisdom,<sup>19</sup> but she has been associated with even other goddesses, for instance, Athene<sup>20</sup> and the much older tree goddesses attested in Palestinian iconography.<sup>21</sup> The erotic imagery employed in Sir 24 is in line with the image of Lady Wisdom elsewhere in the biblical tradition; “she is mother, wife, lover, beloved, virgin, and bride.”<sup>22</sup> In the absence of goddesses, Lady Wisdom takes their place in early Judaism.<sup>23</sup> However, there has not been any discussion on the possible Mesopotamian background of the poem, which is quite plausible even in the Hellenistic context.

In this essay, which I gratefully dedicate to my teacher and friend Simo Parpola, I attempt to demonstrate the close affinity of Sirach 24 with the Song of Songs as well as to disclose the underlying ideology of the goddess as mediatrix of divine knowledge, prominent not only in the ancient Near Eastern love lyrics, but also in prophecy.

## 2. BEN SIRA’S ALLUSIONS TO THE SONG OF SONGS

As much as the first part of the self-praise of Lady Wisdom (24:1–12) echoes Proverbs 8, the second part (24:13–22) unmistakably draws from the Song of Songs, among other texts. Even the section reflecting Wisdom and Law (24:23–29) and Ben Sira’s words about himself (24:30–33) can be associated with the Song of Songs. In what follows, I will survey the allusions of the poem to the Song of Songs, making occasional references even to ancient Near Eastern texts – first and foremost to the Love Lyrics of Nabû and Tašmetu (SAA 3 14), which is the best-

<sup>18</sup> E.g., in Sheppard 1980: 53–54 and Marböck 1999:75. In the Song of Songs scholarship, I am aware only of Murphy 1990: 99 n. 387: “Metaphorical imagery, comparable to that of the Song, is used to describe Wisdom in Sir 1:16–20 and 24:13–22”; and Zakovitch 2004: 251 (cf. also pp. 201, 203): “In einem unverkennbar von Hld beeinflussten Abschnitt in Sir vergleicht sich die Weisheit mit einer Palme (Sir 24,14).” I owe this quotation to Dr. Marko Marttila.

<sup>19</sup> Conzelmann 1964: 228–234, cf. Marböck 1999: 49–54 (but see Marböck 1995: 76), Rogers 1996: 146–147, Collins 1997: 50.

<sup>20</sup> Lebram 1979: 124–128.

<sup>21</sup> Schroer 2000: 92.

<sup>22</sup> Schroer 2000: 143; cf. Job 28, Prov. 1–9, Sir 15:2, 51:13–22, Wis 7:21–26. For the likewise multiple image of the goddess Ištar, see Parpola 1997a: XXVI–XXXI.

<sup>23</sup> Cf. Frymer-Kensky 1992: 183: “These mediating figures did not disappear because they addressed the great existential dilemma of monotheism, the centrality of humankind, and its sense of inadequacy in the face of the divine power.”

**Sirach 24***(New Revised Standard Version)<sup>24</sup>*

1 Wisdom praises herself, and tells of her glory in the midst of her people.	9 Before the ages, in the beginning, he created me, and for all the ages I shall not cease to be.
2 In the assembly of the Most High she opens her mouth, and in the presence of his hosts she tells of her glory:	10 In the holy tent I ministered before him, and so I was established in Zion.
3 I came forth from the mouth of the Most High, and covered the earth like a mist.	11 Thus in the beloved city he gave me a resting place, and in Jerusalem was my domain.
4 I dwelt in the highest heavens, and my throne was in a pillar of cloud.	12 I took root in an honored people, in the portion of the Lord, his heritage.
5 Alone I compassed the vault of heaven and traversed the depths of the abyss.	13 I grew tall like a cedar in Lebanon, and like a cypress on the heights of Hermon.
6 Over waves of the sea, over all the earth, and over every people and nation I have held sway.	14 I grew tall like a palm tree in En-gedi, and like rosebushes in Jericho; like a fair olive tree in the field, and like a plane tree beside watered I grew tall.
7 Among all these I sought a resting place; in whose territory should I abide?	15 Like cassia and camel's thorn I gave forth perfume, and like choice myrrh I spread my fragrance, like galbanum, onycha, and stacte, and like the odor of incense in the tent.
8 Then the Creator of all things gave me a command, and my Creator chose the place for my tent. He said, "Make your dwelling in Jacob, and in Israel receive your inheritance."	16 Like a terebinth I spread out my branches, and my branches are glorious and graceful.

preserved representative of love lyrics in the Akkadian language and the closest extrabiblical parallel to the Song of Songs.<sup>25</sup> It is important to note that nothing of the original Hebrew text of Sirach 24 has been preserved, hence verbatim quotations are impossible to identify and retroversions remain speculative at best.<sup>26</sup> Nevertheless, even the Greek text clearly reflects the parallelistic structure of the original Hebrew poem, and the lexical associations are easily observable.

The image of Lady Wisdom as a fruit-bearing tree is likely to allude to Prov 3:18 where Wisdom is called a tree of life, which, again, leads the thoughts to the Garden of Eden. The rivers surrounding Eden are also mentioned in Sir 24:25–27.<sup>27</sup> In addition to these and many other probable subtexts, the Song of Songs provides a parallel for almost every line of Sir 24:13–20.

<sup>24</sup> My own translations of the Greek are not necessarily consistent with this translation.

<sup>25</sup> Livingstone 1989: 35–37, cf. Nissinen 1998b: 587–592.

<sup>26</sup> For an attempt at a retroversion of the poem, see Skehan 1979: 374.

<sup>27</sup> Cf. Rogers 1996: 150, MacKinlay 1996: 140–142.

17 Like the vine I bud forth delights, and my blossoms become glorious and abundant fruit.	27 It pours forth instruction like the Nile, like the Gihon at the time of vintage.
19 Come to me, you who desire me, and eat your fill of my fruits.	28 The first man did not know wisdom fully, nor will the last one fathom her.
20 For the memory of me is sweeter than honey, and the possession of me sweeter than the honeycomb.	29 For her thoughts are more abundant than the sea, and her counsel deeper than the great abyss.
21 Those who eat of me will hunger for more, and those who drink of me will thirst for more.	30 As for me, I was like a canal from a river, like a water channel into a garden.
22 Whoever obeys me will not be put to shame, and those who work with me will not sin.	31 I said, "I will water my garden and drench my flower-beds." And lo, my canal became a river, and my river a sea.
23 All this is the book of the covenant of the Most High God, the law that Moses commanded us as an inheritance for the congregations of Jacob.	32 I will again make instruction shine forth like the dawn, and I will make it clear from far away.
25 It overflows, like the Pishon, with wisdom, and like the Tigris at the time of the first fruits.	33 I will again pour out teaching like prophecy, and leave it to all future generations.
26 It runs over, like the Euphrates, with understanding, and like the Jordan at harvest time.	34 Observe that I have not labored for myself alone, but for all who seek wisdom.

The parallelism of cedar and cypress (Sir 24:13) can be found both in Cant 1:17 and in SAA 3 14:9–10; in both cases, however, referring to the interior of the scene of lovemaking. Moreover, in Cant 5:15, the male partner is compared with a cedar, paralleled by the mountains of Lebanon, whereas the “brothers” of the female partner, depicted as an adolescent girl, say of her: “If she is a door, we will panel<sup>28</sup> her with cedar.” Lebanon and Hermon appear together in Cant 4:8, and Lebanon is also a common metaphor elsewhere in the Song of Songs (Cant 3:9; 4:11, 15; 7:5).

While the woman of the Song of Songs is associated with a palm tree in Cant 7:8–9 and En-Gedi appears as a seat of vineyards (Cant 1:14), the statement of Lady Wisdom about herself in Sir 24:14, “Like a palm tree in En-Gedi I stand out,” rather calls to mind what the woman says about her beloved: “Like an apple tree among the trees of the wood, so is my beloved among men” (Cant 2:3). Obviously, Ben Sira does not read this imagery as gender-specific but is free to adapt the originally male image to Lady Wisdom, the focus being on her outstanding quality. Jericho is not mentioned in the Song of Songs, nor does a rose garden (φύτα ρόδου) feature anywhere in the Hebrew

<sup>28</sup> Thus Exum 2005: 244, deriving the verb from צַוֵּר III ‘to fashion, shape.’

Bible. Nevertheless, the garden is one of the basic *topoi* in ancient Near Eastern love lyrics in general (cf. SAA 3 14 r.17–18, 23–25),<sup>29</sup> and the woman is equated with a garden in Cant 4:12–14, a passage that is likely to have inspired Sirach 24.

The Song of Songs does not know olive trees or plane trees (Sir 24:14), but as a plane tree, Wisdom (according to one branch of the textual tradition<sup>30</sup>) “is lofty beside the water”, which not only alludes to Ps 1:3 but also to Cant 4:13, where pomegranates with choice fruits grow by watering channels.<sup>31</sup> What follows both in Sir 24:15 and in Cant 4:14 is a catalogue of fragrances, of which cinnamon and fragrant cane,<sup>32</sup> as well as myrrh, are common to Sirach and the Song of Songs, whereas the galbanum, onycha and mastic clearly draw from Exod 30:34.<sup>33</sup> In the Song of Songs, the fragrance is poured forth to seduce the male beloved to the garden (cf. Sir 24:19), but in Sir 24:15, Wisdom herself is compared to the odor of incense in the holy tent, the prototype of the temple of Jerusalem which now is her domain (cf. Sir 24:10–11). There is nothing in the Song of Songs to compare with incense in a sanctuary, since no cult places are mentioned in this book; but it is all the more interesting to find a rather exact counterpart to this line of Ben Sira in the Love Lyrics of Nabû and Tašmetu, where it is said to the goddess Tašmetu: “Save, sit down in the cella! Let (the scent of) pure juniper fill the sanctuary” (SAA 3 14:8). The image of the savior-goddess in the cella is closely related to that of Lady Wisdom ministering in the holy tent, and Ben Sira’s use of this motif is a wonderful example of the adaptation of love poetry in the context of worship, Wisdom assuming the role of the goddess.

Terebinth (τερέμινθος Sir 24:16) is in the Hebrew Bible a tree (תְּרֵבִינֹס) that is associated with both love and worship,<sup>34</sup> hence it is a most fitting metaphor for Lady Wisdom’s cultic and erotic aspects, echoing even the ancient Palestinian tree goddess.<sup>35</sup> The Song of Songs does not mention this tree, but it does speak about sitting in the shade of a fruit-bearing tree (here a metaphor for the male beloved), enjoying the delights of wine and love (Cant 2:3–6). For Tašmetu, “the shade of a sprig of juniper is shelter for my Nabû and my games” (SAA 3 14:11). The goddess is sitting in the sanctuary filled with the odor of juniper in the shade of cedar and cypress – imagery closely akin to the self-praise of Lady Wisdom, who, while sojourning in the temple of Jerusalem, “puts forth delights like the vine” (Sir 24:17). The erotic connotations of fruits, well attested in the Song of Songs and

<sup>29</sup> For further evidence, see Nissinen 1998b: 618; for the garden imagery in the Song of Songs and its mythological background, see Keel 1986: 158–162, Lambert 1987: 27–31.

<sup>30</sup> Thus GII and Peshitta, cf. Skehan & DiLella 1987: 330.

<sup>31</sup> For this translation of תְּרֵבִינֹס, see Keel 1986: 162–164.

<sup>32</sup> I am tempted to ask whether κιννάμωνον καὶ ἀσπάλαθος ἀρομάτων actually translate the Hebrew תְּרֵבִינֹס וְקִנְיָן in Cant 4:14.

<sup>33</sup> See Sinnott 2005: 124.

<sup>34</sup> Gen 12:6, 13:18, 14:13, 18:1, 35:8; Deut 11:30; Josh 19:33; Judg 4:11, 9:6, 37; Hos 4:13; cf. Gilbert 1974: 333–334, Skehan & DiLella 1987: 335.

<sup>35</sup> Cf. Schroer 2000: 92.

in the ancient Near Eastern love poetry (Cant 4:13, 16; SAA 3 14 r.20, 30),<sup>36</sup> are conspicuous also in Sir 24:17, 19, and Wisdom's invitation to those who yearn for her to come and be filled with her fruits is closely reminiscent of Cant 4:16: "Let my beloved come to his garden and eat his choice fruits" (cf. Cant 6:2 and SAA 3 14 r.30: "May her eyes see the plucking of my fruit"). A conscious allusion to the Song of Songs becomes all the more probable when we notice that the fruit metaphor is followed by that of honey and honeycomb in both texts: "I eat my honeycomb with my honey" (Cant 5:1) – "My remembrance is sweeter than honey, inheritance better than the honeycomb" (Sir 24:20). It seems like Lady Wisdom presents herself superior even to the (divine) love praised by the Song of Songs.

The motif of the insatiable hunger and thirst in Sir 24:21 does not find a direct counterpart in the Song of Songs, and the same is true for the assurance of those who obey Wisdom not being put to shame. The Love Lyrics of Nabû and Tašmetu, however, starts with a programmatic expression of trust and devotion to the divine couple, which reads like a positive formulation of the same idea: "May anyone trust in whomever he trusts! As for us, we trust in Nabû, we are devoted to Tašmetu" (SAA 3 14:1–3; cf. Sir 15:4b: "He will trust in her [scil. Wisdom] and not be put to shame").

Verse Sir 24:18 is only to be found in the secondary Greek GII tradition and is missing from the most important manuscripts. Original or not, the verse is worth mentioning here because it depicts Lady Wisdom as "mother of fair love (τῆς ἀγαπησέως τῆς καλῆς), of reverence (φόβου), of knowledge (γνωσέως), and of holy hope (ᾠσις ἐλπίδος)." It would be no surprise to find an ancient Near Eastern goddess, Ištar in particular, praising herself or being praised with similar attributes.

The passages following the self-praise of Lady Wisdom are less filled with allusions to the Song of Songs; however, a few obvious and important cases can be found. The sea (θαλάσσα) and the abyss (ἀβύσσος) certainly allude to Gen 1:2 as well as to Prov 8:24, but a clear echo from Cant 8:6 can also be heard. "Deeper than the sea are her thoughts, her counsels, than the great abyss" (Sir 24:29) reads well together with "Love is strong as death, passion as adamant as Sheol," followed by floods and rivers in Cant 8:7. When Ben Sira, again, reflects his own role as a teacher of wisdom, he compares himself with a watering channel, hence invoking the watercourses of Cant 4:13, and his "pouring out instruction" can be read as echoing the flowing streams from Lebanon in Cant 4:15. The channel metaphor makes Ben Sira the medium of Wisdom,<sup>37</sup> but his self-identification as one of the channels of the garden – in fact, as one part of the garden – implies an intimate affiliation with Wisdom herself.<sup>38</sup>

<sup>36</sup> Cf., e.g., Lambert 1987: 27–29, Nissinen 1998b: 619.

<sup>37</sup> See Sinnott 2005: 130–132, Ueberschaer 2007: 303–305.

<sup>38</sup> Cf. MacKinlay 1996: 145: "But although in v. 30a Ben Sira likens himself to a small canal which flows from a river, with strong echoes of Wisdom/Torah, in the very next verse this has swollen to become a river itself, in turn to becoming a sea."

Apart from chapter 24, motifs and metaphors related to the Song of Songs and ancient Near Eastern love poetry can be found in other parts of the book of Ben Sira as well. In another poem about Wisdom, Sir 14:20–15:10, spying at the gates of Wisdom and peeping through her windows (14:22–23) is clearly reminiscent of Cant 5:2–4, and the erotic connotations of the tree metaphor can, again, be traced in 14:26–27.<sup>39</sup> Wisdom provides the one received by her with food and drink (15:3; cf. Cant 4:16–5:1; 6:2); he will not be put to shame (15:4; cf. Sir 24:22) but will have an elevated position among his peers (15:5; cf. SAA 3 14 r.26: “Among the counsellors, her [scil. Tašmetu’s] throne is foremost”).

More distant but still recognizable echoes from the Song of Songs can be heard also in the praise of Lady Wisdom concluding the book of Ben Sira (Sir 51:13–22). “Wisdom was my wet nurse; thanks to the one who taught me” (51:17) may be taken as a heavily modified reading of “I would lead you and bring you to the house of my mother, and you would teach me<sup>40</sup>” (Cant 8:2). While this remains somewhat unclear, the source of the seeking-and-finding motif in Sir 51:18–21 can quite plausibly be traced to Cant 3:1–4 and 5:2–6. Rather than repeating either version of the story of the nocturnal yearning of the woman, Ben Sira picks up images such as opening the door of Wisdom with his hand (Sir 51:19; cf. Cant 5:4a)<sup>41</sup> and the bodily thrill caused by the passion for Wisdom (Sir 51:21; cf. Cant 5:4b).

Finally, a series of allusions to the Song of Songs can be found in the praise of Simon the high priest concluding Ben Sira’s *laus patrum* (Sir 50:1–24).<sup>42</sup> This is important to note because the description of the high priest unmistakably repeats motifs used in Sir 24:1–22 of Wisdom herself. He is now the cedar of Lebanon, surrounded by the “sons of Aaron” like the willows growing by the water (Sir 50:12; cf. 24:13–14, 31). The way Simon “looked forth from the tent, as he came from the house of the veil” (Sir 50:5) inevitably brings to mind the “Lady at the window” motif,<sup>43</sup> the adaptation of which to a male person is fully understandable if the high priest is representing the qualities of Lady Wisdom. A variation of the “Lady at the window” image has also been recognized in Cant 6:10, a verse that corresponds to the astral imagery used of the high priest in Sir 50:6–7: “Who is this that gazes down like the dawn, beautiful as the moon, radiant as the sun, terrifying as the *nidgālôt*.”<sup>44</sup> Further images in Sir 50:8–10 that may be inspired by the Song of Songs are the lilies (Cant 2:1–2, 16; 4:5; 5:13; 6:2–3; 7:3), Lebanon (Cant 3:9; 4:8, 11, 15; 5:15;

<sup>39</sup> Note that the Greek text in Sir 14:26 reads θήσει τὰ τέκνα αὐτοῦ for the Hebrew קָנוּ יְשִׁים בְּעוֹפֵי הַיָּם, toning down the erotic connotations.

<sup>40</sup> Thus MT; the Septuagint has τῆς συλλαβούσης με, probably translating a different (and original?) Hebrew text.

<sup>41</sup> The Greek translation is euphemistic, avoiding the well-known sexual meaning of “hand” as the male organ: τὰς χειρᾶς μου ἔχεπέτασα πρὸς ὕψος “I stretched out my hands to heaven.”

<sup>42</sup> For a thorough analysis of this text, see Mulder 2003.

<sup>43</sup> I.e., the widespread Near Eastern iconographical motif showing a female figure looking out of a window.

<sup>44</sup> For different translations of אִימָה בְּנִדְגָלוֹת, see Keel 1986: 210, Müller 1992: 68–69.



7:5), the bowl (Cant 7:3); the precious stones (Cant 5:14), and the berries (Cant 7:14) – altogether a cluster of individual motifs fused together by the poet without much regard to their context in the source text. By using this imagery, the function of the high priest is drawn as close as possible to that of Lady Wisdom who, as we learn from Sir 24:10–11, abides in the temple where the high priest is ministering.<sup>45</sup>

The above list of links between the Song of Songs and Ben Sira is far too long and detailed to be purely coincidental. It rather demonstrates that the Song of Songs, among other texts, has served as a subtext for chapter 24 and some other passages. Especially Cant 4:12–5:1 stands out as a source of many motifs in chapter 24 and other pertinent texts in the book of Ben Sira. But this is not the whole truth: as the comparison of Sirach 24 with the Love Lyrics of Nabû and Tašmetu shows, Ben Sira, while doubtless reading the Song of Songs, uses the same reservoir of ancient East Mediterranean erotic-lyric tradition as does the Song of Songs. While the Song of Songs itself represents the genre of love lyrics, leaving the religious and spiritual connotations of love metaphors to the reader's imagination (which does not warrant its definition as "secular" poetry<sup>46</sup>), Ben Sira is free to draw from this reservoir for his own pedagogical and theological purposes. His method of reading the Song of Songs is not straightforward allegorization; rather, he "makes imaginative use of metaphors that allow for a variety of free associations with biblical imagery."<sup>47</sup> When utilizing metaphors drawn from the Song of Songs, he does not seem to care overly much about the original context; their use is not gender-specific and does not necessarily mirror the role structure of the Song of Song's lovers.

Quite obviously, Ben Sira reads the Song of Songs as a religious text that formed part of the instruction he poured out "like prophecy" to his students (Sir 24:33). Bringing the figure of Lady Wisdom to the play, Ben Sira can do something the role-casting of the Song of Songs does not allow for: he can make ample use of the theological connotations of love poetry and read erotic verses in a religious context quite as freely as was done overall in the ancient Near East. Just like the Love Lyrics of Nabû and Tašmetu, and unlike the Song of Songs, Ben Sira makes the erotic odors fill the sanctuary without seeing any problem in combining the sacred with the erotic. Since ancient love poetry does not recognize the dichotomy of "sacred" vs. "secular," its religious adaptation does not mean depriving it of its "original" meaning.

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<sup>45</sup> According to MacKinlay 1996: 138–139, the ministering of Wisdom before the creator expresses "another aspect of Wisdom the mediator between Yahweh and people, between the things heavenly and things earthly. At the same time, it could be an even closer identification with Israel, as she shares the priestly tradition, anticipating her embodiment in Simeon in ch. 50."

<sup>46</sup> For the recent rehabilitation of the religious reading of the Song of Songs, see, e.g., Carr 2003: 144–146, Nissinen 2008a: 212–215.

<sup>47</sup> Rogers 1996: 144.

### 3. WISDOM AND PROPHECY

As free and imaginative as Ben Sira appears to be when he uses the Song of Songs and other texts in constructing his hermeneutical construct of Wisdom,<sup>48</sup> his adaptation of the tradition of love poetry is not wild and uncontrolled. In the case of chapter 24, there is a clear “contextual clue”<sup>49</sup> that can be found when we take a deeper look at Ben Sira’s potential world of reference in the Near East. As I attempt to show below, the role Lady Wisdom assumes in chapter 24 is not his own invention but corresponds to an established Near Eastern pattern. Even the issue of prophecy, which at first sight might seem a deviation from the theme in Sir 24:33, firmly belongs to the picture.

To properly understand the role of Lady Wisdom in Sirach 24, we need to return to the beginning of the chapter, where her self-praise is introduced as follows: “In the assembly of the Most High she opens her mouth, in the presence of his host she declares her worth” (Sir 24:2). The ἐκκλησία ὑψίστου has usually been interpreted as the angelic host (δύναμις) around God,<sup>50</sup> and this interpretation may well correspond to the Hellenistic Jewish imagination of the heavenly beings. The source of this idea is unmistakably the common Near Eastern concept of the divine council (Akk. *puhur ilāni*, Ug. *phr ilm*), that is, the heavenly court where the gods make decisions about earthly matters and the fate of the people and their rulers.<sup>51</sup> Several traces of the divine council can be found in the Hebrew Bible,<sup>52</sup> and not only there, but even in one of the Dead Sea Scrolls, 4Q491, where we encounter an anonymous speaker who claims to be “in the assembly of gods” (בעדת אל ים), “with gods” (עם אל ים) and “in the congregation of the holy ones (בעדת קודש).<sup>53</sup> However the Jews might have imagined the heavenly assembly within the context of their monotheistic theology, the concept was alive in Hellenistic Judaism.

As a member of the ancient Near Eastern divine council, the goddess – more often than not Ištar or one of her manifestations – is the “diviner of the gods,”<sup>54</sup> a mediatrix through whom the decisions of the divine council are communicated to the people.<sup>55</sup> A similar pattern functions in the Mesopotamian sacred marriage,

<sup>48</sup> For Wisdom as a hermeneutical construct, see Sheppard 1980: 116–119.

<sup>49</sup> Cf. the remarks of Beentjes 2008: 415 on the necessity of the identification of a contextual clue that supports Ben Sira’s use of Scripture in order to avoid an uncontrolled “parallelomania.”

<sup>50</sup> E.g., Skehan & DiLella 1987: 331, Collins 1997: 50; cf. Marböck 1999: 58: “Auf jeden Fall steht dahinter die alte Vorstellung von Jahwe, der von himmlischen Mächten oder vom himmlischen Rat umgeben ist.”

<sup>51</sup> For an overview of the evidence, see Neef 1994, cf. also Nissinen 2002.

<sup>52</sup> E.g., Ps 82, 89:6–8; Jer 23:18; 1 Kgs 22:19–22; Isa 6:8; Am 3:7.

<sup>53</sup> Frag. 11, lines I, 12, 14, 18. Publication: Baillet 1982: 26–30.

<sup>54</sup> See Nissinen 2002: 10.

<sup>55</sup> Thus, e.g., in the oracle from Ešnunna, where the local manifestation of Ištar speaks as follows: “O king Ibalpiel, thus says Kititum: The secrets of the gods are placed before me. Because you constantly pronounce my name with your mouth, I constantly disclose the secrets of gods to you” (FLP 1674: 1–8, Ellis 1987: 240–241). For further evidence, see Nissinen 2002: 7–10,

where the goddess assumes the role of an intercessor for the king and the people and the intermediary between gods and humans.<sup>56</sup> Likewise in Assyrian prophecy, Ištar speaks for the king in the presence of *puḫur ilāni*.<sup>57</sup> In both cases, the goddess is the transmitter of divine love and knowledge, establishing an ideal relationship between the heavenly and earthly domains.<sup>58</sup> More or less direct derivatives of this role of the goddess can be found in both Jewish and early Christian and “Gnostic” literature, where it is often mingled with the Greek concept of *logos*.<sup>59</sup>

It is not difficult to recognize a similar pattern in the role of Lady Wisdom in Sirach 24, where she undeniably appears as a mediatrix.<sup>60</sup> Subordinated to the highest God, she is of divine origin (cf. Sir 1:1; Prov 8:21), and her figure is godlike; in fact, explicit statements about God are here applied to her.<sup>61</sup> At the same time, she is associated with priests and their ministry, and the description of Simon the high priest in Sir 50:5–10 almost equates him with her.<sup>62</sup> On the other hand, Ben Sira identifies himself as a teacher as a rivulet from her stream in Sir 24:30–31. Wisdom “opens her mouth” in the divine assembly, maintaining that she actually came forth “from the mouth” of the Most High. All this makes her an interlocutor and her words divine knowledge to be transmitted “among her own people” (Sir 24:1: ἐν μέσω λαοῦ ἀυτῆς), which probably refers to the people of Israel.<sup>63</sup>

What, then, is the divine knowledge to be transmitted? This is declared unambiguously in Sir 24:23: “All this” – that is, the preceding words of Lady Wisdom – “is the Book of the Covenant of the Most High” (Ταῦτα πάντα βίβλος διαθήκης θεοῦ ὑψίστου). This statement, followed by a quotation from Deut 33:4, probably refers to the five books of the Pentateuch as a whole.<sup>64</sup> It brings Lady Wisdom and the Torah very close to each other, but does not quite equate them; rather, the Torah should be understood as the verbal expression of Wisdom, revealing her essence but not being directly identifiable with her.<sup>65</sup> Lady Wisdom

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Pongratz-Leisten 2003: 155–159.

<sup>56</sup> See Nissinen 2001: 110–113, Lapinkivi 2004: 248–252.

<sup>57</sup> SAA 9 9:16: “I have ordained life for you in the assembly of all the gods” (Parpola 1997a: 41); more evidence in Nissinen 2002: 11–17.

<sup>58</sup> See Pongratz-Leisten 2003.

<sup>59</sup> For evidence, see Parpola 1997a: XXVIII, Schroer 2000: 132–154; for *logos* and Ben Sira, see especially Mack 1973.

<sup>60</sup> Thus, e.g., Lebram 1979: 117–118, Skehan & DiLella 1987: 335; cf. Rogers 1996: 153: “Her rule is equated with that of Yahweh. He exercises his dominion in and through the rule of Wisdom.”

<sup>61</sup> Cf. Sheppard 1980: 32–36.

<sup>62</sup> Sheppard 1980: 55–56.

<sup>63</sup> Thus, e.g., Skehan & DiLella 1987: 331, Collins 1997: 50.

<sup>64</sup> Cf. Veijola 2006: 434–435.

<sup>65</sup> Ueberschaer 2007: 357–358: “Die Weisheit ist in der Tora erfahrbar. Dabei handelt es sich nicht um eine Gleichsetzung. Vielmehr bleibt die Weisheit für Ben Sira immer umfassender als die Tora, doch sie äußert sich in ihr und findet in ihr eine konkrete Ausdrucksform.” Cf. Lebram 1979: 108–112, Sauer 2000: 184.

cannot be reduced to the Torah, but the Torah is equal with the word spoken by her “among her people.”

In Sir 24:25–27, the Torah is compared with the rivers bringing wisdom (σοφία), understanding (σύνεσις), and learning (παιδεία) – that is, the stream of Wisdom through which she transmits the divine knowledge to people. It is this stream that Ben Sira feels himself a rivulet of, and it is no coincidence that he claims to “pour out instruction like prophecy (ὡς προφητεῖαν).” This certainly implies the divine inspiration of the teacher who, by the will of God, “will be filled with the spirit of understanding” (Sir 39:6). The spirit is to be understood as nothing else but Lady Wisdom herself,<sup>66</sup> and the words of Wisdom as the Torah, whose teaching and interpreting is understood as prophetic activity. Hence, prophecy and teaching of Wisdom, that is, the Law, fulfill essentially the same function. This corresponds to the tendency of Second Temple Judaism, observable in the Hebrew Bible<sup>67</sup> as well as in the Dead Sea Scrolls,<sup>68</sup> to fuse the roles of prophets and scribes (or teachers of wisdom) together as mediators of divine knowledge, second only to Wisdom herself as the mediatrix *par excellence*.<sup>69</sup>

The similarity of the patterns of transmitting divine knowledge in the ancient Near Eastern evidence and in Sirach 24 is summarized in table I:

Table I. *The Patterns of Transmitting Divine Knowledge in the Ancient Near East and in Sirach 24*

<i>Ancient Near East</i>		<i>Sirach 24</i>
Divine Council	Source	Assembly of the Most High
Goddess	Divine mediatrix	Lady Wisdom
Prophecy	Word	Torah
Prophet	Human medium	Ben Sira (teacher/prophet)
King/people	Recipient	People of Israel

<sup>66</sup> Cf. Parpola 1997a: XXVI: “Accordingly, Ištar can be viewed as the ‘spirit’ or the ‘breath’ of Aššur (= God) – a concept well attested in Neo-Assyrian texts. Going a step further, one can say that Ištar of the prophecies is the spirit of God, who, residing in the heart of the prophet, *spirits* him and speaks through his or her lips” (emphasis original).

<sup>67</sup> Cf., e.g., Floyd 2006.

<sup>68</sup> Cf. Nissinen 2008b.

<sup>69</sup> Beentjes 2006: 150: “[...] in two strategic passages (24:33; 39:1) he uses the concept of ‘prophecy’ in order to describe the sage’s – that is to say, his own – function and activities as passing down and interpreting Torah. It is especially here Ben Sira breaks new ground in respect of the notion ‘prophecy.’” On prophecy in Ben Sira, see also Marttila 2008.

#### 4. BEN SIRA, SACRED MARRIAGE, AND PROPHECY

In view of the dense network of intertextual links between the Song of Songs and Ben Sira, there can be no doubt that Ben Sira actually knew the book and utilized its imagery as a part of his hermeneutical construct of Lady Wisdom. Sirach 24 in particular reads like an early commentary of the Song of Songs; in fact, it may not be much later than the canonical composition of the Song of Songs, which most probably dates from the Hellenistic period.<sup>70</sup> This implies that the Song of Songs was regarded by him as an authoritative text and that he interpreted it as a part of “the Law, the prophets, and the other writings” of his ancestors (cf. Sir Prol. 9–10). Ben Sira had no difficulty in reading the Song of Songs, and love imagery in general, in a religious context. This reading cannot be seen as constrained misuse of love poetry for purposes alien to its original function. Ben Sira rather adheres to the age-old Near Eastern tradition of using erotic imagery to describe the divine-human relationship, whereby the image of Lady Wisdom as a mediatrix between the heavenly and earthly worlds closely resembles that of the Near Eastern goddesses. This tradition, which we can still call “sacred marriage” despite the infamous connotations of this designation,<sup>71</sup> is known from the Sumerians to Hellenistic times, and its offshoots can be traced in Hellenistic Judaism, especially in texts where the personified female Wisdom plays a role.<sup>72</sup>

One of the principal functions of the goddess in Near Eastern theology is the transmission of divine favors and knowledge to the king and the people. This was believed to happen especially within the contexts of both sacred marriage and prophecy.<sup>73</sup> Accordingly, the role of Lady Wisdom as mediatrix, expressed in Sirach 24 with imagery inspired by love lyrics, also has a prophetic dimension. As Table 1 demonstrates, the pattern of the transmission of the divine word in Sirach 24 is virtually identical to that in the ancient Near East in general. It may be that “personified Wisdom refuses to be obscured by such comparisons”;<sup>74</sup> nevertheless, Lady Wisdom clearly brings the function of the goddess back to the picture, while Ben Sira assumes the position of the human medium, or the prophet, in his role as a

<sup>70</sup> For the Hellenistic date, see, e.g., Müller 1992: 3–5; for linguistic arguments in favor of this date, see Dobbs-Allsopp 2005.

<sup>71</sup> For a new understanding of sacred marriage as a metaphor for a symbolic union of two complementary gendered entities in a religious context, see Nissinen & Uro 2008. Cf. Pongratz-Leisten 2008: 57, who underlines the communicative aspect of sacred marriage: “By linking the blessing to the ‘sexual encounter’ between goddess and king, the biological nature of the divine-human interaction is transformed and is now included in the social experience of symbolic universes (*symbolische Sinnwelten*); religion takes on an essential role in constructing reality.”

<sup>72</sup> See Zimmermann 2008.

<sup>73</sup> See Pongratz-Leisten 2008.

<sup>74</sup> Sinnott 2005: 111.

teacher of Wisdom, a “rivulet from her stream”. The prominent position of chapter 24 within the composition of the book gives this idea a special emphasis.

The ancient Near Eastern pattern is an important addition to the Hellenistic evidence (the aretalogies of Isis and other texts) that has hitherto been suggested to fertilize the soil of the wisdom of Ben Sira. We will probably never be able to identify a single source from whence Ben Sira draws this pattern. What is more important is that the book of Ben Sira, being a product of the Hellenistic-Jewish culture, at the same time forms a part of the ancient Near Eastern heritage of early Judaism.