Tasting God's Light

Saints and the Spiritual Senses

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While many Westerners once assumed that sensory perception is more or less constant and universal, scholarship in the area of sensory studies has shown how volatile and diverse sensory discernment can be. For instance, though Western epistemology categorizes sensory knowledge into five senses, people across world cultures do not agree on the number of human senses that exist (some enumerate two, four, six, or seven senses), nor do they agree on how the senses function.[1] As anthropologists have illuminated, these various notions of sensory perception lead people to translate sensory experience into vastly different worldviews.[2] Thus, researchers have concluded that there is no such thing as "common sense," as the senses are not universally common, nor do they function together to produce one shared understanding of how the world works.[3]

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1. Constance Classen, "Foundations for an Anthropology of the Senses," *International Social Science Journal* 49, no. 153 (1997): 401. The Javanese, for instance, have five senses: "seeing, hearing, *talking,* smelling, and feeling." Alan Dundes, *Interpreting Folklore* (Indiana University Press, 1980), 92, emphasis original. See also David Howes, ed., *The Varieties of Sensory Experience: A Sourcebook in the Anthropology of the Senses* (University of Toronto Press, 1991).

2. Perhaps the most important work in launching the so-called "anthropology of the senses" is Paul Stoller, *The Taste of Ethnographic Things: The Senses in Anthropology* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 1989). See also Constance Classen, *Worlds of Sense: Exploring the Senses in History and across Cultures* (Routledge, 1993); David Howes, *Empire of the Senses: The Sensual Culture Reader* (Routledge, 2004); and Mark M. Smith, *Sensory History* (Berg, 2007).

3. Michael Herzfeld, "Anthropology: A Practice of Theory," *International Social Science Journal* 49, no. 153 (1997): 301. See also Jules B. Davidoff, *Differences in Visual Perception: The Individual Eye* (Academic, 1975).

In addition to highlighting cross-cultural differences, scholarship has demonstrated how sensory values and priorities shift within cultures over time. Changes in society often impact the "sense ratio," or the conception and valuation of the different senses in a culture.[4] One example is the increased preoccupation in the West with the sense of sight over the past three hundred years. In medieval Europe, a variety of sense ratios reigned that did not always privilege sight over the other senses.[5] However, since the eighteenth century, the importance of vision has grown exponentially in Western epistemology, and the "medical gaze" has become intrinsically linked with scientific knowledge.[6] This emphasis on sight is evident in language about knowledge. For example, people often use the phrase "I see" to indicate "I understand," as sight and knowledge are virtually one and the same in contemporary culture. But this oneness has not always been the case. To illustrate this point, consider the common phrase "Seeing is believing." This phrase used to be "Seeing is believing, but feeling [is the] truth."[7] With the rise of visual, scientific knowledge, however, the truth of feeling by touch or through emotion was no longer considered valid, so the latter part of the phrase was dropped.[8]

Culture-specific paradigms of sensory perception impact the way that people conceptualize and describe spiritual experience. That is, sensory perception shapes spiritual perception. As a religious educator, I have seen that one of the biggest challenges for Latter-day Saints

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4. The term "sense ratio" was coined by Marshall McLuhan in *The Gutenberg Galaxy: The Making of Typographic Man* (University of Toronto Press, 1962). For more, see Howes, *Empire of the Senses,* 55–142; Richard Newhauser, *A Cultural History of the Senses in the Middle Ages* (Bloomsbury Academic, 2014).

5. For the emergence of a variety of these sense ratios, see Paul L. Gavrilyuk and Sarah Coakley, "Introduction," in *The Spiritual Senses: Perceiving God in Western Christianity,* ed. Paul L. Gavrilyuk and Sarah Coakley (Cambridge University Press, 1993), 8–9. See also Bissera Pentcheva, *The Sensual Icon: Space, Ritual, and the Senses in Byzantium* (Penn State University Press, 2010).

6. Michel Foucault, *The Birth of the Clinic,* trans. A. M. Sheridan Smith (Tavistock, 1973); Lissa Roberts, "The Death of the Sensuous Chemist: The 'New' Chemistry and the Transformation of Sensuous Technology," in Howes, *Empire of the Senses,* 106–27.

7. Thomas Fuller, comp., *Gnomologia: Adagies and Proverbs; Wise Sentences and Witty Sayings, Ancient and Modern, Foreign and British* (B. Barker, 1732), 174.

8. Dundes, *Interpreting Folklore,* 86–92; David Howes, "Sensorial Anthropology," in Howes, *Varieties of Sensory Experience,* 169. Similarly, Erlmann argues that scientific discoveries related to aurality in the twentieth century changed how Westerners ranked the sense of hearing in their sensory ratio—it went from the opposite of reason to part and parcel of reason. Veit Erlmann, *Reason and Resonance: A History of Modern Aurality* (Zone Books, 2010).

is recognizing spiritual communication, which could be partially due to how members of the Church pigeonhole the Spirit into a specific sensorium. While Saints typically conceptualize spiritual promptings according to auditory or tactile models—*hearing* the still, small voice or *feeling* the Spirit—other cultures throughout history have understood spiritual communication differently. And just as scholarship on the physical senses has transformed the way anthropologists conceptualize sensory experience, exploring the spiritual sensoria of other peoples can open our eyes to the various ways that the Holy Ghost communicates. This article explores the sensory worlds of ancient Jews and Christians, focusing particularly on how these ancient believers portrayed spiritual experience by appealing to synesthesia, which is the phenomenon of sensory convergence (for example, hearing color, tasting sound, and so forth). Synesthetic descriptions of spiritual experience demonstrate not only the "divers manners" in which people perceive divine communication (Heb. 1:1) but also the unique, transcendent characteristics of such communication.

Seers and Hearers

Spiritual experiences are impossible to adequately render into language. As the Apostle Paul explains, the Spirit communicates with "groanings too deep for words."[9] Thus, humans must resort to employing inadequate metaphors to describe spiritual communication, metaphors that often limit the divine. To better understand this notion, we must explore recent advancements in metaphor theory.[10] While a metaphor has been traditionally understood as a simple substitution of meaning from X to Y, the scholar George Lakoff has recently demonstrated that the phenomenon is more complex than this simple equation. That is, a metaphor can be a matter of larger concepts, not mere words. For example, the metaphor "love is a journey" is a broader concept that assembles several subsidiary metaphors, like "we are at a crossroads," "we are moving forward," and so on.[11] These latter traveling metaphors are not discrete, independent verbal expressions but products of the larger notion of

9. Romans 8:26, NRSVUE: "στεναγμοῖς ἀλαλήτοις." See also 1 Corinthians 2:14.

10. I would like to thank my research assistant, Andrew Stewart, for his helpful research on metaphor theory.

11. George Lakoff, "The Contemporary Theory of Metaphor," in *Metaphor and Thought,* ed. Andrew Ortony, 2nd ed. (Cambridge University Press, 1993), 206–11; George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, "Conceptual Metaphor in Everyday Language," *The Journal of Philosophy* 77, no. 8 (August 1980): 453–86.

"journey." They apply to the target domain of love wherein "the lovers are the travelers, love is the vehicle, and mutual goals are the destination."[12] Thus, the larger concept of "journey"—which Lakoff calls a "conceptual metaphor"—permits humans to conceptualize the abstract notion of love in the more concrete terms of traveling.[13]

In contemporary Latter-day Saint discourse, spiritual communication operates primarily within the conceptual metaphor of hearing: heeding the whisperings of the Spirit, listening to the voice of the Spirit, and so on. While members of the Church are not typically referencing an actual voice, they conceptualize spiritual promptings as messages to be heard. Consider, for example, Gerald N. Lund's practical guide on how to receive revelation, *Hearing the Voice of the Lord,* or Tom Mould's study of Latter-day Saint folklore related to spiritual experience entitled *Still, the Small Voice.*[14] While Lund's work is devotional, and Mould's is academic, both books clearly situate spiritual experience within the conceptual metaphor of aurality—the Spirit functions like a voice to be heard. Admittedly, Latter-day Saints employ other sensory metaphors for spiritual communication. The notion of "feeling" the Spirit is particularly prevalent in the Church, as promptings are likened to touch. But this tactile metaphor is not conceptual in the way that the auditory is. In other words, "feeling" the Spirit is not a larger concept that provides a map of correlated, subsidiary metaphors for spiritual touch. But the auditory model is just that.

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12. Emily Cain, *Mirrors of the Divine: Late Ancient Christianity and the Vision of God* (Oxford University Press, 2023), 8.

13. Since Lakoff's influential studies, scholars have nuanced his observations by pointing out that different types of conceptual metaphors exist: (1) active/alive and (2) inert/dead. The inert metaphors are so common that people do not even realize they are metaphors to begin with (such as a "deadline," which originally referred to a physical line in the Civil War beyond which prisoners were shot), but active metaphors surprise the listener with the combination of "nonsensical" components. Paul Ricoeur, *The Rule of Metaphor: Multi-disciplinary Studies of the Creation of Meaning in Language,* trans. Robert Czerny with Kathleen McLaughlin and John Costello (University of Toronto Press, 1977), 95. See John Sanders, "Metaphors and Other Conceptual Structures," in *Theology in the Flesh: How Embodiment and Culture Shape the Way We Think about Truth, Morality, and God* (Fortress Press, 2016), 45–78.

14. Gerald N. Lund, *Hearing the Voice of the Lord: Principle and Patterns of Personal Revelation* (Deseret Book, 2007); Tom Mould, *Still, the Small Voice: Narrative, Personal Revelation, and the Mormon Folk Tradition* (Utah State University Press, 2011). Despite describing the Spirit as a voice, Mould begins his book by clarifying the diversity of spiritual promptings: "Personal revelation can be as subtle as a nagging thought or vague feeling, or as dramatic as a booming voice or vision" (ix).

The recent #HearHim initiative is a good example.[15] In 2020, President Russell M. Nelson invited members of the Church to consider the "insistent and consistent" call by God to "Hear [Christ]." Thus, President Nelson issued the following charge: "I invite you to think deeply and often about this key question: How do you hear Him? I also invite you to take steps to hear Him better and more often."[16] The Church subsequently produced a number of videos highlighting the various ways that Church leaders "Hear Him."[17] In these brief video clips, Apostles and other leaders employ a variety of auditory metaphors to explain the different ways they hear the Spirit in their lives. Thus, according to this larger conceptual metaphor of hearing, spiritual communication functions as an auditory phenomenon.

Like most figurative language, the metaphor of "hearing" the Spirit bleeds into the nonmetaphorical realm of Church culture. When Saints worship at church or at the temple, they practice reverent devotion by engaging in silent meditation; only whispering is appropriate when communication is necessary. Implied is the notion that loud noises prevent members of the Church from "hearing" the still, small voice of the Holy Ghost.[18] To a large degree, this notion has guided the construction of Latter-day Saint meetinghouses. In a 1943 *Improvement Era* article, Franklin Y. Gates—an acoustic consultant at KSL broadcasting and for Church construction projects—wrote, "Noise means confusion, quiet is associated with rest and composure. To reduce the noise and create a peaceful atmosphere, we use as much sound absorption material as is

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15. For another example, see "Voice of the Spirit" (video), Media Library, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, accessed June 10, 2024, https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/media/video/2010-08-0016-voice-of-the-spirit?lang=eng; see also James E. Faust, "Voice of the Spirit," *Ensign* 36, no. 5 (June 2006): 3–6.

16. "#HearHim: President Nelson Invites Us to Hear the Voice of the Lord" (video), Media Library, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, accessed June 10, 2024, https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/media/video/2020-02-1000-hearhim-president-nelson-invites-us-to-hear-the-voice-of-the-lord?lang=eng&alang=eng&collectionId=f3ee71a22eaa47608f71479976bda74e.

17. "Hear Him," Media Library, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, accessed June 10, 2024, https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/media/collection/hear-him?lang=eng.

18. "From 1965 to 1975 alone, the LDS organized seven conferences devoted to exposing the threat of rock music because they considered its loud noise harmful to the spiritual body." Amanda Beardsley, "The Female Absorption Coefficient: The Miniskirt Study, Gender, and Latter-day Saint Architectural Acoustics," *Technology and Culture* 62, no. 3 (July 2021): 664.

practical."[19] In other words, Church buildings are designed to dampen noise that could drown out the whisperings of the Spirit.

While such notions of quiet piety might seem natural, they are not, even within the Christian tradition. In a work examining the soundscape of early America, Leigh Eric Schmidt surveys rambunctious Christians whom he calls "sound Christians."[20] Among these were noisy Evangelicals of the early American republic, who worshiped in a manner that was anything but conducive to hearing a still, small voice. Furthermore, the famous cathedral Hagia Sophia, constructed in the sixth century, is renowned for its unparalleled reverberation.[21] Designed by architects known for producing acoustic "special effects"—including replicating the sound of thunder—the enormous cathedral was constructed with marble and other hard surfaces that reflect sound, making Hagia Sophia likely the most reverberant building in the ancient world.[22] One effect of this reverberation is that it blurs semantic speech, swallowing up individual syllables in the resonance of the church.[23] Especially when hymns are sung, the cathedral's reverberation "relativizes time" as reverberated sounds collide or harmonize with newly sung pitches, creating the impression of endless omnipresence.[24] In an edifice built to honor the eternal and "uncontainable" divine wisdom,[25] as one early observer of the cathedral noted, the seemingly endless reverberation conveys the greatness of God through its unparalleled sound.[26] In fact,

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19. Franklin Y. Gates, "Hearing Is Believing: The Story of Architectural Acoustics," *Improvement Era* 46, no. 3 (March 1943): 184. See also Beardsley, "Female Absorption Coefficient," 666–68.

20. Leigh Eric Schmidt, *Hearing Things: Religion, Illusion, and the American Enlightenment* (Harvard University Press, 2000), 38–77.

21. As one modern acoustician observes, "The audible presence of reverberation is the hallmark of Hagia Sophia." Wieslaw Woszczyk, "Acoustics of Hagia Sophia: A Scientific Approach to the Humanities and Sacred Space," in *Aural Architecture in Byzantium: Music, Acoustics, and Ritual,* ed. Bissera V. Pentcheva (Routledge, 2018), 179.

22. Bissera V. Pentcheva, *Hagia Sophia: Sound, Space, and Spirit in Byzantium* (Penn State University Press, 2017), 113. See also Anthony Kaldellis, "The Making of Hagia Sophia and the Last Pagans of New Rome," *Journal of Late Antiquity* 6, no. 2 (Fall 2013): 347–66.

23. Pentcheva, *Hagia Sophia,* 73.

24. Pentcheva, *Hagia Sophia,* 100; Woszczyk, "Acoustics of Hagia Sophia," 179.

25. *Kontakion for Hagia Sophia* 4: ἀχώρητος. See translation in Andrew Palmer, "The Inauguration Anthem of Hagia Sophia in Edessa: A New Edition and Translation with Historical and Architectural Notes and a Comparison with a Contemporary Constantinopolitan Kontakion," *Byzantine and Modern Greek Studies* 12 (1988): 117–68, especially 140–48.

26. Bissera V. Pentcheva and Jonathan S. Abel, "Icons of Sound: Auralizing the Lost Voice of Hagia Sophia," *Speculum* 92, no. S1 (October 2017): S352–56.

Figure 1. Interior view of Hagia Sophia in Istanbul from the balcony. Tinted lithograph with hand-coloring from a series of twenty-five lithographs by Louis Haghe after Gaspard Fossati, published in 1825 with title "Aya Sofia, Constantinople, as recently restored by order of H.M. the svltan Abdvl-Medjid." © The Trustees of the British Museum, released as CC BY-NC-SA 4.0 (original in public domain), lightened.

one sixth-century writer likens the cathedral to Solomon's temple but argues that the cathedral is superior to the ancient temple largely due to its grander sound.[27]

This type of resonant worship is foreign to Latter-day Saints, who are accustomed to straining to hear the whisperings of the Spirit. But like medieval worshippers at Hagia Sophia, the auditory metaphor of a soft voice leads members of the Church to place inordinate stress on acoustics (though in the opposite direction). Compare norms of sound control in the Church to other sensory parameters. No regulation about vision exists, for instance. Is there ever a concern that the fluorescent lights are too bright in a church building, preventing a person from "seeing" what the Spirit has to show? Is this perhaps because contemporary members of the Church almost never conceptualize the Spirit as something to be "seen" or "watched"? Similarly, are Latter-day Saints ever concerned with diminishing the aromas of a church building, so the Spirit can be properly smelled? These questions seem absurd, but we will see that such sensory preferences are particular to our culture's "sensory textures."[28]

To better understand our sensory preferences, we must explore our past. One could trace the Latter-day Saint preoccupation with "hearing" the Spirit to the Protestant milieu in which the Church emerged. Protestants of the sixteenth century equated the sensory-rich mass of traditional Christianity with the "flesh" of the Old Testament, and they identified the simple

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27. Brian Croke, "Justinian, Theodora, and the Church of Saints Sergius and Bacchus," *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* 60 (2006): 57. Hagia Sophia's sonority surpassed the great edifices of the past, according to the *Kontakion for Hagia Sophia*. The *Kontakion* culminates with an emphasis on the sonic transcendence of the great church, dedicating five of its last six verses (vv. 13–17) to Hagia Sophia's sonic elements. In these verses, the *Kontakion* remarks that Solomon's temple was inaugurated with similar impressive sonority: with "sacrifices [and] in hymns, [the whole people of Israel solemnized] the inauguration" of the temple; at this joyous occasion, "the sound of musical instruments accompanied the odes-[with] a many-voiced harmony" (12–13). However, the inauguration of Hagia Sophia transcended Solomon's temple (14) due to its sonic superiority (16). Rather than being a place where instruments rang out, Hagia Sophia was home to "the voice [of joyfulness] and salvation and the sound of those making festival in the Spirit, a sound composed in human souls by God." Such a place was "known to bear the impression of the liturgy of those on high" (17). By reflecting the celestial liturgy, Hagia Sophia occupied a privileged position vis-à-vis Solomon's temple, or any other terrestrial place. And it is important to note that the *Kontakion* frames this superiority in the context of sound. Hagia Sophia was on a higher sonic plane than Solomon's temple; it was a *metaxu*, or bridge, between celestial and terrestrial sonority. Palmer, "Inauguration Anthem of Hagia Sophia," 140–48.

28. Mark M. Smith, "Making Sense of Social History," *Journal of Social History* 37, no. 1 (Autumn 2003): 165–86.

word with the pure Christianity of the New Testament.[29] In other words, they preferred the simplicity of the written or spoken word to the multisensory tradition of "bells and smells."[30] This sensory preference, which emerged with the Reformation, transformed Christian piety in a rapid fashion.[31] For example, the visual presentation of the Eucharist, which was the focal point of the medieval mass for centuries, lost preeminence in the early sixteenth century. As one scholar points out, while worshippers in 1515 wanted to "see" the Eucharist host, worshippers in 1525 wanted to "hear the plain word of God."[32] Such a dramatic fluctuation in religious sensibility certainly reverberated in the metaphorical realm. As hearing the word became the dominant medium of worship, hearing the Spirit became the dominant metaphor for perceiving divinity in many circles. Thus, one could plausibly argue that Latter-day Saint preferences for auditory spiritual metaphors stem from this Protestant cultural transformation.

However, Joseph Smith throws a wrench into this simple equation. In a recent monograph, Mason Allred traces a narrative of visual piety from Joseph Smith's First Vision through the first two decades of the restored Church's existence. Joseph's numerous visitations from Moroni—more than twenty in number[33]—represent a visual experience that Allred describes as "not only repetitious but repeatable."[34] In addition to the three witnesses of the Book of Mormon, scores of others—including Mary Whitmer, Zera Pulsipher, and Oliver Granger—testified of seeing angels or other celestial phenomena, essentially "repeating" Smith's visual experience.[35] Like Joseph the Seer, Saints were invited

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29. Jacob M. Baum, *Reformation of the Senses: The Paradox of Religious Belief and Practice in Germany* (University of Illinois Press, 2019), 108–9.

30. Chris Matthews, *Tip and the Gipper: When Politics Worked* (Simon and Schuster, 2013), 330.

31. While sensory scholarship has cautioned against accepting uncritical binary oppositions of "more" or "less" sensual cultures, a definitive shift in sensory preferences certainly occurred during the Protestant Reformation. Smith, "Making Sense," 165–86; Baum, *Reformation of the Senses,* 5.

32. Peter Blickle, "Die Reformation vor dem Hintergrund von Kommunalisierung und Christianisierung: Eine Skizze," in *Kommunalisierung und Christianisierung: Voraussetzungen und Folgen der Reformation 1400–1600,* ed. Peter Blickle and Johannes Kiunisch (Duncker und Humblot, 1989), 24, author's translation.

33. H. Doni Peterson, "Moroni—Joseph Smith's Tutor," *Ensign* 22, no. 1 (January 1992): 22–29.

34. Mason Kamana Allred, *Seeing Things: Technologies of Vision and the Making of Mormonism* (University of North Carolina Press, 2023), 37.

35. Allred, *Seeing Things,* 37–39. For more, see Trevan G. Hatch, *Visions, Manifestations, and Miracles of the Restoration* (Granite, 2008).

to see spiritual phenomena.[36] In fact, Allred identifies a key difference between scriptural reading practices of Latter-day Saints and their Christian neighbors in the 1830s and 1840s: "Where Evangelical print culture . . . was a sustained attempt to use the Word to transform the world," early Latter-day Saint scriptural practice endeavored "to see *through* the word into the spiritual realm that was material and ever present."[37] For Latter-day Saints, scripture functioned like the seer stone, offering views of spiritual reality beyond the text. This notion of looking at scripture and seeing something yonder—what Allred describes as "becoming a visionary observer by turning natural vision into spiritual vision"—was a harbinger for realities in the hereafter.[38] Indeed, Joseph Smith taught that all exalted residents of the celestial kingdom would one day possess a white stone, or "Urim and Thummim," wherein they would see all things.[39]

Since Joseph's day, however, the Church has experienced a shifting sensorium. Despite the marked visuality of the Restoration—not only the First Vision but the entire visionary mission of the latter-day Seer—twenty-first century Saints typically focus on the auditory command uttered in the First Vision, "Hear Him." Thus, rather than underscoring the invitation for all to be seers like the Seer, the contemporary Church invites all to be hearers. What caused this sensory transformation? An adequate answer to this question would require extended analysis and is beyond the scope of this article. But one component could be the misuse of spiritual sight in the early restored Church. For example, Hiram Page, one of the eight witnesses of the gold plates, required correction of his visionary powers when he began seeing problematic visions in a seer stone.[40] Ultimately, misguided spiritual viewing like Page's led Joseph Smith to feel the need to delineate true visions from counterfeit ones.[41] Apparently, seeing spiritual truths in the early Church was just as difficult as hearing the still, small voice is for many in the modern Church.

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36. Nonetheless, sound was still prominent. Harris and McMurray explain, "From the very first moment, Mormonism has been produced *through* sound while simultaneously theorizing *about* its relationship to sound." Sharon J. Harris and Peter McMurray, "Sounding Mormonism," *Mormon Studies Review* 5 (2018): 34, emphasis original.

37. Allred, *Seeing Things,* 29, emphasis original.

38. Allred, *Seeing Things,* 18.

39. David W. Grua and others, eds., *Documents, Volume 12: March–July 1843,* Joseph Smith Papers (Church Historian's Press, 2021), 141; Allred, *Seeing Things,* 44.

40. See discussion in Allred, *Seeing Things,* 41.

41. See Doctrine and Covenants 129; Allred, *Seeing Things,* 42–43.

To be clear, this discussion of shifting senses is not a call for the Church to return to visual-based spirituality. Any historian of the senses recognizes that sensoria—both physical and spiritual—change over time. This is to be expected. Modern prophets, who we sustain ironically as "seers," have invited the world to "hear" God, as audition is the primary conceptual metaphor for contemporary spirituality in the Church. Nonetheless, members of the Church would do well to recognize that the discourse of spiritual hearing was not always dominant.

Throughout history, God has communicated with people via different spiritual media. Nephi teaches this principle when he asserts that God "speaketh unto [humankind] according to their language, unto their understanding" (2 Ne. 31:3). Commenting on this notion, Mark Alan Wright observes that "language is not limited to the words we use" but also "entails signs, symbols, and bodily gestures that are imbued with meaning by the cultures that produced them."[42] I would also add that "language" includes a culture's sensorium. And just as we should learn new grammar, vocabulary, and pronunciation when we wish to understand a foreign tongue, we should also learn the sensory realities of other cultures when we wish to understand their spirituality. If we impose our sensorium—and especially our spiritual metaphors—on others, we risk elevating our "blindness or dumbness to a universal rule of perception," to use Roland Barthes's expression.[43] In other words, we fail to recognize that our spiritual metaphors are not normative for all human spirituality, and we essentially limit God's communicative power. However, by interrogating the sensory realities of others, we can better understand spiritual communication across time and space.

Synesthesia of Scripture

Ancient Jews inhabited a different sensorium than we do, and learning about their sensory notions can be challenging. Researchers of ancient Jewish senses have limited data, as ancient Hebrew has no verbal category that parallels the modern term "sense" or "sensorium," and no extant Hebrew writing overtly theorizes about the senses.[44] Nonetheless,

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42. Mark Alan Wright, "'According to Their Language, unto Their Understanding': The Cultural Context of Hierophanies and Theophanies in Latter-day Saint Canon," *Studies in the Bible and Antiquity* 3 (2011): 51–52.

43. Roland Barthes, *Mythologies,* trans. Annette Lavers (Cape, 1972), 34.

44. Yael Avrahami, *The Senses of Scripture: Sensory Perception in the Hebrew Bible* (T&T Clark, 2012), 66–67.

researchers can glean an ancient Jewish sensorium based on the linguistic associative patterns in the Old Testament. Employing this methodology, one study identifies seven different senses among ancient Jews: sight, hearing, kinaesthesia, speech, taste, touch, and smell.[45]

Scholars of the Old Testament have traditionally understood ancient Jewish culture as one that privileged hearing over all other senses, including vision. This preference for the auditory is particularly evident in accounts of perceiving the divine.[46] Deuteronomy, for instance, preaches an audiocentric God who is encountered sonically rather than visually (see Deut. 4:12).[47] Furthermore, prophetic books include a large "number of verbal oracles which attest no visual component."[48] And when visions do occur, they are often reliant on auditory explanations (for example, Zech. 4; Dan. 10–12). Thus, ancient Hebrew revelation was, according to the traditional scholarly narrative, primarily an acoustic phenomenon.

But recent scholarship challenges this notion, arguing that sight was the preeminent sense in the ancient Jewish sensorium.[49] Simply put, according to one recent study, "sight leads to knowledge" in the Hebrew tradition.[50] A number of biblical passages pair the verb "to see" with "to

45. Avrahami, *Senses of Scripture,* 65–112.

46. Hans-Joachim Kraus, *Biblisch-theologische Aufsätze* (Neukirchener Verlag, 1972), 84–101.

47. Stephen Geller, *Sacred Enigmas: Literary Religion in the Hebrew Bible* (Routledge, 1996), 30–61; Andrei Orlov, *The Glory of the Invisible God: Two Powers in Heaven Traditions and Early Christology,* Jewish and Christian Texts in Context and Related Studies (T&T Clark, 2019), 39–45.

48. George Savran, "Seeing is Believing: On the Relative Priority of Visual and Verbal Perception of the Divine," *Biblical Interpretation* 17, no. 3 (2009): 323 n. 7.

49. On sight as the privileged sense, see Avrahami, *Senses of Scripture,* 3, 223–76; Michael Carasik, *Theologies of the Mind in Biblical Israel,* Studies in Biblical Literature, vol. 85 (Peter Lang, 2006), 32–43; Cain, *Mirrors of the Divine,* 34–39; Talia Sutskover-Stadler, *Sight and Insight in Genesis: A Semantic Study* (Sheffield Phoenix, 2013); Patrick Hunt, "Sensory Images in Song of Songs 1:12–2:16," in *"Dort ziehen Schiffe dahin . . .": Collected Communications to the XIVth Congress of the International Organization for the Study of the Old Testament,* ed. Matthias Augustin and Klaus-Dietrich Schunck (Peter Lang, 1996), 69–78. Wilson notes, "At times, visually perceiving the divine is the preferable mode over hearing, and even texts that elevate the import of hearing, such as Deuteronomy, can suggest that seeing God is an ideal." Brittany Wilson, "Seeing Divine Speech: Sensory Intersections in Luke's Birth Narrative and Beyond," *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 42, no. 3 (2020): 253. By contrast, Malul suggests the sense of touch, taste, and smell are part of the "multi-sensorial" process of knowing in the Hebrew Bible. Meir Malul, *Knowledge, Control and Sex: Studies in Biblical Thought, Culture and Worldview* (Archaeological Center, 2002), 125–50.

50. Avrahami, *Senses of Scripture,* 238.

know," exhibiting close connection between the two.[51] Furthermore, proof of God's miracles are attested in the visual arena, and divine reality is visually perceived by prophetic "seers."[52] "Seeing God" is also central in cultic ritual, as "viewing" Yahweh is the "preeminent image for the experience of God in the temple."[53] On the other hand, without divine aid, limited human vision results in error and madness in the Old Testament.[54] Furthermore, the hallmark of divine punishment is blindness, which is directly associated with lack of knowledge and understanding.[55] Drawing on this tradition of visual knowledge, several Second Temple and rabbinic writers hypothesize that the name "Israel" (ישראל) stems from the Hebrew verb "to see" (ראה), rendering the Jewish people "a nation of lookers."[56] And as one study demonstrates, rabbinic writers of late antiquity sought to establish themselves as the ultimate arbiters of vision; rabbis taught that only those who looked on the radiant face of a righteous rabbi could receive Torah knowledge.[57]

Despite this newly recognized Jewish ocularcentrism, Latter-day Saints typically do not focus on the visual when they discuss spiritual communication in the Old Testament. Instead, they refer to the soft-spoken Holy Ghost in 1 Kings 19, in which Elijah journeys to Mount Horeb (Sinai), the place where Moses received the Ten Commandments. There, Elijah recognizes messages from God not in the traditional signs of theophany associated with the holy mountain—fire, "great wind," and earthquake—but in a voice that is either soft or silent, translated in the

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51. Avrahami, *Senses of Scripture,* 240–48. Frisch has demonstrated that narratives surrounding Saul tend to employ the verb "to hear" (שמע), whereas stories about David typically use the verb "to see" (ראה). This literary distinction favors David over Saul; David is a mighty seer, whereas Saul is a mere hearer. Amos Frisch, "rʾh and šmʿ as a Pair of Leading Words," *World Congress of Jewish Studies* 12 (1997): 89–98.

52. Avrahami, *Senses of Scripture,* 238–48, 266–69. Elisha, for instance, demonstrates his prophetic prowess when he "sees" heavenly hosts who are protecting him against the bellicose king of Syria. 2 Kings 6:14–17.

53. Mark S. Smith, "The Psalms as a Book for Pilgrims," *Interpretation: A Journal of Bible and Theology* 46, no. 2 (1992): 62. See also Mark S. Smith, "'Seeing God' in the Psalms: The Background to the Beatific Vision in the Hebrew Bible," *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 50, no. 2 (April 1988): 171–83; Simeon Chavel, "The Face of God and the Etiquette of Eye-Contact: Visitation, Pilgrimage, and Prophetic Vision in Ancient Israelite and Early Jewish Imagination," *Jewish Studies Quarterly* 19 (2012): 1–55.

54. Cain, *Mirrors of the Divine,* 38; Avrahami, *Senses of Scripture,* 265–66.

55. Avrahami, *Senses of Scripture,* 197, 219.

56. Chavel, "Face of God," 51–53.

57. Rachel Neis, *The Sense of Sight in Rabbinic Culture: Jewish Ways of Seeing in Late Antiquity* (Cambridge University Press, 2013), 18.

King James as a "still small voice."[58] This depiction of God is quite rare in the Hebrew Bible, however. As one scholar notes, this passage is "almost alone" in its portrayal of God as "accessible to neither the eye nor the ear but evident to an inward sense that can hear silence."[59] Despite Latter-day Saint preference for this unique passage, one can imagine worshippers at Hagia Sophia gravitating more toward biblical passages depicting the theophanic hubbub associated with Moses receiving the law at Sinai (for example, Judg. 5:4–5; Ps. 18; Ps. 29). For them, the thundery manifestation of the divine—who spoke with thunder and a remarkably resonant trumpet—resonated with their own experiences (Ex. 19:16–19).

While Latter-day Saints often reference Elijah's experience with the still, small voice, a different sensory notion prevails in scriptural accounts of God communicating with ancient Israelites: synesthesia, which is defined as the convergence of sensory faculties or when "the senses touch one other."[60] Sensory scholars typically distinguish two types of synesthesia. The first is a neuropsychological phenomenon, wherein "a stimulus in one sensory modality triggers an automatic, instantaneous, consistent response in another modality (e.g., sound evokes color) or in a different aspect of the same modality (e.g., black text evokes color)."[61] The second is verbal synesthesia that joins "*terms* derived from the *vocabularies* of the various sensory domains," such as a "loud perfume."[62] The Old Testament employs both of these forms of synesthesia, typically when it describes a vivid experience with divinity. As we shall see, God was known to evoke the neuropsychological phenomenon of blurring sensory modalities (seeing words, and so on). This notion likely inspired the broader conceptual metaphor of verbal synesthesia that pervades written accounts of divinity.[63] Thus, while

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58. 1 Kings 19:12, קוֹל דְּמָמָה דַקָּה. Translators often render this phrase as "gentle breeze" or "sound of sheer silence." The Septuagint renders it as a the "sound of a gentle breeze" (φωνὴ αὔρας λεπτῆς).

59. Benjamin D. Sommer, "Revelation at Sinai in the Hebrew Bible and in Jewish Theology," *Journal of Religion* 79, no. 3 (1999): 443. Though also see Job 4:16.

60. Sean Alexander Gurd, *Dissonance: Auditory Aesthetics in Ancient Greece* (Fordham University Press, 2016), 84.

61. Reuven Tsur, "Issues in Literary Synaesthesia," *Style* 41, no. 1 (Spring 2007): 30.

62. Tsur, "Issues," 30, 39, emphasis original.

63. Consider, for example, Psalm 19, which employs verbal synesthesia. In this Psalm, vocal terminology conveys visual ideas and vice versa, as the text asserts that the *visible* sky above *audibly* "declare[s] the glory of God" and "pours out speech day by day" (vv. 2–3, author's translation). Conversely, according to the Psalm, "The [audible] commands of the Lord are radiant, giving light to the eyes" (v. 8, author's translation). In

contemporary Latter-day Saints operate within the conceptual metaphor of spiritual hearing, ancient Jews operated within the conceptual metaphor of divinely inspired synesthesia.

The emphasis on synesthesia does not mean, however, that sensory mingling was the only conceptual metaphor for divine communication. As discussed above, scholars debate the degree to which Jews operated within conceptual metaphors that were primarily auditory or primarily visual. Nonetheless, synesthesia is a paradigm for divine communication that is prevalent not only in the Old Testament but also in the Book of Mormon, New Testament, and other early Christian and Jewish sources, as we will see below.[64] Divine presence was often recognizable due to its sensual alterity.

The ancient emphasis on synesthesia should not be surprising, as the phenomenon is relatively common in descriptions of heavenly encounters across an array of religious traditions. Broadly speaking, the merger of sensory perception underscores the convergence of human and divine. In the *Symposium,* for instance, Plato describes the process of approaching pure, divine beauty in its totality. The penultimate step before ascending to this transcendent experience is synesthesia, where sensory experiences are unified.[65] Similarly, in the medieval Christian liturgy, sensory commingling serves to "transfigure at once the things perceived, and the subject perceiving them, and to unite them through the 'immutation' of the senses which conforms them to, rather than extrinsically representing, the [divine] objects of perception."[66] In other words, synesthesia represents transformation and ultimately union with God.[67]

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this Psalm, the vocal and the visual switch roles and ultimately work together to form a complete revelation of God. Sheri L. Klouda, "The Dialectical Interplay of Seeing and Hearing in Psalm 19 and Its Connection to Wisdom," *Bulletin for Biblical Research* 10, no. 2 (2000): 181–95.

64. For synesthesia in the ancient world, see especially Shane Butler and Alex Purves, eds., *Synaesthesia and the Ancient Senses,* The Senses in Antiquity (Acumen, 2013).

65. Ralph Rosen, "Plato, Beauty and 'Philosophical Synaesthesia,'" in *Synaesthesia and the Ancient Senses,* 89–102.

66. Catherine Pickstock, "Spiritual Perception and Liturgy," in *Perceiving Things Divine: Towards a Constructive Account of Spiritual Perception,* ed. Frederick D. Aquino and Paul L. Gavrilyuk (Oxford University Press, 2022), 121–22.

67. Speaking of epiphanies in the Greco-Roman world, Verity Platt observes, "Ritual invocations of divine presence frame climactic moments of visual revelation synaesthetically, combining the aromas produced by incense and burning offerings with the sonic effects of vocal or musical performance and tactile engagement with the paraphernalia of cult (not to mention the gustatory aspects of sacrificial feasting)." Verity Platt, "Sight

Old Testament Synesthesia: Seeing Smells and Sounds

In the Old Testament, synesthesia very often involves the combination of vision and other senses.[68] In these instances, the merger of sensory modalities indicates divine presence and confirms the execution of God's will. Genesis 27, for example, recounts a very sensory story of birthright inheritance.[69] Isaac, whose "eyes were so dim that he could not see" (Gen. 27:1), tells his eldest son, Esau, to go hunt game and prepare "tasty" food for him to eat before he blesses the potential heir with a ritual of inheritance (Gen. 27:4).[70] Overhearing this, Rebekah hatches a plan with Esau's younger brother Jacob for him to deceptively take the place of his older brother. But Jacob is concerned with touch—what if Isaac feels his smooth skin that doesn't resemble Esau's hairy body? Assuaging his concerns, Rebekah cooks tasty food with Jacob for his father, dresses the boy in Esau's clothes, and places the skins of goats on his hands and neck. When Jacob approaches his father and claims to be Esau, inquisitive Isaac wonders how his son has the voice of Jacob but the hands of Esau. Nonetheless, Isaac eats the meal prepared for him and asks Jacob to come close to kiss him. It is at this suspenseful moment when synesthesia confirms Jacob's birthright. So far, the story has incorporated all the Hebrew senses except smell—sight (or lack thereof, blindness), hearing, kinaesthesia (going out to hunt), speech, taste, and touch. When Jacob comes near his father, however, Isaac's doubts are put to rest as he smells the garments of his son—this is the divinely ordained heir. The patriarch exclaims: "See, the smell of my son is like the smell of a field that the Lord has blessed."[71] Blind Isaac ironically now knows, or "sees," that the smell of Jacob's clothing has the aroma of a blessed field.[72] In this case, the sense of smell confirms true birthright and functions like authorizing vision.

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and the Gods: On the Desire to See Naked Nymphs," in *Sight and the Ancient Senses,* ed. Michael Squire (Routledge, 2016), 169.

68. The Hebrew Bible also often blurs the senses of hearing and sight. Avrahami, *Senses of Scripture,* 69–74.

69. On the sensory overload in this story, see Sutskover-Stadler, *Sight and Insight,* 116–18.

70. Author's translation. The word "tasty" (מַטְעַמִּים) is a lexeme based on the word "to taste" (טָעַם).

71. Gen 27:27, רְאֵה רֵיחַ בְּנִי כְּרֵיחַ שָׂדֶה אֲשֶׁר בֵּרְכוֹ יְהוָה, author's translation.

72. See also Exodus 5:21, where the Israelites complain to Moses that he "made us stink in the eyes of Pharaoh" (הִבְאַשְׁתֶּם אֶת־רֵיחֵנוּ בְּעֵינֵי פַרְעֹה), author's translation.

Interestingly, several rabbinic commentaries on this text compare the scent of Jacob to other sacred fragrances. According to one rabbinic opinion, recorded between AD 300 and 500, "When our patriarch Jacob entered to his father, the Garden of Eden entered with him."[73] That is, Isaac smelled the pungent aromas of Eden in Jacob's garment, aromas that were known in ancient Jewish sources to have inordinate power. In fact, in first-century versions of the *Life of Adam and Eve,* the only items that Adam takes from the Garden of Eden upon his expulsion are spices and aromatic plants. Thus, these fragrances become the "one element in the inhabited world that had its direct source in Eden's splendor."[74] By smelling Eden, Jacob links heaven and earth, the human and the divine.

Another rabbinic opinion connects Jacob's clothes to a different holy scent. According to some late ancient rabbis, the smell of Jacob prefigured the fragrant incense that would burn in the Israelite temple centuries in the future.[75] One rabbinic work even claims that God let Isaac see the future temple of Israel, with its pungent incense, when he smelled the garment of his blessed son.[76] Ultimately, regardless of what Isaac smelled and saw in Jacob's clothes, divine favor was sanctioned in synesthetic sight and smell.[77]

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73. Bereshit Rabbah 65:22, בְּשָׁעָה שֶׁנִּכְנַס אָבִינוּ יַעֲקֹב אֵצֶל אָבִיו נִכְנָסָה עִמּוֹ גַּן עֵדֶן, author's translation. Bereshit Rabbah is a Jewish commentary on the book of Genesis.

74. Susan Ashbrook Harvey, *Scenting Salvation: Ancient Christianity and the Olfactory Imagination,* (University of California Press, 2015), 48–53. Divine odor is explicitly linked to the Garden of Eden in *1 Enoch* and the *Life of Adam and Eve.* The text of *1 Enoch* explains that the remarkable fragrances of the trees in the Garden of Eden were the original source of life and will be again at the end of time. In first-century versions of the *Life of Adam and Eve,* Eden is saturated with divine fragrance, the same fragrance which cloaks the cherubim who worship God in heaven. After being told to leave the Garden, Adam begs God to let him "take fragrance from paradise" (51). God relents, so Adam takes spices and aromatic plants, which were the one element on earth of heavenly origin. Harvey explains, "In their fragrances, the spices of paradise joined heaven and earth, mortality and immortality, alienation and reconciliation, human and divine" (52).

75. See discussion in Benjamin Kedar-Kopfstein, "Synästhesien im biblischen Althebräisch in Übersetzung und Auslegung," *Zeitschrift für Althebraistik* 1 (1988): 47–60, especially 55.

76. Bereshit Rabbah 65:23.

77. Many ancient Jews saw continuity between Eden and the Temple. See Alex Douglas, "The Garden of Eden, the Ancient Temple, and Receiving a New Name," in *Ascending the Mountain of the Lord: Temple, Praise, and Worship in the Old Testament* ed. David R. Seely, Jeffrey R. Chadwick, and Matthew J. Grey, 42nd Annual Brigham Young University Sidney B. Sperry Symposium (Deseret Book, 2013), 36–48.

Throughout the Old Testament, synesthesia is a hallmark of biblical theophanies. In these accounts of divine encounters, hearing and seeing typically complement one another.[78] Ezekiel 43:1–5, for instance, employs visual and verbal descriptions of the "glory" of God; the presence of the almighty Jehovah is like the rising sun from the east combined with the sounds of many waters. Speaking of Ezekiel's synesthetic description, Mark Smith observes, "By combining two types of natural phenomena, this passage may be suggesting that the nature of God is so great that it incorporates aspects of both types. It may also indicate that God's appearance was considered so great that it could not be identified easily with, or reduced to, one natural phenomenon. In effect, God is above the language of natural phenomena; God is truly 'super-natural.'"[79] Thus, by transcending one sensory mode, God demonstrates that he is beyond terrestrial perception.

God's supernatural nature is also revealed at Sinai, which is the most famous instance of synesthesia in the Old Testament. When Moses is on the mount receiving the Ten Commandments, "all the people see the voices" of thunder that God articulates.[80] Enigmatically, God's speech is something to see, not hear. This defining moment for the people of Israel—the divine bestowal of their law that sets the precedent for all subsequent relations with God to a large degree—occurs in a mysterious, synesthetic fashion of visible speech.

For millennia, this passage has inspired Jewish interpreters to theorize about the nature of God's visible voice.[81] For example, according to one ancient Jew named Philo of Alexandria (around 20 BC–AD 50), God's words at Sinai are words of light, not sound. Moses sees them; he does not hear them.[82] On the contrary, the idolatrous golden calf represents the inferior sense of hearing (as it was made from the golden

78. Savran, "Seeing Is Believing," 320–61. According to Savran, vision and audition are the primary modes of divine communication found in the Bible. See also Malul, *Knowledge, Control, and Sex,* 144–51.

79. Smith, "Seeing God," 179.

80. Exodus 20:15, וְכָל־הָעָם רֹאִים אֶת־הַקּוֹלֹת. Exodus 20:18, LXX, καὶ πᾶς ὁ λαὸς ἑώρα τὴν φωνὴν, author's translation.

81. See especially Sommer, "Revelation at Sinai," 422–51; Elliot R. Wolfson, "The Hermeneutics of Visionary Experience: Revelation and Interpretation in the *Zohar,*" *Religion* 18, no. 4 (October 1988): 313; Michael Carasik, "To See a Sound: A Deuteronomic Rereading of Exodus 20:15," *Prooftexts* 19, no. 3 (September 1999): 257–65; Stephen A. Geller, "Fiery Wisdom: Logos and Lexis in Deuteronomy 4," *Prooftexts* 14, no. 2 (May 1994): 103–39.

82. Philo, *De decalogo* 46–47 (LCL 320:28–30).

earrings of the Israelites).[83] Thus, God is experienced in the visual realm.[84] Significantly, however, according to Philo, the divine and the human merge when God descends via the verbal to his prophets, who ascend via the visual. God speaks luminosity, and prophets experience synesthesia to symbolize the coming together of human and divine, the auditory and the visual.[85]

Jewish writers throughout the ages have similarly theorized about the Sinai revelation, though they have not found widespread agreement about the nature of this synesthetic encounter with divinity. A near contemporary of Philo, Rabbi Akiva (around AD 50–135), taught that the Israelites saw the fiery word extend from the mouth of God and strike the Ten Commandments onto the tablets. On the contrary, Rabbi Judah the Prince (around AD 135–217), argues that the notion of seeing the word of God refers to the Israelites' miraculous ability to immediately visualize and interpret the divine voice, which was originally auditory.[86] The medieval Jewish mystical work called the *Zohar* includes several other rabbinic opinions about the nature of the visible speech on Sinai, with each interpretation underscoring the transcendent nature of the synesthetic voice.[87] Similarly, one fifteenth-century rabbinical commentary on Exodus teaches that each word that God uttered at Sinai took on physical form and could be seen in the air as floating letters.[88] Ultimately, no matter how these Jewish readers interpreted the Exodus passage, they understood the revelation of God as something that occurred in a manner that differed from standard sensory experience. The synesthetic description of Sinai inspired these interpreters to conceptualize divine communication as otherworldly.

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83. Philo, *De posteritate Caini* 165–167 (LCL 227:424–26).

84. The following description of Philo is a summary of David Chidester, *Word and Light: Seeing, Hearing, and Religious Discourse* (University of Illinois Press, 1992), 30–43.

85. In this experience, the visionary/luminous aspect of divine words always remain, however. See discussion in Chidester, *Word and Light,* 39–42.

86. For the arguments of Akiva and Judah, see Jacob Z. Lauterbach, ed., *Mekilta de-Rabbi Ishmael,* 9th ed. (Jewish Publication Society of America, 1933), 2:266–67.

87. Rabbi Abba "suggests that the . . . voices of divine speech were embodied in the . . . darkness, cloud, and thick fog." Rabbi Jose claims that the voices were "the potencies of God, which shone forth." Rabbi Eleazar believes that "Sinai Israel had a vision of Shekhinah." Wolfson, "Hermeneutics of Visionary Experience," 313.

88. *Kli Yakar* commentary on Exodus 20:15:1. "We have to understand how they could see the sounds. . . . It sounds reasonable that each word the God spoke became palpable and tangible to the extent that it took on physical form and could be seen in the air as floating letters as if they were written in front of them." Josh Fleet, trans., "Seeing Sound: Making Sense of Sinai," *Sefaria,* May 21, 2019, https://www.sefaria.org/sheets/174978?lang=bi.

Book of Mormon Synesthesia: A Delicious Word, Tasting Light, and a Piercing Voice

Like many writers of the Old Testament, Nephi conceptualizes divine communication as a combination of the visual and verbal. He explains that while the "words of Christ will *tell* you all things what ye should do," the Holy Ghost "will *show* unto you all things what ye should do" (2 Ne. 32:3, 5, emphasis added). Various figures in the Book of Mormon also resemble Old Testament writers in their descriptions of sight-based synesthesia. For instance, in 1 Nephi 8, Lehi is journeying in a "dark and dreary waste" (1 Ne. 8:4) when he sees a tree bearing fruit that is not only the sweetest that he has ever tasted but the whitest thing that he has ever seen. When Nephi sees the same tree in a vision a few chapters later, he remarks that it exceeds "the whiteness of the driven snow" (1 Ne. 11:8). The fruit of this tree is so white that it is essentially light—this is at least how Alma the Younger interprets the vision. In his discourse on planting the seed of the tree of life in Alma 32, Alma compares the process of cultivating the growing tree to tasting its luminous fruit.[89] He asks, "After ye have tasted this light is your knowledge perfect?" (Alma 32:35). How can a person taste light? Normal sensory functions render this notion impossible. But the love of God, represented in the fruit, is otherworldly—it is perceived differently.

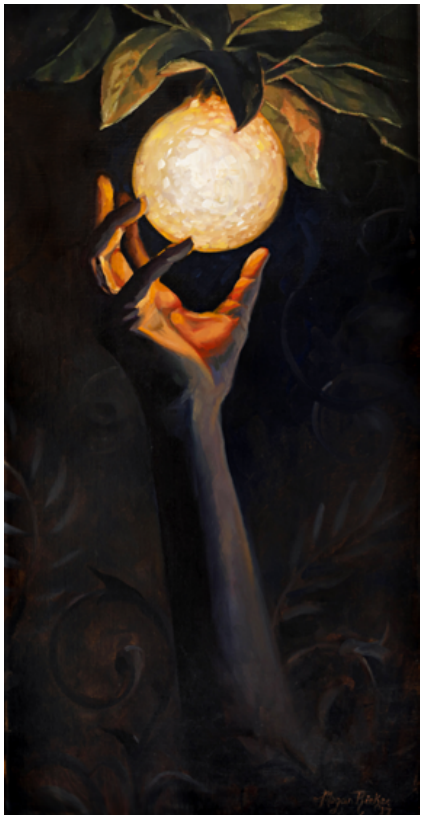

Figure 2. *Fruit of Life* by Megan Rieker, oil on canvas, 2017, by permission of the artist.

This notion of tasting light gains more significance when we consider that Alma's discourse on growing the seed of the tree of life was originally in the same

89. Alma identifies the tree as the tree of life in Alma 32:40–42.

chapter as his rebuttal of the antichrist Korihor. Thus, as Grant Hardy argues, we should read these passages in light of one another.[90] Korihor is fundamentally ocularcentric, arguing that humans cannot know of things they cannot "see" (Alma 30:15). He denies traditions about God who "never has been seen or known," unless Alma will "show" him a (presumably) visible sign.[91] Ironically, Alma conjures an auditory sign, striking the visually oriented Korihor dumb. While this ostentatious display silences Korihor in a flurry, the narrative does not provide a fleshed-out rebuttal of Korihor's epistemology until Alma discourses on the seed of the tree of life a little while later. There, Alma explains that spiritual knowledge functions differently than Korihor's visually oriented paradigm. Rather than the result of standard eyesight, sure knowledge, or "light," is the product of eating the fruit that is "white above all that is white" (Alma 32:42). In other words, light and knowledge are the result of eating the metaphorical fruit, not seeing with the literal eye. This synesthesia of tasting light reinforces the notion that spiritual knowledge cannot be perceived the same way as physical knowledge.

The counterintuitive connection between tasting and seeing is prevalent in the Book of Mormon. In this regard, Nephite prophets echo the sentiments of the Psalmist, who states, "Taste and see how good the Lord is."[92] In Alma 36, for instance, Alma tells his son Helaman how he came to know Christ, "not of the temporal but of the spiritual, not of the carnal mind but of God" (Alma 36:4). Then, outlining his conversion, Alma speaks of "the exceeding joy" which he "did taste," as well as the many converts who also "have tasted as I have tasted, and have seen eye to eye as I have seen" (Alma 36:24, 26). Being "born of God" permitted Alma and his subsequent missionary converts to experience spiritual knowledge in the form of delicious vision. Similarly, King Benjamin and Mormon also draw on the discourse of spiritual taste to describe their

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90. Alma 30–35 in the current chapter divisions originally comprised one chapter: Alma 16. Grant Hardy, *The Annotated Book of Mormon* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2023), 400.

91. See Alma 30:28, 43–45. Korihor plausibly used the word אוֹת for "sign," which bears visual connotations. See Francis Brown, S. R. Driver, and Charles A. Briggs, eds. *A Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament* (Clarendon Press, 1974), 16, s.v. "אוֹת." For more on a "sign" for knowledge, see Joseph Spencer, "Is Not This Real?" *BYU Studies Quarterly* 58, no. 2 (2019): 87–104, especially 95.

92. Author's translation. Psalm 34:8–9, טַעֲמוּ וּרְאוּ כִּי־טוֹב יְהוָה. See also the account of Jonathan's eyes being enlightened when he eats: 1 Samuel 14:24–30.

knowledge of divine truths.[93] Thus, just as the contemporary Church maintains the spiritual injunction to "Hear Him" from its founding story, the Nephites draw on the synesthetic combination of taste and light from their founding story: the famous account of the tree of life.

The climactic theophany of the Book of Mormon is also rich with synesthetic themes and resembles Old Testament revelations. In 3 Nephi 8, the most terrible storm in Nephite history announces the death of the Messiah. With thunder, lightning, and earthquakes, the tempest evokes the divine demonstration at Sinai. But 3 Nephi includes an even more overt reference to the events of the Exodus: a "thick darkness" comes upon the land so that all the inhabitants of the Nephite lands "*feel* the vapor of darkness" for three days (3 Ne. 8:20, emphasis added). While many readers explain this tangible darkness as the likely result of volcanic ash, it also recalls the ninth plague of Egypt where God curses the Egyptians with "darkness" so thick "it can be felt."[94] Following this synesthetic darkness in Egypt, which lasts three days, the Lord slays the firstborn Egyptians, and the Israelites flee Egypt to Sinai, where they experience a synesthetic theophany and see the sound of God's voice. Likewise, in 3 Nephi, the three-day tangible darkness comes in the wake of the death of the Firstborn Son, and the people subsequently experience a synesthetic theophany when Jesus appears. Just as the Israelites at Sinai had seen divine words, the Nephites see the Word.[95] Furthermore, these Nephite witnesses of Christ later testify that they "*saw and heard* Jesus speak" (3 Ne. 17:16–17, emphasis added), combining the visual and aural like the account of the famous theophany of Exodus. Clearly, Christ is the synesthetic "God of Israel," the title he uses to introduce himself to the people of the Americas (3 Ne. 11:14).

Another central component of this Book of Mormon theophany is the voice that comes from heaven. In the darkness, the people hear a loud declaration that echoes "upon all the face of [the] land, crying" woes and repentance (3 Ne. 9:1). Then, about a year later, the people at

93. King Benjamin follows the paradigm of the tree of life, whose fruit is the love of God, when he speaks of those who "have known of [God's] goodness and tasted of his love" (Mosiah 4:11). Likewise, Mormon describes his younger self as someone who "tasted and knew of the goodness of Jesus" (Morm. 1:15). Clearly, taste, which is often connected to sight, is a primary sensory model for depicting spiritual experience in the Nephite record.

94. Exodus 10:21, וַיְמֵשׁ חֹשֶׁךְ, author's translation.

95. While Jesus does not explicitly refer to himself as the Word (John 1:1), he describes himself with Johannine language in 3 Nephi 9:15–18.

the temple of Bountiful hear a "small voice" announcing the arrival of Christ (3 Ne. 11:3). Thus, like Sinai—where God's thundery presence is experienced by liberated Israelites, and his still, small voice is heard by Elijah—the divine voice in the Book of Mormon resounds at opposite ends of the decibel scale. And when it announces the arrival of Christ in a quiet tone, the voice bears synesthetic properties. The people are physically affected by it—"[the voice] did pierce them that did hear to the center," causing their frames to "quake" and their "hearts to burn" (3 Ne. 11:3). Furthermore, the Nephites and Lamanites are unable to understand the voice until they look "towards the sound thereof" (3 Ne. 11:5). Similar to Sinai, there is a synesthetic nature to the voice.[96]

New Testament Synesthesia: See the Word; Jesus Narrates the Father

Like the Book of Mormon and Old Testament, the New Testament often employs synesthetic descriptions for divine phenomena. It almost goes without saying that Christ's incarnation represents an anomaly in history, as divinity "was made flesh and dwelt among us" (John 1:14).[97] Even though there was "nothing [special] in his appearance that we should desire him" (Isa. 53:2, NIV), there was something unique, even synesthetic, about his presence. For instance, in a recent analysis of divine speech in Luke's nativity account, Brittany Wilson notes the significance of seeing, not just hearing. "For Luke," Wilson observes, "there is something important to 'seeing' divine speech."[98] This sensory merger is evident in the shepherds' reaction to the angelic annunciation of Christ's birth: "Let us *see this word* which the Lord revealed to us."[99] Like the

96. Touch is also emphasized in this account. At his initial descent among the people, Jesus commands them to come forth and "feel" the nail prints in his hands and feet, that they "may know" who he is (3 Ne. 11:14). Only after they "did feel with their hands" did they "know of a surety" and "bear record" that this was the prophesied Christ (3 Ne. 11:15). While worldly-minded people like Korihor prized vision as the preeminent sense of knowledge, touch functions like truth-confirming eyesight here. In fact, Jesus himself explains that he came to the Nephites for them to "feel and see" that he is "the light" (3 Ne. 18:24–25). Just as the Nephites had felt the tangible, deathly darkness at the death of the Messiah, when Christ appears, they feel the wounds of the "light and the life of the world" (3 Ne. 9:18). While seeing might be believing, touching is the truth here.

97. Author's translation.

98. Wilson, "Seeing Divine Speech," 254.

99. Luke 2:15, emphasis added, ἴδωμεν τὸ ῥῆμα τοῦτο τὸ γεγονὸς ὃ ὁ κύριος ἐγνώρισεν ἡμῖν. While ῥῆμα can also mean "thing," Wilson argues convincingly for rendering it as "word" here. Wilson, "Seeing Divine Speech," 258–60.

Israelites who see the divine words at Sinai, the shepherds go to see the divine word recently spoken to them. This notion recalls the synesthetic statement of Jesus in Luke 8: "Watch how you listen."[100]

A similar synesthetic description is found at the beginning of the Gospel of John. The fourth gospel is perhaps the most ocularcentric text in the New Testament. In this account, Christ is the "light of all humanity" who invites potential disciples to "come and see" where he dwells.[101] When Nathanael answers the call to see Jesus in John 1, the Lord informs him, "I saw you while you were still under the fig tree" (John 1:48, NIV). Christ's visionary power leads Nathanael to dub Jesus the "King of Israel."[102] Potentially drawing on the tradition of Israel as a "nation of lookers," Nathanael recognizes Jesus as the king of seers. But Christ overlooks this acclaim and promises Nathanael grander vistas than Christ himself just witnessed: "You will see greater things," Jesus informs Nathanael. "You will see heaven open, and the angels of God ascending and descending on the Son of Man."[103] Then, throughout the fourth gospel, the disciples see the incredible views promised by Jesus, including the Father himself in Christ. As Jesus states, "Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father" (John 14:9, NIV). Christ is the ultimate theophany, revealing even the Father.

Despite this overtly visual witness, Christ inspired notions of synesthesia in John. The Gospel's prologue (John 1:1–14) declares Jesus to be "the Word" (*Logos*), which is a common title in ancient Greek writings for the divine reason that orders the cosmos. As this Word, Christ espouses a visual, luminary function: he is the "true light that gives light to everyone" (John 1:9, NIV). At the same time, however, Christ also resonates acoustically with Jewish tradition; John links Christ the Word to the Genesis account of God speaking a word "in the beginning" (Gen. 1:1; John 1:1). In this regard, Jesus embodies both the visual and the verbal simultaneously. This amalgam is particularly evident in the Johannine reference to Sinai. After outlining the wondrous sight of Christ incarnate—asserting "we viewed his glory"—John declares that "no one" had

100. Luke 8:18, βλέπετε οὖν πῶς ἀκούετε, author's translation, emphasis added.

101. John 1:4, τὸ φῶς τῶν ἀνθρώπων; John 1:39, ἔρχεσθε καὶ ὄψεσθε, author's translation.

102. John 1:49, ὁ υἱὸς τοῦ θεοῦ, σὺ βασιλεὺς εἶ τοῦ Ἰσραήλ, author's translation.

103. John 1:50–51, NIV, μείζω τούτων ὄψῃ . . . ὄψεσθε τὸν οὐρανὸν ἀνεῳγότα καὶ τοὺς ἀγγέλους τοῦ θεοῦ ἀναβαίνοντας καὶ καταβαίνοντας ἐπὶ τὸν υἱὸν τοῦ ἀνθρώπου, author's translation.

previously "ever seen God" (John 1:14, 18).[104] This statement is almost certainly a reference to Exodus 33:18–23, where Moses is allowed only a partial view of God's "glory."[105] John distinguishes this partial view from the unobstructed divine revelation embodied in Christ and his visible "glory." That is, John implies what is explicitly proclaimed later in the Gospel: "Anyone who has seen [the Son] has seen the Father" (John 14:9, NIV). But, curiously, John's prologue uses a verbal word to convey this visual reality. The Gospel explains that Jesus, the Word, "exegeted" or "narrated" the Father, employing the verb ἐξηγέομαι, which denotes the dictation of words in a narrative. Thus, the prologue—which is filled with optical and luminous depictions of the Word—concludes with an auditory descriptor. Similar to, though grander than, Sinai, Christ's revelation is a synesthetic combination of sight and hearing.

After the death of Jesus, his post-Resurrection appearances likewise trigger synesthesia. On the road to Emmaus, for instance, Jesus interprets scripture to his disciples and causes their hearts to "burn," linking an oral interpretation to a physical sensation.[106] Then, when Jesus breaks bread, he causes their eyes to be "opened," connecting the tactile breaking of bread to the notion of vision.[107] His other post-Resurrection appearances are likewise overtly sensory, combining visual, tactile, auditory, and gustatory phenomena. Ultimately, the Gospels bookend Christ's earthly life with synesthetic descriptions of his birth and Resurrection. Jesus is revealed by synesthesia.

Conclusion

Ancient scripture is replete with synesthetic descriptions of divinity. Transcending the standard sensory perceptions of everyday life, divine communication occurs beyond the discrete, terrestrial senses. The faithful see divine words, smell the promises of God, and taste heavenly light. These notions pervade ancient sacred texts, as synesthesia constituted a primary conceptual metaphor of divine phenomena. Though these notions were "foolishness" to the "natural [hu]man," spiritual communication was known to be sui generis, or "spiritually discerned" (1 Cor. 2:14, KJV). It defied the sensory modalities of everyday life.

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104. Author's translation.

105. Craig S. Keener, *The Gospel of John: A Commentary,* 2 vols. (Hendrickson, 2003), 1:410–12.

106. Luke 24:32, Οὐχὶ ἡ καρδία ἡμῶν καιομένη ἦν ἐν ἡμῖν, author's translation.

107. Luke 24:31, αὐτῶν δὲ διηνοίχθησαν οἱ ὀφθαλμοί, author's translation.

While the contemporary Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints inhabits a conceptual metaphor of auditory spirituality, members would do well to recognize that this notion is specific to our era. Studying other spiritual languages, so to speak, can inform learners about divine communication generally. Perhaps, as we respond to the call to "Hear Him," we can recognize that his messages come in a variety of forms, including synesthesia. With the ancient faithful, we can taste the light or see the words of his love.

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