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# **BETWEEN HEARING AND SILENCE**

A Study in Old Testament Theology

*John Kessler*

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To Père Jean Lévêque O.C.D.

With profound gratitude

אך אל אלהים דומיה נפשי ממנו ישועתי

For God alone my soul waits in silence; from him comes my salvation. (NRSV)

Ps 62:1

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# 1

## UNDERSTANDING SILENCE

### *Foundational Issues*

What is silence? And why is it worth considering? Even a moment's reflection reveals how elusive a concept silence actually is. Why is it so difficult to define? Unlike many topics that can be dealt with more objectively, most if not all discussion of silence necessarily proceeds from its *experiential* dimension. Like hunger, fatigue, thirst, or love, we are able to speak of silence because we have experienced it. As children we hear the sound “shhh” and learn something of silence by being called to enact it, to cease what we are doing, and “not make a sound.” Or we may have experienced silence lying fearfully in our beds in the dead of night, attentive to every creak or thump. As we proceed through life, we learn that silence is closely related to concepts such as stillness, calm, peace, and quiet. We discover as well that it can be something external, such as a calm or silent place, or relate to more internal states, such as a serene or peaceful heart. We learn that it can describe intentionally adopted behaviors. Someone appears upset and we ask, “why are you so quiet?” However, it can also refer to imposed behaviors—“the teacher forbade all discussion of the subject.” It can describe how actions should be performed—“leave quietly when you go”—or characteristics of persons or things. We sing the carol *Silent Night* or hear talk of a “quiet child.” We quickly become aware that the concept of silence is multiform, relating to numerous interrelated ideas and experiences.

As we shall see, silence may mean many things, but rarely, in our common use, does it refer to a total absence of all sound. A silent night is not a time of absolutely no sound, nor is a taciturn person one who never speaks

at all. When a person or group is said to have been forced into silence, that silence does not concern *all* speech, but only to certain, prohibited topics. The title of Rachel Carson's famous monograph *Silent Spring* alludes not to the absence of all sound, but to the customary noises of birds and insects lost due to environmental pollution.<sup>1</sup> Composer John Cage, famous for his piece "4'33" in which the audience sits in silence while the musicians do not play a note, declared after its premiere performance, "There's no such thing as silence." He was referring to the audience's experience of becoming aware of the numerous sounds other than musical notes that were audible to them.<sup>2</sup> In fact, it is not altogether certain whether a total absence of sound is actually perceptible by the human person. Cage once described being placed in a totally soundproofed room and yet being able to hear two sounds, one low and the other high. He was subsequently informed that the low sound was the circulation of his blood, and the higher one emanated from his nervous system.<sup>3</sup>

We generally understand silence as *expressive of meaning*. A person who chooses to remain silent may be communicating a wide range of sentiments or making any number of declarations: anger or peace, assent or dissent, acceptance or rejection. Furthermore, silence relates not only to speech and sound, but also to actions. To fail to intervene is to remain silent. But silence does more than simply convey meaning. It is deeply connected to affect, ethos, and context. Specific geographic settings seem to exude a silence of their own.<sup>4</sup> Silence is sometimes associated with buildings. Alain Corbin describes certain edifices, both real and literary, that seem to be infused with it.<sup>5</sup> Silence may also depict the inner attitude of a person who is attentive and waiting for that which another may say or do. Mystic and religious philosopher Simone Weil famously writes of *Waiting for God*.<sup>6</sup>

Moreover, silence may also have an active dimension. As one philosopher has stated, one may *do* things by means of it.<sup>7</sup> Silence has effects, and may create possibilities. A sudden diminution of sound may draw one's attention away from distractions and preoccupations, and create a context for speech and hearing. In A. A. Milne's famous children's book *The House at Pooh Corner*, Winnie the Pooh, a bear, and his companions Piglet and Rabbit, are lost in the fog, and cannot find their way home. It is only when they become separated, and Pooh is away from Rabbit's incessant banter, that he can "hear" his honey pots calling him and leading him home.<sup>8</sup> On a more sombre note, the films of Ingmar Bergman illustrate silence's ability to create a context or a space within which words or actions take on special poignancy.<sup>9</sup> Edgar Lee Masters' poem *Silence* (Feb 1915) sets forth the many ways silence may express that which lies beyond words.<sup>10</sup>

Silence frequently pulls us in two opposing directions. On the one hand, in our frenetic world we desperately crave the peaceful silence of solitude, stillness, and undisturbed rest.<sup>11</sup> Images of glass-like lakes, mountain vistas, or deep green forests come to mind and offer us respite. On the other hand, silence may speak to us of death, separation, and sorrow. The realities of a telephone that no longer rings, a silent room where no one enters, or an aching emptiness within speak to us of silence. Hamlet, just before his tragic death, utters the words, “the rest is silence.”<sup>12</sup> Bob Dylan once observed, “experience teaches that silence terrifies people the most.”<sup>13</sup> As we go on in life, we encounter silence in various contexts and see it enacted numerous ways. And, at one time or another, silence affects us most profoundly, for good or for ill.

In recent years there has been a great proliferation of books, articles, and films on silence, written from various perspectives: religious and secular, theoretical and applied.<sup>14</sup> Discussions of silence frequently take one specific dimension of it as their starting point. Some studies focus on its more philosophical and theoretical aspects.<sup>15</sup> Others examine the phenomenon of silence cross-culturally.<sup>16</sup> Some works decry the deleterious effects of noise, and its proliferation in modern society and call for resistance to it.<sup>17</sup> More theologically oriented works frequently focus on silence as a spiritual discipline, and provide counsel on its practice.<sup>18</sup> The life and practices of the Carthusian monastery in the French Alps are often of special interest in this regard.<sup>19</sup> Others examine the place of silence in Christian traditions, or world religions more broadly.<sup>20</sup> Still others have pointed to the culpable silences of religious communities at moments when there ought to have been speech or action, and called for an end to such silence today.<sup>21</sup>

### Silence in the Hebrew Bible: Foundational Concepts

In the midst of this rich and diverse body of literature and other media, the specific focus of the present monograph is upon silence in the Old Testament (or, as I will be referring to it, the Hebrew Bible, or HB). A great wealth of scholarly material on silence in the HB has appeared in recent years. Before 2010, this area of investigation had received relatively little attention from scholars, especially in the English-speaking world. Many significant studies had appeared in Italian, Spanish, French, and German, often consisting of encyclopedia and dictionary entries and specialized articles. In 2004, Paolo Torresan provided an extensive bibliography of such works.<sup>22</sup> Silvio Báez’s monographs on silence in the HB also constituted an important contribution to the field.<sup>23</sup> More recently, several significant English-language studies have

appeared. In 2011, Marjo Korpel and Johannes de Moor published *The Silent God*, a work examining the motif of divine silence both in the arts and philosophy, and most especially in the biblical and comparative materials from the ancient Near East (ANE).<sup>24</sup> Göran Eidevall's important 2012 semantic study examined various lexemes related to silence, as well as the relationship between silence as the absence of speech and the related concepts of stillness or calm.<sup>25</sup> Most recently, Sonja Noll has produced a magisterial analysis of the semantics of silence in the HB.<sup>26</sup> As the book's title suggests, Noll's work is highly technical and focuses on "the lexical representation of silence."<sup>27</sup> In pursuit of this objective, she seeks to determine the semantic field of the various Hebrew terms that are frequently understood by most translations and lexicons as related to silence, then proposes revisions of various traditional translations of these terms, and establishes broader categories for the Hebrew understanding of the concept of silence.

The study of silence in the HB must take as its point of departure the understanding of silence present within its own linguistic, sociological, and ideological world.<sup>28</sup> The HB employs various rich and multifaceted means of speaking of silence. However, despite this diversity, a single foundational assumption lies at its core. Similar to its meaning in English, for the biblical writers silence is *not the total absence of sound or actions* but rather the absence of (or, alternatively, the cessation or restraint of) those sounds or actions that would *normally be expected in a given circumstance*. Moving one step further, in the HB, where such silences occur, they are generally *communicative*. Quite the opposite of Macbeth's sorry verdict that life "is a tale told by an idiot, *full of sound and fury, signifying nothing*," the HB views the *absence of expected sounds or actions* as meaningful and significant.<sup>29</sup>

I write these lines in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020. I live in Toronto, a large, noisy, urban center. Normally, aircraft destined for or departing from Toronto's Pearson International Airport pass overhead day and night. Nearby roads are clogged with traffic. But in March the skies and roads became "silent." Images of normally crowded sites in Paris, Venice, London, Jerusalem, Tokyo, Hong Kong, and New York, now eerily silent, were displayed across the globe. Pollution diminished as air and road traffic were stilled. In some locations animals emerged from forests and walked about freely. For many, the silence in the skies and calm in the streets was a welcome relief. But to others it represented an aberration, a reflection of the threat posed by the pandemic ravaging the world. But whether the conspicuous silence was welcomed or not, the reason *why* the skies and streets were silent was not generally in doubt. However, someone with no idea of COVID-19 or the world's response to it, upon emerging from a long hiking journey in the Andes and having been

entirely “off the grid,” would be stupefied. Why had the world gone silent? What did this mean? What was happening?

These questions point to a core element of our study: silence, either human or divine, is generally a form of communication, and when present, calls for an *explanation*.<sup>30</sup> We live in a world of sound, or a “soundscape,” in which we encounter speech, sound, as well as various kinds of silence. Indeed, as will be explained below, the concept of a *soundscape*—that is, the sounds depicted in a biblical text or the sounds hearers would encounter as the text was read aloud—will form a critically important component of the biblical passages we will study.<sup>31</sup> Some silences are normal parts of daily life. They are as essential to communication as rests are to music. The silences of politeness in everyday interactions, or of brief pauses in speech, are entirely unremarkable.<sup>32</sup> When such silences are not present, we become irritated or annoyed. However, when silence moves beyond these more basic roles, it draws attention to itself and is almost always meaningful. We become aware of its presence, ask why it has occurred, and what it means.<sup>33</sup>

### Silence: Meanings, Functions, Contexts, Ethos

Generally speaking, a given context and culture will possess a *range of socially acknowledged possibilities* that can account for silence in a given context. As just noted, some silences are expected and unremarkable. Although meaningful, the significance of such silences is not difficult to ascertain. The concert hall is full. The lights are dimmed. Silence descends upon the room. The telephone rings, a child learns that an expected event has been cancelled and returns silently to her room. Such silences are easily interpreted. At other times, the meaning of the silence is unclear. We expect those close to us to respond to us, and if they do not, we wonder why: “Is there something wrong? Are you upset? Are you angry with me? Are you not well?” Or, in the midst of a crowded restaurant, a sudden silence sweeps over the diners. Why, we wonder. Has someone had a heart attack, or choked on their food? Or has a well-known celebrity entered the room? Or is some kind of argument about to erupt?

Moving one step further, expressions of silence may be both *trans-cultural* (i.e., relatively stable across cultures) and *culturally specific*. Silence in the presence of a superior or honored person is widely understood as a sign of respect. However, many greater subtleties exist within specific cultures and contexts, as well as from one historical period to the next.<sup>34</sup> Thus, as intimated above, the meaning of silence in a biblical text must be determined in terms of the social, literary, and theological world of the HB itself.

Approached this way, biblical silences prompt important questions: Why does God stop speaking to Saul (1 Sam 28:6, 15)? Why, following the destruction of Jerusalem, do its elders sit in silence (Lam 2:10)? Why does Elisha command the prophets to be silent, just before Elijah is about to be taken up (2 Kgs 2:3, 5)? What is the significance of the silence that follows the wind, earthquake, and fire in 1 Kings 19:12? To speak of silence in the biblical text is thus to raise questions of meaning and significance. And in the present monograph, we will examine several series of texts within the HB dealing with silence, and seek to discern its meaning and significance within them.<sup>35</sup>

Although silence can serve as a bearer of meaning, its significance is not limited to this role. In fact, there are three other facets of silence in the HB that are highly relevant for the present study. First, the silences of a text may create an *ethos* or *ambiance* in which its action takes place. Genesis 22, to be studied in detail in chapter 8, is a significant example. Abraham's inner sentiments are not revealed. His words are ambiguous. The repeated phrase "the two [Abraham and Isaac] walked on together" contains within it an oceanic depth of silence. E. A. Speiser has described the phrase as the "most poignant and eloquent silence in all literature."<sup>36</sup> Second, silence may have a profoundly *active* dimension. For example, silence enacts resistance in 2 Kings 18:36, where, in obedience to Hezekiah's command, the people remain silent in the face of the Assyrian commander's argument that they surrender. A similar active role of silence appears in 1 Kings 19:12, where the Lord replaces loud sounds with silence to draw human attention to that which God will say or do. Silence thus becomes a *precursor* for hearing the divine word. Samuel's nighttime experience at Shiloh manifests a similar pattern. Third, silence may serve as a descriptor of a human state of heart when *words might seem inadequate for such a task*, especially in cases of trauma.<sup>37</sup> This appears in Leviticus 10:3, where Aaron is silent following the death of his sons, and in Lamentations 2:10, where the elders of Jerusalem are silent following its destruction. In a more positive vein, Psalm 62:1-2 describes the psalmist as waiting attentively for God's response. In such passages silence describes a state of waiting and expectancy. In sum, silence in the HB functions in various ways: as a bearer of meaning of various sorts; as a means of creating an *ambiance* within a text; as an active statement; as a phenomenon in the external world, creating space to hear God's voice; and as a reflection of various states of the human spirit, many of which might become truncated if put into words. Thus, over the course of our study, in pursuit of a closer understanding of the dynamics of the

divine-human relationship, we will frequently find ourselves “between silence and hearing.”

A few qualifications are in order at this point. Although my discussion touches upon a number of aspects of silence often discussed in biblical studies and theology, space precludes a full investigation of them.<sup>38</sup> Thus, I will engage matters of semantics and lexicography, but only briefly. Similarly, although matters of theodicy and the “silence of God” are indeed relevant to aspects of my topic, I cannot undertake an in-depth analysis of such matters. Again, although I will touch upon the important issue of illegitimate or culpable silence—that is, those times when persons remain silent when they should speak, or are reduced to silence by those more powerful than themselves—I cannot pursue this matter exhaustively. Similarly, the issues of silence at Qumran, in the intertestamental literature, and in the New Testament (NT) lie outside my purview.<sup>39</sup> Finally, although my study has implications for various spiritual practices in Christian and other traditions (and indeed I will in the course of this study refer to them from time to time), this is not its primary goal. This does not mean, however, that my study has no relevance for Christian theology and spirituality. On the contrary, I will describe my understanding of how readers may move from the world of the HB to that of Christian experience today near the conclusion of this chapter.

This study is an investigation of silence rooted in the disciplines of *exegetis* and *biblical theology*. As such, we will engage in careful exegetical readings of various HB passages involving silence and seek to understand the meaning borne by silence in each text. Moreover, as we shall see, quite frequently various texts coalesce and form consistent patterns of meaning which flow through various sections of the HB.<sup>40</sup> Then, having performed our task of exegesis, we shall seek to discover their theological significance and reflect upon their contemporary relevance.

### How Does the HB Denote Silence?

The HB has four principal ways of referencing silence: (1) specific terminology; (2) narrative descriptions of persons not speaking or acting; (3) non-verbal indications of keeping silent; and (4) complex images, motifs, and conceptualizations in which silence is a key element. A fifth consideration, Masoretic scribal designations, usually via a gap (*parashah setumah*) or line break (*parashah petuchah*), could be included, but these were added subsequent to the writing of the text itself, and, apart from a few instances, will not be discussed here. Without entering into great detail, let us briefly examine these means of referring to silence.

### Specific Terminology

Noll's recent monograph presents a comprehensive analysis of the key terms and semantic field relating to silence.<sup>41</sup> She identifies eight primary verbal roots relating to silence, categorizing them broadly as denoting either restraint or cessation. The roots she identifies as indicating restraint are \**harash*, \**ilem*, and \**hashah*, while cessation is referenced by the root \**damam*-1 (and various associated terms: \**doum*, \**damah*, \**dumiyah*, \**demamah*), \**has*, \**shataq*, and \**sakat*. Finally, she identifies \**shaqaṭ* as standing on the periphery of the semantic field of silence. As an overall conclusion, she states: "The lexemes studied do not, in fact, refer primarily to a lack of noise, but instead more broadly to a lack of action, a failure to do what is expected, a cessation of commotion, the cessation of life, or the presence of rest. *Most of the lexemes have surprisingly little to do with the absence of sound*, having more to do with unmet social expectations or the quieting of chaos in the natural world."<sup>42</sup> Three lexemes will be of special interest in our analysis: (1) \**harash*, a verbal root that frequently indicates restraint or cessation of speech, movement, or actions (Exod 14:14; Num 30:4; 2 Sam 13:20; 2 Kgs 18:36; Isa 42:14; Mic 7:16; Pss 28:1; 50:21; Job 13:13); (2) \**damam*-1 (and its related nouns, verbs and adjectives, noted above), terms that frequently denote stillness, peace, silence, or calm (Exod 15:16; Lev 10:3b; Josh 10:12; Pss 37:7; 62:1; 131:2; Isa 23:2; Amos 5:13);<sup>43</sup> and (3) \**has*, an interjection similar in meaning to the English "shh," used as an urgent demand for silence (Judg 3:19; Amos 6:10; 8:3; Hab 2:20; Zeph 1:7; Zech 2:13; Neh 8:11). As we encounter these terms, we will explore their significance in their various contexts.

### Narrative Descriptions

Quite frequently, the concept of silence, especially as inaction or indifference, is depicted through narrative without recourse to the lexical stock above. Thus the refusal to speak or act becomes a means of expressing silence.<sup>44</sup> As noted above, Genesis 22 is a prime example of narrative silence. Narrative descriptions of reprehensible silence appear in Jacob's failure to respond to the sexual violation of his daughter Dinah (Gen 34:5, 25-31) and David's similar lack of response to the victimization of his daughter Tamar (2 Sam 13:21). Narrative silence also figures in passages such as 1 Samuel 10:16 and 2 Kings 18:36.

### Nonverbal Expressions

The HB depicts certain nonverbal expressions of silence. These include placing one's hand over one's mouth (Judg 18:19; Job 21:5; 40:4), or shutting one's mouth (Isa 52:15).<sup>45</sup>

## Complex Images and Conceptualizations

Much like the ingredients in a recipe or the soundtrack of a film, silence plays an indispensable yet at times complex and ambiguous role in certain depictions and motifs within the HB. For example, Sheol, the realm of the dead, is said to be characterized by silence (Ps 115:17; Isa 47:5). However, at times its inhabitants are depicted as speaking (Isa 14:12-17). Similarly the temple is associated with silence (see esp. 1 Kgs 6:7). But why is this so? Silence is frequently associated with repentance. The penitent sit before God in silence (Lam 2:10; 3:25-26). Yet penitence is frequently depicted as involving wailing and tearing one's clothes (Lam 2:11, 18-19; 3:49-50; Joel 2:12-14). Thus, in many instances, silence forms one strand in a more wide-ranging and complex tapestry.

## Our Journey into Silence and Hearing

In the chapters to follow we will journey into the HB's portraits of silence and hearing. Chapters 2-4 form a unit. In chapter 2, we will encounter the deterioration of the divine-human relationship as human unfaithfulness leads to God's silence, reflecting the *alienation* that has now come between the two parties. This is followed in chapter 3 by a study of the silence of *catastrophe* as judgment comes upon the people and land. Happily, however, judgment is not the last word. In chapter 4, the silence of *repentance* opens the door for relational renewal and hope. In chapters 5-7, we turn our attention to several key collocations involving silence. Chapter 5 explores the theme of silence as an expression of the *security* that the people of God have in the Lord as their rock and hiding place, most especially in times of crisis and threat. Chapter 6 examines two seemingly contradictory expressions of silence: the silence of Sheol, or death, frequently associated with severe uncleanness, and the silence of sacredness, especially that silence associated with Israel's most holy places, the inner sancta of the tabernacle and the temple. Chapter 7 wrestles with the motif of God's silence in the Psalms, specifically as it relates to divine unresponsiveness to the cries and sufferings of the Lord's people. Finally, chapter 8 explores the interplay between speech, sound, and silence in three well-known texts, Genesis 22, 1 Kings 19, with its allusion to the famous "still small voice," and the Book of Job, tracing the journey of those whom the Lord has called through doubt and perplexity to greater clarity. A concluding epilogue draws out the implications of our study.

## From Then to Now

As intimated above, this monograph is not simply a description of silence in the HB or in the life of the ancient Israelite community. These pages are written out of the conviction that the spirituality reflected in these HB passages

has ongoing meaning for the synagogue, for the church, and beyond. It is my sincere desire that readers, whether of Jewish, Christian, or any other commitment, may read them with profit. More specifically, I write out of the conviction that the spiritual dynamics in evidence in these passages are essentially the same as those that are present in the divine-human relationship as represented in the NT.<sup>46</sup> Both bodies of literature depict the same God engaging in an ongoing and interactive relationship with a community of faith (1 Cor 10:1-11; 1 Pet 2:1-10; 3:10). Movement between the testaments, in my view, hinges upon the apprehension of the *relational dynamics* in evidence in the texts under consideration. I have explored this in detail in my *Old Testament Theology*. Thus, the issue is not “is this text still relevant?” but rather, in any given passage, what are the character qualities that the Lord desires to see incarnated by the people of God? What are the values and virtues that are most central to the Lord’s purposes, and how ought they be lived out? What kind of world does God desire the community of faith to enter into and to bring into being through obedience to the demands of the passage? What does the passage under consideration have to say about the relationship between the Lord and the people of God, between the members of the community of faith, between God and those outside the visible community of faith, and between God and the creation, and the place of the people of God vis-à-vis the creation?<sup>47</sup> It seems to me that by foregrounding such questions, readers today may quite rapidly see the implications of the HB texts we will be studying.

### Conventions and Limitations

In the course of this study I will observe the following conventions. All biblical citations are from the NRSV. Out of a desire to enable non-specialist readers to pronounce and discuss key Hebrew words, I have used a simplified phonetic system of transliteration. I have provided full phonetic equivalents for nouns (thus, Heb *melek*, king). Verbal roots will be generally be given in the third masculine singular of their most commonly appearing stem, and preceded by an asterisk (e.g., *\*paqad*). The *shureq* of hollow verbs will be represented by *ou* (thus, *\*qoum*). Consonantal *waw* is transliterated by *w*. *Shin* and *tsade* are rendered as *sh* and *tz*, respectively, for ease of pronunciation. However, *chait* is designated by *h*, rather than *ch*, so as to avoid the normal English pronunciation of *ch* as in *cheese*. The letter *tet* is transliterated with a diacritical (thus *ṭ*) to distinguish it from *tav*. I have not distinguished between

*sin* and *samek*. The presence or absence of the *dagesh lene* is reflected with reference the letters *beth* and *pe*, but not elsewhere. I have avoided gender-specific pronouns for the God of Israel, but I have retained them in the NRSV and the authors I quote. I will render the Tetragrammaton into English either by “Yahweh” or “the Lord.” The body of the book contains material for more general readers, while the footnotes provide more detailed documentation and discussion. All translations of non-English sources (where no English translation exists in print) are my own. My bibliography is not exhaustive; in the interest of brevity I have chosen only selected sources. Finally, I beg the reader’s understanding regarding the limitations of this book. Within the space allotted to me, I simply could not enter into a discussion of every biblical text relating to silence, much less all of the associated scholarly material written on the topic. My sincere hope, however, is that these pages will serve as an incentive for many readers to go “further up and further in” in their pursuit of silence.<sup>48</sup>