

SILENCE IN THE BIBLE

PAOLO TORRESAN

The space and the importance generally ascribed to silence in the Bible are inadequate. Many lexicons and biblical encyclopedias hardly speak of it. The articles which deal with biblical silence often consider it simply as an obstacle to speech and communication. Also, there is a widespread tendency to limit silence to situations of grief and mourning, or ascribing it to idols only. However, when one begins to realize the abundance of variant examples, wherein silence is not merely a negative fact but a lively force, one becomes acutely aware of the one-sidedness and limitations of the usual assumptions, and large spiritual horizons may open up.

More generally, in this article I shall attempt to provide a way of explaining the phenomenon of silence of God and of man and, at the same time, keep intact its richness and plurality of form.

THE SILENCE OF GOD

The silence of God is perceived from three aspects: the psychological, the historical and the metaphysical.

PSYCHOLOGICAL SILENCE

If life is, at least in part, about relationship with God, and that relationship is sustained by perceptible communication, then silence, or a lack of the Divine word, is equivalent to death. Put differently, death may be understood as an attack on life which is supported and sustained by relationships. Therefore, death would seem to be a fact which is as much a matter of a loss of communication as it is physiological. In this sense, there are many words which describe death, among them: "abyss," *t'hom* as in *The waters encompassed me about. . . the deep [t'hom] was round about me . . .* (Jonah 2:6); "dust," as in *My dead body shall arise. Awake and sing, you that dwell in the dust* (Isa. 26:19); "forgetfulness," as in *Shall Thy . . . righteousness [be known] in the land of forgetfulness?* (Ps. 88:13).

Paolo Torresan, born in Treviso in 1971, obtained his Master's Degree in philosophy in 1999. He has published articles on spirituality in a number of journals. He currently works in Italy and abroad teaching and training teachers in Italian as a second and foreign language. One of his research topics "the special language of religion" will soon be published by Guerra Edizioni.

The word "*dumah*" [silence] (Ps. 94:17, 115:17), manifests death in its most intimate and worrying aspects. Down in the depths of *sheol* [the underworld], "death" can no longer praise God nor proclaim its faithfulness. Sometimes, as in Psalm 30:10, there is a lament rich in pathos, when the power of death vanquishes life, and there is silence. There will be no more dialogue, the dead will no longer remember God, and God will no longer remember the dead. The psalmist asks: *What gain is there in my blood, if I go down into the grave?*

The biblical imagination oscillates between two complementary concepts of death. On the one hand, there is neutral space, no man's land, and the desert, each of which connotes absence and emptiness, no feelings or memories. On the other hand, death also may be construed as a dynamic force which detracts from life. This death can be said to be present in situations such as hunger, war, and famine. It is likely that the rites of mourning reflect both concepts; death's silence, as well as its dynamic power. The family and the friends of the deceased may tear their hair and clothing, weep and cry, as though they themselves were affected by death's power. Alternatively, they may choose to remain silent, identifying with death's annihilating dimension. There are many traces in the Bible of this ritual silence, among them: *For seven days and seven nights, none spoke a word to him, for they saw that his suffering was very great* (Job 2:13), and *a time to keep silence and a time to speak* (Eccl. 3:7). Silence figures in biblical passages, such as: *Be still, O inhabitants of the coastland* (Isa. 23:2) and *Sit thee silent and get thee into darkness* (Isa. 47:5) and *The elders of Fair Zion sit upon the ground and keep silence* (Lam. 2: 10).

The concept of *dumah* as a process of annihilation is frequently transmitted by the verbal forms *hiphil* (causative) and *niphal* (passive) of the roots *dmh*, for the constructions "reduce to silence" and "reduced to silence." Thus, the evil are put to silence as in ... *But the wicked shall be put to silence* (I Sam. 2:9).

The enemies of Israel often are "reduced to silence" when the root *dmh* expresses various terms for destruction, destroy, ruin, cut off. For example: *Ar of Moab is laid waste* (Isa. 15:1); *Ashkelon is cut off* (Jer. 47: 5); *You shall be cut down, O Madmen* (Jer. 48:2); *All the warriors [of Damascus] shall be cut off in that day* (Jer. 49:26); *All her [Babylon's] men of war shall be cut off*

(Jer 50:30); Tyre will be mourned, *like her who is brought to silence in the midst of the sea* (Ezek. 27:32).

When Israel breaks the Covenant, the terrible power of *dumah* falls upon it. A regime in Samaria is destroyed when *at day break, the king of Israel was utterly cut off* (Hos. 10:15). It falls on a people who, misled by corrupt priests *are destroyed for lack of knowledge* (Hos. 4:5,6).

GOD'S SILENCE IN HISTORY

At the dawn of Israel's history as a consecrated nation, the people at the edge of the Sea of Reeds prepared for the escape from Egyptian bondage. Moses imposed silence on them: *The Lord will fight for you, and you shall hold your peace* (Ex. 14:14).

Divine anger can be accompanied by a progressive cessation of prophecy when the word becomes silent. Thus there were times when the oracles of God became like a sealed book, which the people are no longer able to decipher: . . . *when the vision of all this is become to you as the words of a book that is sealed*. (Isa. 29:11-12). The prophet, too, may be silenced by God precisely when he asks that the Divine anger be mitigated: *Therefore pray thou not for this people, neither lift up cry nor prayer for them* (Jer. 7:16). With his tongue stuck to his palate, the prophet may be compelled to entrust his message to the silent language of the symbolic, such as binding with cords (Ezek. 3:25-26).

The silence of prophecy may be experienced as a severe punishment, which makes the people roam in search of the word of God. Israel goes from sea to sea, wandering back and forth as if its own spatial limits coincide with the walls of a prison (Amos 8:11-12). The drama is not so much in the disappearance of the word as in the inability to understand it. The prophets are stunned and the priests no longer teach the Law, for God has abandoned the people: *Then shall the seers be put to shame . . . yea, they shall all cover their lips; for there is no answer from God* (Mic. 3:6-7). For Israel, it remains only to ask itself: . . . *until when?* (Ps. 74:9), and, *Has His word disappeared forever, from generation to generation?* (Ps. 77:9). The people who once discarded their prophets (Amos 7:12-13), who put them in prison (Jer. 38:1-3), or forbade them to prophesy (Isa. 30:9-11; Jer. 11:21; Amos 2:12, Zach. 1:4-5; Neh. 9:30), finally realize that with the absence of the prophets they are se-

verely punished. Without prophets, Israel feels deprived not only of one who dares to denounce abuse and injustice, but above all of a spokesman on the Divine level, who can intercede with God, and thus transmit His word to the people. He chooses His men and He chose Israel. It is only the word of God, which makes Israel different from other nations. Without it, Israel's status as chosen people is diminished; without the word, it is no longer Israel.

Yet, there is hope for redemption through repentance. This is the starting point of a process wherein silence will change from a symbol of infidelity and lack of interest to a renewal of Israel's faith and loyalty to the ancient Covenant. When Israel suffered destruction by Assyria and Judah endured exile to Babylon, the prophets taught how to find liberation from silence through contrition and regeneration. The dreariness of the time of exile will be transformed: . . . *then shall thy light rise in darkness, and thy gloom be as the noonday: and the Lord shall guide thee continually* (Isa. 58:10). God's face will shine upon Israel, and: *I will open thy [the prophet's] mouth in the midst of them; and they shall know that I am the Lord* (Ezek. 29:21). God thus breaks His silence: . . . *when I have forgiven thee for all that thou hast done, says the Lord God* (Ezek. 16:63).

METAPHYSICS: GOD'S SILENCE IN NATURE

The silent work of God manifests itself also in nature, where it reveals itself in terms of God's rule over the world. God acts and saves His faithful when *He makes the storm a calm, so that the waves thereof are still . . . and he brings them* [that go down to the sea in ships] *to their desired haven* (Ps. 107:29-30). At Joshua's request, *the sun stood still, and the moon stayed, until the people avenged themselves upon their enemies* (Josh. 10:12-13). Scripture seems to say that there exists also an eternal language, a form of communication devoid of ordinary words and sounds, that tells of the glory of God. Some, like the Psalmist, might say it is the language of heaven: *The heavens declare the glory of God . . . There is no speech nor are there words; their voice is not heard. [Yet] their line is gone out through all the earth, and their words to the end of the world* (Ps. 19:2-5).

We have already spoken of prophetic silence. Is there a deeper form of silence that emanates from the Divine? Perhaps God's silence is punishment, His face hidden in history: *I will forsake them, and I will hide My face from*

them (Deut. 31:17). There is also the silence of patience, the silence which precedes punishment: God is long-suffering and patient until His anger can no longer bear it and explodes: *Our God comes, and does not keep silence: a fire devours before Him, and it is very tempestuous round about Him. He calls to the heavens above, and to the earth, that He may judge his people* (Ps. 50:3-4).

There is also the silence of joy. God, in His love for Zion, shouts out with joy and then falls into an enchanted silence: *He will shout with joy for you, He will jump for you in jubilation, He will be silent in His love* (Zeph. 3:17).

The prophet Elijah had a profound experience of Divine silence at Mount Horeb. Elijah lived at a time when religious syncretism profoundly undermined the faith of Israel because of a policy favored by the crown. Through his marriage to the Tyrian Jezebel, Ahab, King of Israel formed a pernicious alliance with Tyre. It was of benefit to Israel's economy, but at the price of a widespread introduction of the pagan cults of the Phoenicians. Elijah worked to re-awaken the monotheistic faith of the people, who, *jumping between two branches*, at times placed their faith in the religion of their fathers and at other times, in that of Phoenicians (I Kg. 18:21). At the famous contest on Mount Carmel, the prophets of Baal were slaughtered in the presence of the King. Jezebel threatened Elijah's life and he fled to Mount Horeb (I Kg. 19:5-7), the same mountain on which, centuries before, God had appeared to Moses. Here, he had a remarkable theophany. A strong wind passed, then a fire, then an earthquake, but in none of these phenomena, was God present. At the end, Elijah perceived *kol demamah dakah* – "a still small voice," or, in an alternative translation, "a thin sound of silence." The prophet, covering his face as a gesture of respect, understood that God had finally shown Himself (19:11- 13).

"A thin sound of silence," or the voice of an impalpable silence. A poet might say that words hide themselves in the folds of silence and, at the same time, silence keeps within itself the folds of the word. What might this revelation on Mount Horeb have meant? The exegetes are divided into two groups.

There are those who think that Horeb, the place of silence and solitude, is opposed to Mount Carmel, the place of fire and crowds. According to this

view, the Horeb experience indicated a refinement of theophanic language within the religion of Israel.¹

Others would find in the story of Horeb more of the anti-Baal motif which dominated the scene at Mount Carmel: in the wilderness, God shows Himself to be in control of natural phenomena, sending fire and storm (thus showing the impotence of Baal). But He reveals Himself also in a thin sound of silence, showing that it is He who inhabits silence, while the "silence" of the pagan god is because he does not exist.²

THE SILENCE OF MAN

The silence of man assumes many forms reflecting the human condition. Of the many passages in the Bible, I shall single out the silence:

- in reverence before the God in the Temple: *The Lord is in His holy temple; let all the earth keep silent before Him* (Hab. 2:20).

- of thoughtfulness, as when: *the man held his peace to know whether the Lord made his journey prosperous or not* (Gen. 24:21).

- of the sagacious and wise person who is a master of language and thinks carefully before responding to a question or commenting on some issue: *He who guards his mouth and his tongue keeps his soul from troubles* (Prov. 20:23).

- preceding a grand vision (Job 4:16-17).

- of keeping a revelation *the matter in my heart* (Dan. 7:28; 8:26).

- of a person who is suffering, at times sad and despairing, as when *Jacob heard that [Shechem] had defiled Dinah, his daughter . . . and Jacob held his peace until [his sons] had come* (Gen. 34:5).

- which causes concern: *When I kept silence, my bones wasted away through my groaning all day long* (Ps. 32: 3).

- which makes one feel alone, because the other no longer responds: *I opened to my beloved, but my beloved had turned away, and was gone* (SofS 5:6).

Some biblical characters have experienced the polymorphic nature of silence in a sort of person-to-person exchange of words and silences. One example is found in Esther, who was discreet about her origins (Est. 2:10) until circumstances made her change. Mordecai advised her to break her silence if

a time came when she had to reveal herself (4:13-14). Esther invited the King and Haman to her banquet (5:4), but it was only at a second banquet, that strategy and good sense gave her the courage to reveal herself and the conspiracy of Haman (7:3). Her journey, therefore, from silence and secrecy to self-revelation, can be described as proceeding by stages: from a silence seeking to hide one's own identity, to sensing the fearful consequence of unconditional silence, emerging to her full stature as Queen not only of Persia, but of her own people.

CONCLUSION

Dumah, the most obscure and mysterious silence, which seems to reject any possibility of redemption other than death, shows patches of unexpected sunlight. *Dumah* has extension and depth, connecting death to life, through God's intercession: *If I go up to heaven, You are there, if I go down to she'ol, You are there* (Ps. 139:8).

Man, therefore, may choose to bow his head in supplication and give himself up to the impenetrable Divine will, trusting in the wisdom and saving power of the Almighty. Without saying a word, he decides to trust in the will of the hidden and mysterious God. There appears to be evidence of this behavior in the texts: *The Lord is in His holy temple: let all the earth keep silent before Him* (Hab. 2:20). Others believe that personal experience testifies to the reality of the Divine Presence. Yet in the face of these awesome complexities, silence prevails. To the silence of God is added the silence of man "reduced to silence." The believer does not speak, but responds with meekness or a prayer to God who does not show Himself.

A cognate of *dumah* is *dumiyyah*: *My soul waits in silence [dumiyyah] only for God; from Him comes my salvation* (Ps. 62:2). Surrounded by the moral silence of history, humanity clings to the hope for redemption with all the openness and trust possible, certain that the face of the silent and hidden God is a form of revelation. Thus, silence can become an actual door towards the faith in a personal God. Israel, the people that knows exile, draws its strength, its resources and its expectation of redemption from silence. Like a silent dove, it gives itself up to the supreme will: *Be gracious unto me [us] O God: for men lust to swallow me up . . . When I am afraid, I will praise His word,*

In God I have put my trust (Ps. 56:1). It is in words like these that we may find the meeting of the human and the Divine.

NOTES

1. A.J. Hauser & R. Gregory, *From Carmel to Horeb; Elijah in Crisis* (Sheffield: Sheffield University Press, 1990) p. 117; A. Neher, *L'exile de la parole. Du silence biblique au silence d'Auschwitz*, (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1970) pp. 96 - 97; M. Masson, "L'expérience mystique du prophète Élie," *Revue de l'Histoire du Religions*, CCVIII (1991) pp. 241-271; E. Würthwein, "Elijah at Horeb: Reflections on I Kings 19:9-18," in *Proclamation and Presence: Old Testament Essays in Honor of Gwynne Henton Davies*, eds., J.L. Durham & J.R. Porter (Richmond: John Knox Press, 1970) pp. 152-166.

2. J. Jeremias, *Theophanie. Die Geschichte einer alttestamentlichen Gattung* (Neukirchen: Verlag des Erziehungsvereins, 1977) p. 115; A. Baumann, s. v.: "Dmh, dmm, dwm," in *Theologisches Wörterbuch zum Alten Testament*, eds. G.J. Botterweck & H. Ringrenn II (Stuttgart: Verlag, 1977) pp. 277-283; R.L. Cohn, "The Literary Logic of I Kings 17 - 19," *Journal of Biblical Literature*, CI (1982) p. 348; J.M. Van Cangh, "Trois rencontres de Dieu dans l'Ancien Testament" in *La Mystique* (Paris: Rélais Etudes 4, 1988) pp. 39-40; R.C. Carlson, "Élie a l'Horeb," *Vetus Testamentum*, XIX (1969) pp. 429-439; B.P. Robinson, "Elijah at Horeb, I Kings 19:1-18. A Coherent Narrative," *Revue Biblique*, XCVIII (1991) p. 527; O. Steck, *Überlieferung und Zeitgeschichte in den Elia-Erzählungen* (Neukirchen: Verlag des Erziehungsvereins, 1968) p. 118.

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For those who are interested in a comprehensive bibliography, please contact the author, Dr. Paolo Torresan, at: piroclastico@tin.it

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QUESTIONS from Rabbi Hayyim Hal- pern's book **TORAH DIALOGUES**

1. Why is Shabbat reiterated at the beginning of Exodus Chapter 35? What is the connection with the Tabernacle?

2. There is an old Jewish tradition that youngsters begin their study of Torah with Leviticus. What rationale can you offer for such a practice?

3. Which two of the prohibited marriages listed in Leviticus Chapter 18 are affected by death?

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