

Theology on the Web.org.uk

Making Biblical Scholarship Accessible

This document was supplied for free educational purposes. Unless it is in the public domain, it may not be sold for profit or hosted on a webserver without the permission of the copyright holder.

If you find it of help to you and would like to support the ministry of Theology on the Web, please consider using the links below:



Buy me a coffee

<https://www.buymeacoffee.com/theology>



PATREON

<https://patreon.com/theologyontheweb>

[PayPal](https://paypal.me/robbradshaw)

<https://paypal.me/robbradshaw>

A table of contents for *The Baptist Quarterly* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_bq_01.php

The Voice of God.

THE term "voice of God" has become a familiar metaphor for the vehicle of revelation, whatever be the contents of the revelation, whether it concerns the nature and character of God or His will and purpose. The media of revelation are manifold, and are conditioned by race and geographical situation as well as by religious tradition and the mental and moral make-up of the individual, and they may all be included in the term "voice of God." It is possible, too, to speak of the voice of the Risen Christ, as Francis Thompson does in "The Hound of Heaven." We do not, however, expect that voice to be audible, and are naturally suspicious of those who claim to hear it outwardly. Our sympathies would rather be with the prayer attributed to St. Ambrose: "Let Thy good Spirit enter my heart and there be heard without utterance, and without the sound of words speak all truth." When we speak of the voice of God we know, if we stop to reflect, that we are using a metaphor, and that the voice is audible only with the inner sense.

But men have not always interpreted their religious experience in this indirect way. Metaphorical usage has grown out of what was accepted as actual experience, however remote such experience may seem from our own. We bring to our experience the results of centuries of reflection and analysis of the nature of physical and mental life. The ancient Hebrew was unable to penetrate into the complexities of cause and effect as we do, and would jump from the immediate perception to its ultimate or primary cause. Hence a sound that could not readily be ascribed to a visible cause would be thought to come direct from God (or some other supernatural first cause), and to be the sound of His activity and movement, or the sound of His speaking. Were not men made in God's image, and might they not expect that His ways would resemble theirs, and His speech resemble their speech? It was not *as though* they heard God speak, it was for them His voice itself that they heard in a very real way. That is not to say that whenever He spoke they would naturally hear Him; they would not be for ever in His presence, though it might happen that they would find themselves unexpectedly listening to God and then be overawed by the sense of fear and danger (Dt. iv. 33), or of high privilege (Is. vi.). The contrast between the ancient and the modern is expressed in these lines:

Of old our fathers heard thee when the roll
 Of midnight thunder crashed across the sky;
 I hear thee in the silence of the soul—

Its very stillness is the majesty
 Of thy mysterious voice, that moves me more
 Than wrath of tempest as it rushes by,
 Or booming thunder, or the surging roar
 Of seas that storm a never-trodden shore.
 (E. G. A. Holmes.)

In the Old Testament we meet with both the direct and the metaphorical conception of the voice of God.

I. Hebrew has but one word for both *sound* and *voice* (Qol), and we are not always quite certain whether voice or sound is meant. Sometimes the approach of God to man is audible; they hear the sound of His coming. "And they heard the voice (R.V. mg. sound) of the Lord God walking in the garden in the cool of the day: and the man and his wife hid themselves from the presence of (the Hebrew may simply mean "from") the Lord God . . ." "And it shall be when thou hearest the sound (qol) of marching in the tops of the mulberry trees, that then thou shalt bestir thyself: for then is the Lord gone out before thee to smite the host of the Philistines" (II Sam. v. 24). It is the sound of God's approach that is heard when the wind rustles the tree tops. The wind was recognised to be a vehicle of God's approach:

And He rode upon a cherub, and did fly:
 Yea, He flew swiftly upon the wings of the wind.

Ps. xviii. 10.

In the same psalm His advent for the discomfiture of Israel's foes is described in terms of the thunderstorm:

Yahweh also thundered in the heavens,
 And the Most High uttered His voice:
 Hailstones and coals of fire.
 And He sent out His arrows and scattered them;
 Yea, lightnings manifold, and discomfited them. 13, 14.

If He came thus, in earlier times, to deliver His people, was it not to be expected that He would come again in like manner if need arose? "She shall be visited of Yahweh of Hosts with thunder (ra'am), and with earthquake, and great noise (qol), with whirlwind and tempest, and the flame of a devouring fire. And the multitude of all the nations that fight against Ariel . . . shall be as a dream, a vision of the night" (Is. xxix. 6, 7). (cf. xxx. 30, 31: Hab. iii. 16.)

Here is something more than the mere sound of His approach, it is a sound that is known, the sound of thunder; but what else is thunder but the voice of God? It is a mighty and a powerful voice.

Hearken unto the rumbling of his voice,
 And to the muttering that goeth out of his mouth.
 He letteth it go under the whole heaven,
 And his light(ning) to the ends of the earth.
 After it a voice roareth;
 He thundereth with his majestic voice;
 And he delayeth not his lightnings,
 From his mouth his voice is heard. . . . Job xxxvii. 1-4.
 (Gray's translation.)

The twenty-ninth psalm will come to mind in this connection, the psalm in which the "recurrent phrase, Qol Yahweh, runs through the verses like clap after clap of thunder. . . . Before this tremendous manifestation of the divine power, the sea, the mountains, the desert—all those things which . . . men cannot subdue—are forced to tremble. Nothing in the world can resist the Lord in His majesty" (Welch, *The Psalter*, p. 16).

Sound and activity are here closely associated. That was always so. If God's voice was heard, then He was at work in the world, though He might also be at work and not be heard by mortal men. For the Israelites thought, word, and action were parts of a single whole, and not successive processes taking place more or less independently of each other; they were activities of the soul, which was a dynamic unit. Thought was incomplete until it came to fruition in utterance, which in turn carried in it the germs of its fulfilment (cf. the power of spoken blessings and curses: cf. also Is. lv. 10, 11). The God whose voice they heard was the "living God," the Creator, the God of Sinai, and the uttering of His voice was neither meaningless nor arbitrary, but had purpose, whether creative, redemptive, or judicial.

(i.) God's voice was the instrument of creative activity. This need not seem so strange to us when we remember that the Israelite could not conceive of thought which was not essentially articulate (the Hebrew for "to think" is "to say in one's heart," but thoughts that were not uttered and acted on would be "vain" ones), or of words and speech which did not involve action or effect. The story of creation in Gen. i. tells how God gave commands which were immediately fulfilled. The same thought comes in Psalm xxxiii. :

By the word of the Lord were the heavens made;
 And all the host of them by the breath of His mouth.

The voice was but the word made audible, hence we also read of the creative power of God's voice (thunder) :

Who laid the foundations of the earth,
 That it should not be moved for ever.
 Thou coveredst it with the deep as with a vesture;
 The waters stood above the mountains.
 At thy rebuke they fled;
 At the voice of thy thunder they hasted away. Ps. civ. 5-7.

“ He hath made the earth by his power, he hath established the world by his wisdom, and by his understanding hath he stretched out the heavens: when he uttereth his voice, there is a tumult of waters in the heavens, and he causeth the vapours to ascend from the ends of the earth; he maketh lightnings for the rain . . . ” Jer. x. 12, 13.

(ii.) God's activity was not only creative, it was redemptive, and a very real part of redemptive activity is revelation. Now the signal act, both of redemption and of revelation, which Yahweh performed for Israel, culminated in the vision and audition on Mount Sinai. There was His dwelling, and there He had already made Himself known to Moses from the burning bush by calling to him, that is, by uttering His voice. The people had now been brought there by Moses, and they became aware of God's presence there. Moses himself ascended the Mount, but the people stayed below, hearing the sounds which they could not understand till Moses came down to interpret. “ And the Lord came down upon mount Sinai, to the top of the mount: and the Lord called Moses to the top of the mount; and Moses went up. And when the voice of the trumpet waxed louder and louder, Moses spake, and God answered by a voice.” It was a complex experience, physical and spiritual elements being inextricably woven together, so that it is no longer possible to say how much each contributed to the whole experience. That power of God which had wrought deliverance from the house of bondage was now *seen and heard* by the people through the medium of the volcano or the thunderstorm, whichever it was which took place then. That being so, the storm became a very natural concrete expression of God's majesty. It was a vivid experience, and it lived on in the memory and in the literature of the nation:

“ And ye came near and stood under the mountain; and the mountain burned with fire into the heart of heaven, with darkness, cloud, and thick darkness. And the Lord spake unto you out of the midst of the fire: ye heard the voice of words, but ye saw no form; only ye heard a voice.” Dt. iv. 11, 12. cf. vv. 33, 36.

“ Ye saw no form.” God's majesty was too brilliant to be seen by mortal eyes, unless the privilege was granted by Him, as it was, we are told, to Moses (Ex. xxxiii.), and to the elders

"from afar" (Ex. xxiv.). To Isaiah He appeared in vision, and the prophet was filled with alarm that such a man as he should *see* the King, the Lord of Hosts. They did not think of God as formless, He had a form which had features similar to that of men, but it was as different from theirs as spirit is different from flesh. They were not, however, so greatly concerned with what God looked like as with how He acted towards them and on their behalf. His activity they knew, they could see it, and they could hear God, as it were, at work, but they could not see Him, and therefore, though they were surrounded by people who made images of their gods, they developed an imageless religion.

There is an interesting poetic echo of the deliverance from Egypt and of God's activity in it, in Psalm lxxvii., showing Yahweh as a warrior taking the field against His foes :

The waters saw thee, O God ;
 The waters saw thee, they were afraid :
 The depths also trembled,
 The clouds poured out water ;
 The skies sent out a sound (qol) :
 Thine arrows also went abroad.
 The voice of thy thunder was in the whirlwind ;
 The lightnings lightened the world :
 The earth trembled and shook.
 Thy way was in the sea,
 And thy paths in great waters,
 And thy footsteps were not known. (16-19.)

(iii.) Another reason why God's voice should be heard is that God was supreme judge of His people, and when cases were referred to Him He would not simply pronounce judgment, but in giving utterance to it would begin the process of events which would re-establish the "righteous" man, or would lead to the ensnaring of the "wicked" man in the pit he himself had dug. This being the sincere belief of the worshipper, there is nothing surprising in the claim that God's voice, or His utterances in pronouncing sentence and in carrying it out, were heard by men (cf. Ps. l., and for the idea of God as Judge Ps. vii., and elsewhere). The Book of Amos opens (v. 2) with :

The Lord shall roar from Zion,
 And utter his voice from Jerusalem :
 And the pastures of the shepherds shall mourn,
 And the top of Carmel shall wither,

which depicts, probably figuratively, a thunderstorm sweeping over the land bringing to effect the judgment of Yahweh (cf. also Jer. xxv. 30 ; Joel ii. 11 ; iii. 16).

II. It was mentioned at the outset that present metaphorical and figurative use is a development of early actual experience, but it is almost impossible to say where the one ends and the other begins; to say, in other words, how soon speech became consciously symbolical and sacramental. It was the natural accompaniment of the growth of religion in Israel from a stage of simple, almost materialistic, anthropomorphism to the relatively high degree of spirituality it had attained by post-exilic times. In spite of the development in the linguistic use from the real and actual to the metaphor, two features of the earlier stages have survived; first, that the thunder (and even the wind to a less degree) may be closely associated with the voice of God, and secondly, the reality of God's speech to men, even through indirect means.

The thunderstorm may seem to the more spiritually-minded man to be but the outskirts of the ways of God, but it remains at least as impressive as ever in its power and majesty, and makes a fitting symbol of these things even when consciously used as such. We find it, almost in disguise, in Ezekiel's vision: "And when they went, I heard the noise of their wings, like the noise of great waters, like the voice of the Almighty, like the noise of a tumult, like the noise of an host" (i. 24. cf. x. 5; xliii. 2). The psalmist, singing the praise of God as King, speaks of Him coming to take His seat on the throne:

To Him that rideth upon the heaven of heavens, which
are of old,
Lo, He uttereth His voice, a mighty voice.—lxviii. 32.

Whatever words they used to describe their experience, and often words were inadequate, the experience was a real one, they *did hear* God. One could not always be sure how He would speak. This uncertainty seems to lie behind the story of Elijah on Mount Horeb, where we find a dramatic rehearsal of all the time-honoured ways of God's approach to man, and then when all was quiet again, and the prophet was, as it were, brought to the "edge of dynamic silence," God was there speaking to him. He might be heard anywhere, in the sanctuary (Num. vii. 89), or in one's own room:

Now a thing was secretly brought to me,
And mine ear received a whisper thereof.
In thoughts from the visions of the night,
When deep sleep falleth on men,
Fear came upon me and trembling,
Which made all my bones to shake.
Then a spirit passed before my face;

The hair of my flesh stood up.
It stood still, but I could not discern the
 appearance thereof;
A form was before mine eyes:
I heard stillness and a voice. Job iv. 12-16.

With all this, we have to remember that when men heard God's voice it was not a case of the wish being father to the thought, neither was it subsidiary or incidental to their religious experience; it was something that concerned the very heart of life, there was something dynamic and creative in it, it was the voice of the living God that they heard. It meant that God was in the world, at work there, ever creating, or renewing, or redeeming men, and therein revealing His nature and His judgment on the world. It is in the light of this that we must understand the voice from heaven in John xii. 28-30: "Father, glorify thy name. There came therefore a voice out of heaven saying, I have glorified it and will glorify it. The multitude that stood by and heard it said that it thundered: others said: an Angel hath spoken to him. Jesus answered and said; this voice hath not come for my sake but for your sakes."

L. H. BROCKINGTON.