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Sounds of Silence in Biblical Hebrew: A Lexical Study

Abstract

This article explores the semantic resources of biblical Hebrew, when it comes to speaking about silence. The aim is to reach more clarity concerning the sense and function of pertinent lexemes, and to contribute to a better understanding of the “semantic field” of silence. It is demonstrated that biblical Hebrew had several verbs with the sense “to be silent” (= abstain from speech), but no noun corresponding to the English word “silence” (denoting a situation characterized by the absence of speech or by the complete lack of audible sounds). However, the domains of silence and stillness overlap. Thus, when the biblical writers wanted to describe a situation of “silence”, they could choose one of several words associated with the wider concept of stillness.

Keywords: silence; stillness; biblical Hebrew; vocabulary; semantic domain

Introduction

According to some biblical texts, keeping quiet in the right moment is a true sign of wisdom (Prov 11:12; Amos 5:13; cf. Sir 20:7). In other situations, silence can be seen as something negative, even traumatic. This is especially true of God’s silence, as experienced by a desperate supplicant (see, e.g., Ps 28:1). Arguably, the different attitudes towards silence in the Hebrew Bible would constitute a topic of vital interest for the study of both culture and theology in ancient Israel. Unfortunately, it is difficult to make a selection of the most relevant texts for such a study, since there is disagreement over the correct translation of some Hebrew words. Hence, it is sometimes uncertain whether a text speaks about silence or not.

Against this background, additional research on relevant vocabulary in biblical Hebrew is called for.

Judging from the most recent dictionaries (*DCH*, *Ges*¹⁸, *HALOT*), biblical Hebrew contained at least three or four different nouns carrying the sense “silence”, and about half a dozen verbs that convey the meaning “to be silent”. This observation aroused my curiosity. To what extent are we dealing with synonyms? Which differentiations can be made? Are the traditional translations correct? This study is an investigation into the semantic domain of silence in biblical Hebrew. The aim is to reach more clarity concerning the sense and function of pertinent lexemes, as well as a better understanding of this “semantic field”.¹

First of all, it is necessary to define the concept of silence. One possible definition would be: the *absence of sounds*.² However, absolute silence is something exceptional, if it exists at all in our world. We are permanently—even in moments of calm and peace—surrounded by sounds, some of them loud, others hardly audible. Thus, I would suggest that most of the time the English word “silence” refers to a state characterized by a *relative* absence of sounds. To be even more precise, speaking of silence very often means speaking about the (absolute or relative) *absence of speech*, in a situation where perhaps many other sounds can be heard.³ Every language, it seems, needs a vocabulary for this domain, in order to be able to speak about those situations where no one is speaking. Hence, I suggest that it makes sense to study the semantic resources related to this conceptual domain, also in the case of biblical Hebrew. However, we should be aware of the risks of anachronistic reasoning involved in any attempt

¹ I will occasionally use the term “semantic field”, mainly because it has been deployed in previous studies of this topic. However, this usage does not entail a commitment to some version of semantic field theory.

² The first definition of “silence” given by the *Oxford Advanced Learned Dictionary* (s.v.) is “a complete lack of noise or sound”.

³ The second definition of “silence” in the *Oxford Advanced Learned Dictionary* is: “a situation when nobody is speaking”.

to reconstruct the concepts of an ancient culture, or the lexical range of a group of words in its vocabulary. It is unlikely that the senses of lexemes used in the Hebrew Bible would correspond exactly to modern Western concepts as expressed in, for instance, English.

Previous research

Previous studies of silence in the Hebrew Bible have often focused on theological issues, such as God's silence.⁴ Only a few articles have discussed the philological aspects more thoroughly.⁵ A first attempt towards an outline of the semantic field of silence in biblical Hebrew was made by A. Baumann, in an article on *dmh* II and related words and word stems.⁶ According to Baumann, "[t]he most common words in the semantic field meaning 'to be silent' have (in spite of occasional overlapping) clearly discernible nuances of meaning and usage".⁷ The article contains important observations, but it does not cover all resources within biblical Hebrew when it comes to speaking about silence. Baumann discusses words related to the following stems: *dmh* II, *dmm*, *dûm*, *ḥrś* II, and *ḥśh*. In several cases, I agree with Baumann's conclusions. However, there are some instances where I find his argumentation less convincing.

⁴ For a representative example of this genre, see Torresan, 2003. For references to literature relating to theological aspects of the theme of silence in the Hebrew Bible, see Torresan, 2004, p. 85-86, n. 2 (a footnote that covers almost two full pages!).

⁵ See the studies of Schick (1913), Baumann (1978 [1977]), Levine (1993), and Barrado (1997).

⁶ For practical reasons, I will cite the English version of Baumann's article, although it originally appeared in German.

⁷ Baumann, p. 260.

The verb *ḥrś* II is a case in point.⁸ Baumann suggests that “it denotes the inability to communicate”, and further, that this “inability” can be “due to physical incapacity or to ... intentional decision”.⁹ This is not entirely clear to me. How can incapacity and deliberate behaviour, passivity and activity, be subsumed under the same concept? Baumann goes on to describe an alleged contrast between the verbs *ḥśh* and *ḥrś*. Whereas *ḥśh* is characterized by “an emphasis on passivity”, *ḥrś* (II) is said to emphasize “active, intentional silence”.¹⁰ Is this an adequate description? A renewed investigation can perhaps bring more clarity.

Another enigmatic statement in Baumann’s article concerns *dmh* II and related stems (*dmm*, *dûm*). These are regarded “as a unit, the primary meaning of which is silence in the face of an impending catastrophe or one that has already struck, or in preparation for a revelation”.¹¹ This is puzzling. Modern languages do not need special words for types of silence that are restricted to certain contexts, or to certain spheres of action and experience. Why, then, would biblical Hebrew need a specialized vocabulary of the kind suggested by Baumann? Are there good reasons to assume that these word stems actually denote something as particular as disaster- and theophany-related silence? An examination of all relevant texts in the Hebrew Bible suggests that Baumann’s hypothesis is flawed: In the biblical texts, the state of being silent or speechless, or not actively communicating, can be linked to all kinds of situations and emotions.¹²

⁸ Somewhat confusingly, Baumann (p. 261-62) refers to this verb as “*charash*”, without making any explicit differentiation between homonyms.

⁹ Baumann, p. 261.

¹⁰ Baumann, p. 262.

¹¹ Baumann, p. 261.

¹² As regards the biblical texts, this has been demonstrated by Torresan (2004), who lists an impressive amount of different kinds of situations where words or phrases related to silence are employed. Interestingly, Torresan’s main focus lies on the stems *dmm/dmh/dwm*.

In a more recent article, Pedro Barrado has studied all words and expressions in the Hebrew Bible which could be of relevance for a reconstruction of the semantic field of silence.¹³ He divides this field into several categories.¹⁴ In this way, he is able to show that such words and expressions occur in many different genres and contexts. However, the subdivisions do not permit the author to treat all occurrences of, for instance, one and the same verb under the same heading. On the whole, Barrado based his work on established theories concerning the lexical sense of the words studied, instead of examining whether these theories are correct. Hence, the results of his study are of limited value for this investigation.

Exploring the vocabulary of silence in biblical Hebrew

The present study covers all lexemes in biblical Hebrew which, according to the most recent (and complete) dictionaries, would seem to carry senses related to silence.¹⁵ I have sought to answer the following questions:

¹³ Barrado (1997).

¹⁴ These are the subdivisions made by Barrado, and used by him as headings in the article (in my translation): the narrative silence; the administrative silence; silence in diverse situations; the impossible silence; silence/muteness in combination with other physical defects; the silence of fear and shame; the silence of resignation and impotence; the silence of Sheol and death; God's silence; silence related to negative aspects; silence as a sign of wisdom; the numinous and reverent silence.

¹⁵ Three dictionaries have been used throughout this study: *DCH*, *Ges*¹⁸, and *HALOT*. In addition, it would have been interesting to integrate results from the promising project called the Semantic Dictionary of Biblical Hebrew (SDBH, accessible at www.sbdh.org), with its focus on semantic domains. However, at present a majority of the lexemes discussed in this study are not covered by SDBH. For the principles behind this new online dictionary, one of them being that the traditional distinction between dictionary and encyclopedia cannot be upheld, see de Blois (2000; 2004) and Van der Merwe (2006).

- Which is, more precisely, the semantic meaning of each of these verbs and nouns? In which cases can it be demonstrated that the traditional translation “silence” or “to be silent” is dubitable or incorrect?
- To which extent are these verbs and nouns overlapping or synonymous? To which extent do they denote different aspects of “silence”?

In the following, I will present the results of my analysis of all verbs, nouns, adjectives, and particles that may be, or have been, linked to the field of silence. However, exactly as in many other languages, the semantic domains of silence and stillness overlap within biblical Hebrew. Therefore, I have also included some words which arguably belong primarily to the adjacent domain of calm and stillness, but which nevertheless seem to be relevant for a reconstruction of the vocabulary of “silence”.¹⁶

Uncontroversial cases will be treated very briefly, leaving more room for a detailed discussion of those cases where the lexical sense is a matter of dispute, or for some reason difficult to ascertain.

Interjections and imperatives: “Silence, please!”

Several activities pertain to the field of silence. One of them consists in asking or commanding someone to be quiet. In this respect, biblical Hebrew is rather rich in resources:

¹⁶ I have thus included a number of lexemes linked to the verbal stems *dmm/dmh/dwm*, although some of them do not denote “silence”, according to my analysis. However, among potentially relevant verbs in biblical Hebrew I have decided to exclude one of the most frequent, *šqt*. The main reasons are: 1) recent lexica do not suggest that this verb carries the sense “be silent” (not speak), and 2) this lexicographic decision was confirmed by my analysis of the passages where this verb occurs. One may note, though, that bible translations occasionally opt for “be silent” or the like, as regards the following attestations of *šqt*: Ps 83:2 (Qal); Isa 62:1 (Qal); Job 34:29 (to be read as Hiphil or as Qal?).

There is more than one way of saying “silence, please” (or: “shut up!”). The interjection *has* (חָסַ, with the plural form חָסוּ in Neh 8:11) is evidently onomatopoeic, corresponding to English “hush!”. It occurs 7 times in the Hebrew Bible.¹⁷ In three texts (Hab 2:20; Zeph 1:7; Zech 2:17), the immediate context refers to a theophany.¹⁸ The verb *hsh* is only attested once,¹⁹ in the Hiphil. In Num 13:30, it denotes the act of hushing someone.

In addition, silence can be commanded by using the Hiphil imperative form of three different verbs: *skt*, *hšh*, and *hrš*. While the verb *skt* occurs only once in the Hebrew Bible (Deut 27:9), the two other verbs mentioned, *hšh* and *hrš*, deserve a more thorough examination (see below).

Words related to muteness or involuntary silence

If a person abstains from speaking, this is often a voluntary act. However, it can also be due to an involuntary condition, a speech disorder. There is a Hebrew adjective which denotes the state of being mute: *ʾillēm* (אִלֵּם). The related verb, *ʾlm*, carries the sense “to be dumb” (in Niphal).²⁰ Hence, its use is in principle restricted to what we might call cases of involuntary silence, even if Ps 39:3 (= Eng 39:2) seems to describe a situation where the enacted muteness was a result of the supplicant’s own decision.

Words related to the voluntary act of not speaking

According to the dictionaries, biblical Hebrew has several verbs that can denote the deliberate “act” of not speaking. However, in some cases, this definition of the lexical sense can be contested. To begin with, I will discuss a relatively clear case.

¹⁷ Judg 3:19; Neh 8:11; Amos 6:10; 8:3; Hab 2:20; Zeph 1:7; Zech 2:17.

¹⁸ Cf. Barrado, p. 25.

¹⁹ Or twice, if חָסַ in Neh 8:11 is counted as a Qal form of this verb. Thus *DCH* (s.v.).

²⁰ The basic sense is probably “to bind”. See *HALOT* and *Ges*¹⁸, s.v.

As regards the verb *hšh*, it can be ascertained that Qal means “to be silent”.²¹ This verb is typically used about someone who refrains from speaking. Hence, in Qoh 3:7 *hšh* serves as the polar opposite of *dbr*: “a time to keep silence (לִשְׁכֹּחַ), and a time to speak (לְדַבֵּר)” (NRSV). One may note that, in 4 out of 7 occurrences of this verb in Qal, the topic is YHWH’s silence (Ps 28:1; Isa 62:1; 64:11; 65:6). In two of these cases (Isa 62:1 and 64:11), *hšh* might refer more generally to divine passivity. Still, the sense “keep silent” fits at least equally well. In one case, though, it is clear that *hšh* does not refer to the absence of speech. However, the translation “be silent” makes sense also there. In Ps 107:29, the grammatical subject of *hšh* is not a person, but a natural phenomenon, viz. the waves of the sea. This passage relates how YHWH once calmed a storm (this description also includes the lexeme *dēmāmā*, which will be discussed below). Since waves make noise, we can assume that the verb here is inchoative, and that it denotes the establishment of a state characterized by (relative) absence of sound/noise. Hence, I suggest that the phrase וַיִּשְׁכַּח גְּלִיָּהֶם in Ps 107:29 can be translated “and the(ir) waves became silent”.

In Hiphil, the semantic range of the verb *hšh* becomes wider. It can still denote keeping silence (not speaking), but in addition it may describe passivity in a wider sense (not acting).²² In most cases, it is not possible to discern a causative aspect in the use of the Hiphil of *hšh*. However, the attestations of the Hiphil participle deserve some comment. The total amount of occurrences is four. In two cases (1 Kgs 22:3; 2 Kgs 7:9), the Hiphil participle is used in order to describe a group of persons as inactive. In the third case, Isa 57:11, the speech of YHWH seems to make an ironical reference to divine silence or inactivity. Only in the fourth and last instance, in Neh 8:11, can the Hiphil be defined as causative in its function: “the Levites

²¹ Thus all dictionaries. Personally, I think *hšh* is onomatopoetic, reproducing the “sh” sound that seems to be more or less universal in its function to indicate silence.

²² Judg 18:9; 1 Kgs 22:3; 2 Kgs 7:9. For these cases, *HALOT* (s.v.) gives the sense “hesitate”. However, I am hesitant to give my consent, since “be still, inactive” fits the context equally well in each case.

quieted/silenced/stilled all the people”. Regarding the verb *ḥšh*, then, Baumann’s “emphasis on passivity”²³ would perhaps seem to be justified, but only in a somewhat self-evident sense, since being silent or inactive always, per definition, entails an aspect of passivity (of *not* speaking, or *not* acting). However, it should be noted that *ḥšh* never refers to involuntary silence or stillness. This verb does not denote total incapacity of speech or action. It is never associated with muteness. On the contrary, it is employed, both in Qal and Hiphil, to describe acts of *intentional* silence or passivity.

Biblical Hebrew had rich resources for describing voluntary acts of abstaining from speech. The verbs *ḥrš* II and *dmm* I could also be used for this purpose.²⁴ However, as we shall see, the lexical sense of these verbs is, to a certain degree, a matter of dispute. Mention should also be made of the verb *štq*, since the meaning “be silent” is attested in later Hebrew. However, in its biblical attestations (only four, always in Qal), this verb would rather seem to carry the sense “become calm”.²⁵

Words related to deafness and/or muteness

Since all dictionaries agree that *ḥērēš* means “deaf”, and that this adjective is derivative of the root *ḥrš* II, it is reasonable to assume that the sense of the verb *ḥrš* II in Qal is “to be deaf”. In accordance with this, both *DCH* and *HALOT* have “be deaf” as the first and only entry for Qal

²³ Baumann, p. 262.

²⁴ In addition to the verbs *ḥšh*, *ḥrš*, and *dmm* (and in addition to the obvious possibility of using a verb meaning “to speak” together with a negation), the biblical authors could also use expressions of the type “shut one’s mouth” (e.g., Isa 52:14) or “put one’s hand over one’s mouth” (e.g., Judg 18:19) in order to describe a person as not speaking, or as not communicating. For a more detailed discussion of the use of this type of expressions, see Barrado, p. 12-23.

²⁵ So also *Ges*¹⁸ (“sich beruhigen) and *DCH* (“become quiet”). *HALOT* (s.v.) gives the sense “grow silent” for *štq*. However, its German *Vorlage* (HALAT) has “zur Ruhe kommen”, which I find more accurate.

of this verb.²⁶ However, according to *Ges*¹⁸ the primary lexical sense of this verb would rather seem to be related to muteness, since the first sense listed is “stumm sein”.²⁷ This discrepancy between recent lexica is somewhat perplexing: deaf or dumb? Considering the meanings of etymologically related verbs in cognate languages,²⁸ as well as the fact that these two disabilities often are connected, it is of course conceivable that this Hebrew verb denotes being *both* deaf and mute. Nevertheless, I would like to argue that *HALOT* and *DCH* are correct. In other words, I suggest that the sense of *hrš* II in Qal is primarily “to be deaf” (not hearing, i.e., being unable to hear, or: for some reason or other, acting as if one were deaf, i.e., not listening). This does not exclude the possibility that this verb might occasionally refer to a person who is both deaf and mute.

Let us examine the occurrences of *hrš* II in Qal a little closer. How are they rendered in extant bible translations? How should they be translated? There is one absolutely clear case, where this verb denotes being deaf, viz. Micah 7:16, where the expression אֲזַנֵיהֶם תִּהְיֶה שָׁמָּה makes explicit mention of the ears. NRSV translates, correctly: “they shall lay their hands on their mouths; their ears shall be deaf”. The remaining instances, all found in the book of Psalms, seem to be somewhat less unequivocal—and in all 6 instances the grammatical subject of the verb is God!

God in the Psalms: Deaf or dumb?

In Ps 28:1, the supplicant appeals to YHWH: אֵל־תִּהְיֶה שָׁמָּה. With NASB, I would opt for the translation “do not be deaf to me”. Such a petition makes perfect sense, immediately after the opening words of Ps 28:1, “I am calling to you”. The person who is praying wants YHWH to

²⁶ See *DCH* and *HALOT*, s.v.

²⁷ It should be noted that *Ges*¹⁸ differs from the other dictionaries also in another respect, as it refers to this homonym as שָׁמָּה.

²⁸ See *Ges*¹⁸, s.v.

listen, to be all ears, so to speak. The passage in Ps 39:13 (= Eng 39:12) presents a similar case. This is my own translation (largely concurring with that of NIV): “Hear my prayer, YHWH, listen to my cry, do not be deaf to my weeping”.²⁹ In a similar vein, I would translate Ps 109:1 as follows: “God of my praise, do not be deaf”, despite the fact that all English translations that I have studied have “do not be silent” or the like. Similarly, in Ps 83:2 (= Eng 83:1), all modern translations that I have consulted render *ḥrš* II with “to be silent”. However, on the assumption that the verbs *ḥrš* and *šqt* are causally connected in this sentence, one could translate: “Do not be deaf and (thereby) do not be idle/passive”. If this is correct, the question is why the bible translations, from the Septuagint to the most recent ones, have “be silent”, both here and in Ps 109:1? And why do several translations opt for “be silent” also in Pss 28:1 and 39:13?

I suspect that this has to do with some kind of theological considerations, which have had an impact on the bible translators. Within religious groups, it could probably be seen as rude or inappropriate to insinuate that YHWH is deaf. Silence (absence of speech) would, I surmise, be more compatible with various pious conceptions of the divine. However, calling someone “deaf” can simply be a way of accusing a person of not listening. This makes perfect sense in the psalms of lament. Moreover, we have no reason to assume that the psalmists were extremely polite as they formulated cries of anguish. Hence, the translation “be deaf” is far from unthinkable in the cases discussed above.

However, in the two remaining occurrences in Qal, I have to concede that *ḥrš* II seems to carry another sense than “be deaf”. In Ps 35:22, the immediate context (“you have seen”) would suggest something like “do not be passive”. The wider sense of being inactive would also fit the context of Ps 50:3, but in this case it might be preferable to translate “will not be

²⁹ Several other translations would seem to follow the lead of the Septuagint, in their way of rendering *ḥrš* II. See, e.g., NRSV (“do not hold your peace”) and NASB (“do not be silent”).

silent” (NIV), in view of the references to divine speech in verses 1 and 4. To sum up, the attested lexical senses of *ḥrš* II in Qal are: 1) be deaf; 2) be still (idle, passive, silent).³⁰ We may construct a logical connection between the two: The one who does not hear will usually not act (or speak), at least not in accordance with the spoken message.

A semantic transformation: From not hearing to not speaking

The sense of *ḥrš* II changes significantly, as we begin to study the use of the Hiphil. In a majority of the cases, 33 out of a total of 39, the Hiphil of *ḥrš* II denotes a state of keeping silence, i.e. of not speaking (German: *schweigen*).

That the verb *ḥrš* in Hiphil refers to the exact opposite of speaking can be demonstrated with the help of Job 13:13: “Be silent (הִתְקַדֵּשׁ) before me so that I may speak” (NASB). It may refer to the silence of YHWH (Ps 50:21; Isa 42:14; Hab 1:13), but also, and more often, to the silence of human beings (e.g., Gen 24:21; Num 30:5, 8, 12, 15; 2 Kgs 18:36; Neh 5:8; Job 6:24; 13:5, 13.). In Exod 14:14, it is perhaps preferable to translate with “be still” or “be passive”.³¹ One case, Job 11:3, seems to require the translation “to silence” (in a transitive sense: put to silence; German *verstummen*). A couple of cases, Jer 38:27 and 1 Sam 7:8, possibly involving idiomatic phrases, are not easy to translate at all. However, this does not

³⁰ Against the background of the extensive discussion of *ḥrš* II above, the purported contrast between this verb and *ḥšh* cannot be upheld. According to Baumann (p. 261-62), *ḥšh* is associated with passivity, whereas *ḥrš* “emphasizes active, intentional silence” (p. 262). But the word “intentional” could also be used about *ḥšh*! Indeed, as we have seen, this is a more fitting characterization of *ḥšh* than of *ḥrš* II, since the latter verb, in Qal, sometimes denotes a physical disability (deafness).

³¹ Arguably, this text is informed by a “holy war” ideology according to which the deity wins the war on his own, while the people can remain passive. Whether these spectators are allowed to speak or not is beside the point. Commentators and translators are, however, divided on this issue. Cf. NASB (“keep silent”), NIV (“be still”), and NRSV (“keep still”).

change the overall picture: A verb which in Qal usually refers to a state of *non-hearing*, becomes in Hiphil a verb which primarily denotes *non-speaking*.

This conspicuous semantic transformation can, I suggest, be explained along the lines of the causative function of the Hiphil. Let us first consider a possible parallel. In Qal, the verb *šmʿ* means “to hear”. In Hiphil, the same verb can convey the sense “proclaim” or “announce” (see, e.g., Deut 4:10 and Isa 52:7). There is an underlying logic: To speak, or to proclaim, is equivalent to “letting someone hear something”. In other words, *the causative function of the Hiphil becomes a bridge between the domains of hearing and speaking*. In my opinion, the verb *ḥrś* II presents us with a similar case. In Qal, it denotes “not hearing”. In Hiphil, it can describe the act of “not letting someone hear anything”. To refrain from speaking, to keep silent, can indeed be seen as one way of causing or creating the state denoted in Qal, the state of not being able to hear anything! In other words, here the causative function of the Hiphil links the aspects of non-hearing and non-speaking. Thus, it is possible to explain how *ḥrś* II can carry these two lexical senses: “to be deaf” in Qal, and “to be silent” (to abstain from speaking) in Hiphil.³²

Silence or stillness, or both?

Apparently, the fields of silence and stillness are overlapping in biblical Hebrew. Among the words possibly related to both silence and stillness, we need to consider the verbs *dmh* II and *dmm* I. As to the trilateral stem *dmh*, the dictionaries disagree regarding the number of homonyms.³³ According to *HALOT*, *dmh* II means “be silent” or “be still” in Qal. Only two occurrences are registered: Jer 14:17 and Lam 3:49. In both cases, however, it seems more

³² For the sake of completeness, one should also mention the Hitpael form of *ḥrś* II in Judg 16:2 (denoting silence or, more likely, inactivity), and what looks like an adverbial use of a noun *ḥereš* (חֶרֶשׁ) in Jos 2:1 (translated “secretly” by NRSV).

³³ *Ges*¹⁸ lists two homonyms, *HALOT* three, and *DCH* four.

reasonable to render the verb with “to cease” (thus *DCH*). To this one should add four occurrences in Niphal (Ps 49:13, 21; Isa 6:5; Jer 47:5). However, since they are better explained as instances of *dmh* III (“to be destroyed”), I draw the conclusion that *HALOT*’s *dmh* II (if it really exists as an independent stem) does not denote silence.³⁴

What about the verb *dmm* I, then? To begin with, it is necessary (but not always easy) to make a distinction between this verb and its homonym, *dmm* II, which means “wail” or “mourn”.³⁵ Arguably, the primary lexical sense of *dmm* I is not “to be silent”, but rather “cease” or “be still”.³⁶ More precisely, the idea seems to be: to cease moving and become still. This usage of *dmm* is evident in the famous episode in Joshua 10, where Joshua gives a command to the sun and the moon, דִּמּוּ (v. 12), a command which clearly means “Stand still!” (and by all means not “Be silent!”). Another clear case is found in Job 30:17, where Job complains that his intestines are in constant uproar and never become calm.³⁷

The translation “be silent” appears to be applicable in several cases: Lev 10:3; Ps 30:13 (= Eng 30:12); Job 29:21; Am 5:13. However, some of these cases could also be treated as

³⁴ This critique is also applicable to the alleged stem *dmh* III in *DCH*. The position taken here, regarding the number of homonyms and their lexical senses, coincides largely with that of *Ges*¹⁸.

³⁵ See *Ges*¹⁸ and *HALOT*, s.v. Cf. the studies of Dahood (1960), Levine (1993). Cf. also Blau, p. 242–43. Things have developed during the last century. In 1913, Schick described the situation like this: “A comparison of the translations which the leading Hebrew dictionaries give for the stem דִּמּוּ shows that they unanimously assign to it the meaning *to be silent*.” (Schick, p. 219, emphasis as in the orig.) See further Cohen (p. 274), who lists nine(!) different DMM stems in various Semitic languages.

³⁶ Thus also *HALOT* (s.v.), whereas *DCH* presents “be silent” as the primary sense. The first entry for this verb in *Ges*¹⁸ is connected to a state of terrified stupor, “erstarren vor Schreck, bestürzt sein”, whereas the second entry relates to stillness and silence: “sich still halten, schweigen”. For the idea that “be silent” is a secondary sense of *dmm*, cf. Murtonen, p. 151: “The primary meaning does not seem to be absolute silence, but consequences of a stunning or exhausting experience of which silence or more or less quiet moaning is one”.

³⁷ Other instances where this verb means “be still” include Pss 4:4; 62:6; Isa 23:2.

instances of *dmm* II (“wail”, “mourn”).³⁸ Possibly, then, this verb testifies to the fact that the domains of stillness and silence overlap. If so, I find it likely that the sense “be(come) silent” (i.e., cease speaking or making sounds) has developed from the more basic and general sense “be(come) still” (i.e., cease moving and acting). Stillness is, arguably, a broader concept than silence.

Next, there is a group of nouns in biblical Hebrew, all of them somehow related to the stems *dwm/dmh/dmm*, which are commonly (but perhaps not correctly) translated by the English word “silence”. The noun *dûmâ* occurs only twice (Pss 94:17; 115:17), and both times it refers to the gloomy prospects awaiting those who descend to Sheol. It appears to designate death as a state of stillness, where nothing interesting happens. Hence, there is no compelling reason to connect this noun with the concept of silence (absence of sound), as the lexica do.³⁹ The affiliated adverb *dûmām*, with three attestations in the HB (Isa 47:5; Hab 2:19; Lam 3:26), can preferably be translated “in stillness”.⁴⁰ The noun *dûmiyyâ*, occurring four times in the Psalms, would also seem to denote a state of stillness, or rest, although the dictionaries opt for “silence”.⁴¹ In my opinion, the translation “(in) silence” is only warranted in one case, viz. in Ps 39:3 (= Eng 39:2), where this word stands in apposition to the verb *ʾlm*. To sum up, the nouns related to the stems *dwm/dmh/dmm* which have been discussed so far appear to be linked to the domain of stillness, in the first place. This conclusion would seem to contradict a prevailing consensus, since all modern dictionaries relate these words to the

³⁸ For such an interpretation of Lev 10:3 and Amos 5:13, see Levine, p. 89-90, 96.

³⁹ *HALOT* and *DCH* give the sense “silence”. *Ges*¹⁸ has similarly “Stillschweigen”.

⁴⁰ *HALOT* lists the senses “quiet”, “silence”, and “silently”; *DCH* has similarly “silence” or “in silence”; *Ges*¹⁸ has “still, stumm”.

⁴¹ *HALOT* has both “silence” and “rest”, *Ges*¹⁸ only “Schweigen”. Similarly *DCH*. However, in addition, *DCH* introduces a homonym, דוּמָיָה II, with the alleged senses “response” and “satisfaction”.

domain of silence. However, one should keep in mind that there is no sharp line between stillness and silence.

A sound of silence, or stillness after the storm?

Also the last lexeme to be discussed, *dēmāmā*, seems to fit into this pattern. This is a most interesting and almost mysterious word, and worthy of a more detailed discussion than what is possible here.⁴² For the purpose of the present study, the main point can be put rather succinctly: It is (contrary to the belief of some bible translators) highly unlikely that the lexical sense of *dēmāmā* is “silence”. Regarding the verb *dmm* I, it was argued above that it denotes the “activity” of being still, or: ceasing to move and come to a standstill. Hence, it is likely that the definitions that are offered by *HALOT* and *Ges*¹⁸ are basically correct: “calm; cessation of strong movement” (*HALOT*), “calm after the storm” (*Ges*¹⁸).⁴³ However, one cannot completely rule out the possibility that this noun should be derived from *dmm* II (“mourn”, “moan”, etc).⁴⁴ In that case, the sense could be “whispering” or “sigh”, as *DCH* suggests,⁴⁵ or perhaps something like German “Säuseln”, denoting the soft soughing or swishing sound produced by a gentle breeze.⁴⁶

⁴² For references to the literature, especially as regards the meaning of *dēmāmā* in 1 Kgs 19:12, see Torresan, 2004, p. 85-86, n. 2; cf. also p. 97, n. 108. See also Eidevall, p. 104-108.

⁴³ See *HALOT* and *Ges*¹⁸, s.v. I have translated the definition of *Ges*¹⁸. In the German original, it reads “Ruhe nach dem Sturm”.

⁴⁴ Thus Levine, p. 101-102.

⁴⁵ See *DCH*, s.v. *DCH* lists a number of occurrences of *dēmāmā* in the Dead Sea Scrolls. In most cases, the sense seems to be something like “whisper” (speaking/singing with a low voice). However, this does not prove that *דממ* carried that sense in biblical Hebrew. Rather, it gives us valuable information concerning early stages of interpretation of some biblical texts. On a closer examination, all the attestations from Qumran (mainly from the *Songs of the Sabbath Sacrifice*) seem to be dependent on one or two of the biblical attestations of *dēmāmā*, and in particular on 1 Kgs 19:12. Apparently assuming that Elijah heard a celestial voice on the holy mountain, the

Which of these senses makes best sense in the texts where the noun *dēmāmā* is attested?

This word occurs only three times in the Hebrew Bible. In Ps 107:29, in the context of a description of adventures on the ocean, we read יָגֵם סְעָרָה לְדִמְמָה, which I would translate “he made the storm to stillness”. Here, *dēmāmā* clearly denotes the “calm after the storm”. A similar interpretation would seem to be possible in the two remaining cases. In Job 4:16, the phrase וָשִׁמְעָה וְקוֹל דִּמְמָה is not easy to interpret. I propose the translation “(there was) stillness, and I heard a voice”. It is arguably less paradoxical than “I heard silence, and a voice”, and less redundant than the alternative “I heard a whisper and a voice”. One may observe that Job 4:15 mentions a strong wind.⁴⁷ Also in this case, then, *dēmāmā* may describe the stillness that comes after the storm. At any rate, it hardly denotes silence, understood as a state of soundlessness.

The third attestation of *dēmāmā* is found in 1 Kings 19:12, in the context of a theophany. We are told that Elijah covered his face as he heard the sound of *dēmāmā*: קוֹל דִּמְמָה דָּקָה. What does this enigmatic phrase mean? Some interpreters render *dēmāmā* with “silence”. NRSV, e.g., translates: “a sound of sheer silence”. This translation is poetic, and interestingly paradoxical, but from a linguistic point of view it has a weak foundation. I suggest the following translation: “a fine sound of stillness”. What Elijah heard (rather than saw with his eyes, since he was inside the cave!) was that the great turmoil (storm, earthquake, and fire) had ceased; he reacted to the almost inaudible sound of a sudden, stunning stillness.⁴⁸ Since it

author(s) of the Sabbatical Songs repeatedly used the expression קוֹל דִּמְמָה (“sound of stillness”) in descriptions of the angelic praise of YHWH in heaven. See Eidevall, p. 106. Cf. also Newsom, p. 313.

⁴⁶ *Ges*¹⁸ gives these two senses: “Ruhe nach dem Sturm, Säuseln”. The idea that Elijah heard the sound of a breeze goes back to the Septuagint’s translation of 1 Kgs 19:12: φωνὴ αὐραὺς λεπτῆς. Cf. NASB: “a sound of a gentle blowing”.

⁴⁷ Alternatively, *rûah* refers to a spirit. Cf. the discussion in Levine, p. 101-102.

⁴⁸ For this interpretation, see further Eidevall, p. 107.

is almost impossible to experience absolute silence, one might perhaps after all speak of “hearing” the stillness.

Conclusions

Biblical Hebrew had a rather rich vocabulary for silence, especially in the context of communication. Several verbs could be used for speaking about the absence or the (voluntary or involuntary) abstention of speech. Apparently, the vocabulary of biblical Hebrew did not include a word equivalent to the English noun “silence”, primarily conveying the notion of (relative) absence of sounds, or the absence of speech. It was argued that several nouns connected to the *dmh* / *dûm* / *dmm* stems, which traditionally have been translated with “silence”, should rather be connected to the semantic domain of stillness. However, the domains of silence and stillness can be seen as overlapping, as indicated by the fact that one and the same verb can carry these two senses: “be silent” (not speak) and “be still” (not act). Thus, when the biblical writers wanted to describe a situation where we might use the word “silence” (i.e., a situation characterized by the absence of speech or the complete lack of audible sounds), they could choose one of several words denoting the wider concept of stillness.

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DCH = *The Dictionary of Classical Hebrew*, David Clines (ed.), (Sheffield Academic Press, 1993-).

*Ges*¹⁸ = Gesenius, W., *Hebräisches und Aramäisches Handwörterbuch über das Alte Testament*, 18th ed., Meyer, D. R. & H. Donner (eds.), (Berlin: Springer-Verlag, 1987-2010).

HALOT = Koehler, L. and W. Baumgartner (eds.), *The Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament*, revised by Baumgartner, W. and J. J. Stamm, transl. by M. E. J. Richardson, Leiden: Brill, 1994-2000.

Bible translations (listed according to abbreviations used)

NASB = New American Standard Bible

NIV = New International Version

NRSV = New Revised Standard Version