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Reading Silence(s) in Psalm 39

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Introduction: A Personal Note

For months after agreeing to write for this issue of *Word & World*, I wondered what to write about, what "reading the Bible" might mean. As a biblical scholar, of course my jump-start and my focus would be a biblical text—especially in a volume on "Reading *the Bible*"!—but what meaning the chosen text might convey regarding "reading the Bible" still needed to be asserted. As a Lutheran scholar, I am aware that the *sola*s, particularly the *sola gratia* principle, inform my reading even if I do not quote Luther very often. As a child of liberation theology in Latin America, my eye is more trained to seek social structures than personal experiences reflected in a text. Using the best tools available, I try to understand how the poorest in society may have been affected by what is said in the text, and also how today's readings may still affect those most vulnerable. And finally, as a feminist scholar, I find that the question of gender justice is ever present as well. I have laid bare those elements of my background which, from my point of view, most explicitly permeate my reading, since no reading is neutral or universal. Reading the Bible always means reading from a particular place and with (hopefully only some) biases or blind spots.

Reading the Bible, one must concentrate as much on what is not said, as what is said. Sometimes the silences in the text "speak" volumes, or, perhaps they open a space for questions and engagements of a deeper variety. Using the example of Psalm 39, whose silences are profound, we are invited into new ways of understanding a text.

Lately, I have been exploring Psalm 39 for a short contribution to a collective volume.[1] The psalm offers some unexpected aspects, making it worthy of further meditation. The psalmist alternates between silence and clamor, quite unable to decide which is more fitting to address their situation and relationship to YHWH. Therefore, the matter of human silence vis-à-vis speaking up (in general terms) is one of the key issues this psalm puts before us. It is also a question with all sorts of ramifications for today, from political insecurity to pastoral counseling.

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In order to understand a text, both its characters and its empty spaces—its silences—have to be adequately marked, perceived, and acknowledged. Anyone who has had to interpret an oral communication in a foreign language will recall how hard it is to grasp its meaning until one learns where each word ends and a new one starts. As Sonja Noll states, silence "is an integral part of music and communicative speech, both of which rely on the silences between sounds for their meaningfulness, as well as on the silence of the listening ear."[2] In communication, the whole gamut of utterances, from silence to shouting, is subject to interpretation. Silences, therefore, are no minute matter—neither in the Bible nor in conversations we carry on with other people daily.

When we turn to an ancient religious text, there are further considerations, as Marjo Korpel and Johannes de Moor argue concerning divine speech and silence: "They form a subcategory of the major conceptual metaphor or simile GOD IS (LIKE) A HUMAN BEING. . . . Therefore divine speech and silence should be interpreted against the background of human discourse."[3] Religious people are used to the metaphor of God's silence when the expected answer tarries, especially in response to prayers in times of anguish, sickness, or death, and of silence as a discipline to listen to the Word. Less common is the idea of human silence toward the Divinity one worships. Psalm 39 covers several of these attitudes: It hints at God's silence as people cry out to be given an answer, to be spared unpleasant experiences, to not be scorned by fools. On the other hand, the psalmist recalls also a previous time in which they decided to remain silent. Silence, however, "can represent opposites: both absence and presence, both positive and negative associations. It can reflect ultimate peace and rest or the most terrible destruction and anarchy. It can represent defiance or complicity, the injustice experienced by the

[1] Submitted to Athalya Brenner-Idan and Archie C. Lee, editors of the Texts@Contexts series (Bloomsbury).

[2] Sonja Noll, *Semantics of Silence in Biblical Hebrew* (Leiden: Brill, 2020), 2.

[3] Marjo C. A. Korpel and Johannes C. de Moor, *The Silent God* (Leiden: Brill, 2011), 65–66.

oppressed or the smug detachment of the privileged. It can represent solidarity in unity or harsh exclusion."[4] To this inherent ambiguity one should add also the particular ambiguity of Psalm 39 in that it is unclear whom the psalmist addresses with silence: only the enemy in whose presence they wear a muzzle (v. 2), or is that silence also a message to YHWH? There is no way to avoid interpretation!

My contribution will comprise two subsections. The first will offer some exegetical information regarding the psalm's linguistic particularities and structure, and along the way I will offer some observations on what these may mean for reading. For this section, I rely on my own work with the text as much as on work by other scholars. The second subsection will summarize what it means for a critical, feminist, Lutheran scholar to read the Bible today. Since every reading is contextual, it would be patronizing of me to tell my readers how to read the text; all I can do is share my view of it and be as explicit as possible on my reasons for such a reading.

Reading the Bible Starts with Reading the Bible!

Psalm 39 does not easily yield its message. Although it shows no serious textual problems, several colons may be interpreted in widely diverse ways, as already the ancient versions attest. Poetry hints rather than bluntly asserting, both contributing to the text's rich message and blurring its possible certitudes. Furthermore, the syntactic function of some words is unclear. Just to illustrate this point, I will discuss briefly verse 3 (I follow Hebrew verse numbering, which includes its title as verse 1; quotations from NRSV). To start with, here are a few translations:

> I was silent and still;/ I held my peace to no avail;/ my distress grew worse;
> I was mute and silent; I remained silent (far) from good,/ but my pain was stirred;
> I was muzzled to total silence,/ I refrained from speaking, / I was deeply stirred by anguish;
> I became dumb and was humbled,/ and I was silent from good things, and my suffering was renewed.[5]

The first verb in first person may have a reflexive or a passive connotation, thus "I muted myself" or "I was dumb" (or other translations), followed by the noun *dûmîyâ*, "silence, quiet." There follows a second verb, also in the first person, meaning "to be silent" (root *ḥāšâ*), followed by *miṭṭôb*, the preposition *min* and

[4] Noll, *Semantics of Silence in Biblical Hebrew*, 3.

[5] From NRSV, Phil J. Botha, "Psalm 39 and Its Place in the Development of a Doctrine of Retribution in the Hebrew Bible," *Old Testament Essays* 30, no. 2 (2017): 242; Mitchell Dahood, *Psalms I, 1–50: Introduction, Translation, and Notes* (Garden City, NY, Doubleday, 1966), 238 (and notes on 240); and Johann Cook, "Psalm 39 (LXX 38): A Retributive Psalm?," *Old Testament Essays* 32, no. 2 (2019): 309, translating from the Septuagint, quoting Albert Pietersma and Benjamin G. Wright, eds., *A New English Translation of the Septuagint and the Other Greek Translations Traditionally Included under That Title* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), respectively.

the noun/adjective *ṭôb*, "good, goodness," a very common word, used for instance in Genesis 1. The problem lies in that the syntactic relation of this term to any of the others is unclear; furthermore, the preposition *min* may have a partitive or a comparative meaning, thus referring to the psalmist or the wicked one in front of whom the psalmist has decided to be silent. One is faced with so many possibilities that, in the end, one feels unsatisfied with whichever one chooses.

Likewise, there is no consensus regarding its genre. Verse 1 introduces it as a psalm or song (*mizmōr*). Is it an individual complaint? It certainly includes typical elements of that genre. According to Rolf Jacobson, it "borrows a rhetorical structure from the song of thanksgiving" (recollection of past crisis and prayer about it), without ever moving to giving thanks or praising God for any rescue, as most complaints do.[6]

Identifying changes of addressee and of subject is also complicated by the fact that, in the end, it all turns around the psalmist, even though there is a move from the conscious self to God:

> At first the poet is more conscious of the self and the human condition than of God. In the course of venting feelings, references to God become more evident (vv. 7–13). The request is urgent: free me from sins, "[d]o not make me the scorn of the fool," "[r]emove your stroke from me," "[h]ear my prayer . . . , give ear to my cry; do not hold your peace at my tears," "[t]urn your gaze away"—seven imperatives, five positive and two negative (vv. 8–13). The final request leaves the impression of imminent, unavoidable death.[7]

One has to take into consideration also the extent to which our own lenses make us see positive or negative elements in the text we read. Psalm 39 has been called "the Qoheleth psalm" for good reason. But, again, which Qoheleth: the pessimist sage or the man who enjoys life? Or would it have to be either/or?[8]

Reading the Bible Is Also an Exercise in Conversation

That any text may be read in conversation with other texts, contemporaneous to it or otherwise, poses questions of intertextual relations, internal quotations, and

[6] Rolf A. Jacobson, "Psalm 39," in *The Book of Psalms*, ed. Nancy DeClaissé-Walford, Rolf A. Jacobson, and Beth Laneel Tanner, NICOT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2014), 364. Erhard Gerstenberger titles it a "meditative prayer" because of its first section, vv. 2–4 [1–3]. *Psalms, Part I, with an Introduction to Cultic Poetry*, The Forms of the Old Testament Literature 14 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988), 165. The fact that this is how it is treated in a series devoted to genre indicates to me the impossibility of agreeing on this issue.

[7] Konrad Schaefer, *Psalms* (Collegeville: Liturgical, 2001), 97.

[8] "Within the Bible, pessimism is not distinctive to Wisdom Literature. Lament psalms can have a similar cathartic effect ([Mark] Sneed [*The Politics of Pessimism in Ecclesiastes: A Social-Science Perspective*. Atlanta: SBL] 2012, 236). The two laments virtually devoid of praise, Psalm 39, the "Qoheleth-Psalm" ([Klaus] Seybold, [*Die Psalmen*. Tübingen: Mohr], 1996, 162), and Psalm 88 are the closest parallels," according to Will Kynes, *An Obituary for "Wisdom Literature": The Birth, Death, and Intertextual Reintegration of a Biblical Corpus* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), 212.

allusions. Many of these are obvious in Psalm 39 and have been discussed in the pertinent literature. Although intertextual relations to Qoheleth are undeniable, particularly the reference to *ḥebel*, vanity, vapor, or Abel (1:2; 12:8), more abundant are those to Job—to the point that Psalm 39 has also been called a "Job-Psalm" and much discussion has ensued from trying to determine who borrowed from whom.[9] One could speak of Job 7, for instance, as "an authorized commentary" on the psalm, by which Job brings God to trial rather than praying to God.[10] One could also have the psalmist dialogue with Lemuel's mother (Prov 31:1–9), whose instruction to her son and his drinking buddies involves careful use of silence and speech as well as justice on behalf of the vulnerable. And the fact that the psalm has been ascribed to David is yet another invitation: to read it intertextually with other psalms and with the Davidic narratives in 1 Samuel 16–1 Kings 1; 1 Chronicles 10–29. Whether we take the scholarly consensus regarding its date or forget its history, the fact that the name Jeduthun appears—aside from Psalms 39:1; 62:1; and 77:1—almost exclusively in Chronicles (e.g., 1 Chron 16 and 25; 2 Chron 5:12; 29:14) invites us to be attentive to their conversation. It goes beyond the scope of this reflection to pursue any of these intertextual allusions. Yet, with our focus on reading the Bible, it is important to remember that we never read only one text (or *only* the Bible, for that matter).

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In appealing to God's mercy, the psalmist makes a noteworthy reference to one of the paradigmatic groups of socially vulnerable people:

> Hear my prayer, O Lord,
> and give ear to my cry;
> do not hold your peace at my tears.
> For I am your passing guest,
> an alien, like all my forebears.

[9] According to Will Kynes, *My Psalm Has Turned into Weeping: Job's Dialogue with the Psalms* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2012), 122, the expression also belongs to Klaus Seybold, *Psalmen*, 162. Kynes discusses the most relevant connections between both texts and hesitatingly concludes that "Job puts them to new use in the context of his suffering. Thus, whereas the psalmist displays faith through the tension between hope and accusation, Job accuses by denying hope, but, paradoxically, does so because he hopes God will live up to a divine standard of justice" (140).

[10] Luis Alonso Schökel, "Todo Adán es Abel: Salmo 39," *Estudios Bíblicos* 46 (1988): 279. As an example only, Job 7 takes up at least two issues important in Psalm 39, to wit: the brevity of life ("wind" and "vapor"), and the negative connotation of God's gaze upon human creatures.

> Turn your gaze away from me, that I may smile again,
> before I depart and am no more. (vv. 13–14)

There is also reference to a generic "wicked one" (Heb. *rāšāʿ*), in whose presence the psalmist keeps quiet, but we do not have specific referents for this term. Thinking of David, there are many candidates to fill in that gap. Even the reference to the *ḥerpat nābāl*, the reproach of the fool or base person, v. 9, is more an appeal to God's mercy than a fact. Therefore, the real trouble the psalmist suffers escapes our comprehension. This vagueness is both a difficulty in locating the origins of the psalm and an invitation to apply it to our own situations. This is good news!

The psalm's refusal of an easy classification as a thanksgiving song, a complaint, or a meditation is also good news: once we assign a psalm a genre, we will easily find the characteristic elements of that type of piece, and other elements will probably go unnoticed. Not to be able to do such an exercise means that the psalmist felt free enough—or disturbed enough—not to comply with a genre. And it also means that our modern critical categories cannot account for some particular cases.

Closely related is yet another contended issue, which is the psalm structure. This is not surprising, since structures are ours, not the text's. Structures are ways we find to better apprehend a text in its entirety and in its internal relations. Structures are readings. Studying this psalm, I came to realize that one reason it is so difficult to agree on a structure is because it weaves several elements together. For instance, there is the liturgical element of the pause called *selah* at the end of verses 6 and 12, which already serves to structure the psalm. These two indications pause at the realization that every human is vapor/Abel (*hebel*: "everyone is a mere breath," NRSV); again, this may be an intertextual allusion to our human ancestors in Genesis. If one looks at how silence and speech interplay, then Jacobson's suggestion of five strophes (vv. 2–4b, 4c–6, 7–9, 10–12, 13–14) may be more easily perceivable than other proposals.[11]

Some Reflections on Reading the Bible from My Standpoint

Churches have a long history of silence regarding very serious issues, from slavery and war to sexual harassment and abuse. Often, we have been silent out of discomfort and embarrassment at what human beings can do to others and out of prudence about what should be said or not said; at other times, it has been caused by imprudence or lack of care. Since, as we have seen, silence is polysemic, it follows that it may be (and it has been) heard as complicit or detached. And it has sent the wrong message, especially to victims and perpetrators, within and beyond denominations. Silence is deadly for people in violent domestic environments, and it also kills many when it is the only answer to calls for justice and peace. Silence

[11] Jacobson, "Psalm 39," 360–361 (in his version, verses 1–3b, 3c–5, 6–8, 9–11, 12–13, excluding the heading).

is a tool in the hands of the powerful and, I concede, it may be a tool for survival for a victim.

There are also forms of silence like ignoring those who do not conform to the androcentric model of "man" as a physically fit, heterosexual, cisgender male (and we could go deeper and add categories such as class, skin color, education, age, and so on). Silence regarding those who are overlooked can include taking them for granted, subsuming them to a general, all-inclusive concept of "man," treating them as exceptions, and speaking for them. Is our psalmist, who first decides to keep silent and then to cry out to God, a hegemonic male, like David, who took his friend's wife, murdered him, and counted on silence to get away with his actions? Could Uriah the Hittite, killed by David, have prayed these same words? Did Bathsheba feel that David was one of the wicked in whose presence she kept silence? In that case, in whose ears did she speak out of anger? Nathan's perhaps? (see Ps 51:1). Could an enslaved girl, such as Hagar fleeing from Sarah and Abraham, have prayed with these words? We cannot know, because the reference to David (v. 1) works as silence here.

Silence deserves careful consideration when the Bible mentions it, when the Bible uses it for concealment, and when we apply it in our personal and social relationships. Lack of words is not the same as lack of action, of course. And likewise, lack of words is not the same as lack of sounds. The whole cosmos speaks to us and to God, and yet its sounds are not words we can understand.[12] In cultures that overwhelm us with words and sounds, it is easy not to notice silence any longer. Yet, if we take a minute to search our memory, we will remember several biblical examples in which silence speaks loudly. Take, for instance, Jesus's silence during his trial in the gospels. Or take the suffering servant: "He was oppressed, and he was afflicted, yet he did not open his mouth; like a lamb that is led to the slaughter, and like a sheep that before its shearers is silent, so he did not open his mouth" (Isa 53:7). There is also the quiet rest, perhaps not utterly silent, with which God speaks to Elijah after the earthquake and the fire (1 Kgs 19:12).

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It is inevitable that I ask how the text may be good news, especially to vulnerable people; how it can speak of God's grace and love when people feel that God's gaze on them brings almost death. In fact, the psalmist speaks more candidly to

[12] Korpel and De Moor classify human silence in antiquity under five categories relating to its cause, namely, the silence caused by offenses, awe or fear, forbearance or prudence, incapacity, and sleep.

God than to the wicked ones in front of them (Ps 39:2). "Turn your gaze away from me, that I may smile again, before I depart and am no more" (v. 14). This is surely a daring move![13] Yet, it seems to be a conscious move: quietness has proven worse than crying out, and whatever the situation, the assertion "it is you who have done it" (v. 10) tells us whom the psalmist holds ultimately responsible. Silence, then, is not the answer in Psalm 39. Rather, confession of faith ("my hope is in you," v. 8), sapiential meditation (including setting "a muzzle on my mouth," v. 1, and references to Adam/Abel and to life's brevity), and prayer to God give the psalmist some peace.

Reflecting on reading the Bible, we are invited to ponder what kind of reading we should perform. In the words of Diane Jacobson:

> I often tell my students at Luther Seminary that they must never lie when they read Scripture in order to protect either the text or God. Such honesty is frequently uncomfortable, though I see no alternative. We are, despite ourselves, trapped in a dilemma which undermines any easy claim to biblical authority. Faith remains a gift.[14]

Faith plays an important role in order for the psalmist to be able to cry out, pray, meditate, and ask, "How long, O God?" Faith allows us to make the psalmist's words our own and to expect our deliverance as well. Perhaps faith makes us substitute "Christ" for "David" and think, as I did earlier, of the suffering servant who responded with silence to violence and abusive power as the occasion for this prayer.

The gift of faith Jacobson names above seems, at first sight, very different from the psalmist's faith. Yet it is also the kind of faith that, critical and engaged, stands up against any unacceptable theology, calling God and theologian to task. Reading Psalm 39 without considering other texts paints a dark picture, one in which there is no answer to the person seeking a word from God. Since, however, we never read one text alone—for our theology is impregnated by texts and concepts, even biases and slogans—the psalmist's calling God to task may be set in dialogue with several other psalms, many of which are also attributed to David.[15] Take, for instance, Psalm 40: "I waited patiently for the Lord; he inclined to me and heard my cry . . . making my steps secure. He put a new song in my mouth, a song of praise to our God. Many will see and fear, and put their trust in the Lord.

[13] See, for instance, Abraham J. Heschel, *The Prophets* (New York: Harper & Row, 1962); Walter Brueggemann, *Theology of the Old Testament: Testimony, Dispute, Advocacy* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1997); more generally on ethically problematic Bible texts and different readings of them, Eryl W. Davies, *The Immoral Bible: Approaches to Biblical Ethics* (London: T & T Clark, 2010). Versification follows the Hebrew notation.

[14] Diane Jacobson, "Hosea 2: A Case Study on Biblical Authority," *Currents in Theology and Mission* 23 (1996): 171–72.

[15] Eleuterio Ramón Ruiz states that Psalms 35–41 are arranged in a chiastic order. Psalm 38, an individual petition, stands at its center, flanked by Psalms 37 and 39, both of which show wisdom elements. Ruiz further notes that "except for Ps 36, all the others in this series make some reference to silence." "El silencio en el primer Libro del Salterio (Salmos 1–41). Primera parte," *Revista Bíblica* 67, no. 1–2 (2005): 63. And, may I add, they are all ascribed to David, "the servant of the Lord" in Ps 36:1.

Happy are those who make the Lord their trust" (vv. 1–4a). Some themes of our psalm are seen in a more positive light here: what had been perceived as God's silence turned into God's deliverance; the psalmist praises God with a new song rather than being silent or crying out; and the hope in God that the psalmist had in Psalm 39:8 has become trust (Heb. *bāṭaḥ*). Or take Psalm 145, the last piece in our Psalter ascribed to David and filled with joyful proclamation: "Gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love . . . good to all . . . All your works shall give thanks to you, O Lord, and all your faithful shall bless you . . . speak of the glory of your kingdom, and tell of your power, to make known to all people your mighty deeds, and the glorious splendor of your kingdom" (vv. 8–12).

I have tried to lay bare the different moves and moods a challenging text produces in me as an example of what "reading the Bible" may mean. An Old Testament text may at times seem far from the gospel, but it often becomes a fit mirror in which to see ourselves, to check on our faith, and to turn to God in thanksgiving that even in the darkest moments we can pour ourselves out to the God in whose salvation we, like the psalmist in Psalm 39:8, hope despite all odds.

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