

The Use of "Voice" in the Psalms

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One of the more unique aspects of the Psalms is that of man's words. In the Psalter we get a unique look at how man ought to interact with God in real life situations. One of the mind-boggling truths in the Psalms, and of the Bible as a whole, is that not only are these words from men, but they are also the words of God. It is in this spiral that we find קול used frequently.

קול (or *qol*) has a wide semantic range, stretching from loud thunder to soft rustle.¹ The *NIDOTTE* glosses *qol* using "noise, roar, voice"² and the *TWOT* uses "voice, sound, noise."³ *Qol* is most often translated as "voice" and with one exception is found in the singular form in the Psalms.

The intent of this study will be to determine how the Psalter characterizes the voices found within. There are three separate personalities and are all profitable to determine our right relationship within this conversation.

The players

The voices in the Psalms come from three mouths: the mouth of God, the mouth of man and the mouth of creation. Out of *qol*'s 54 occurrences, the voice is attributed to God 12 times, to creation 8 times, and to man 34 times and would seem from this data that the voice of man is some sort of focus in the Psalms as a whole. In comparison, the voices of God and creation are relatively tight-lipped.

God's voice occurs in only seven chapters and is not even present in Book V. When God's voice does show up, it is something powerful and one should avoid putting undue emphasis on word count statistics. Creation's voice is also missing from Book V

¹ B. Kedar-Kopfstein, "Qol," in *TDOT*, 12:576.

² W. R. Domeris, "Qol," in *NIDOTTE*, 3:898.

³ Leonard J. Coppes, "קול," in *TWOT*, entry 1998a.

and occurs in less chapters than God's (five chapters in total). Man's voice, far from being quiet, occurs in 28 chapters and is present in all of the Psalter's books. The voice coming from man occurs in all but two genres of the psalms: the creation psalms and the wisdom psalms (where *qol* does not occur in any instance).

The objects

Except for a few instances, our speaking subjects address at least one of the other speaking subjects. Most often, God addresses man and creation, man addresses God, and creation addresses God. There are a few exceptions to this rule, but overall this seems to be the case.

God addresses man in five instances: Pss. 18:13, 46:6, 68:33, 95:7, 106:25. These are relatively well spread out. Psalm 18's example can almost be directed in either way-to creation or to man, as the result of the Lord's voice is rooted in David's surroundings. The reason for classifying this as directed to man lies in verses 17 and 18. Here the Psalmist personalizes the enemy. It is not against creation itself that the Lord utters his voice, but towards David's enemies. The title of the Psalm also helps in this regard, speaking of deliverance "from the hand of all his enemies, and from the hand of Saul" (ESV). The same situation is found in Psalm 46. Here we find the earth melting, not man, but again, the uttering of God's voice seems ultimately to be directed to man, specifically nations and kingdoms.

This all suggests man's deep intertwining with the rest of creation. Man and nature are all parts of the created, separating God as the Creator. Lines of demarcation are not hard and fast but semi-permeable.

God specifically addresses creation in one psalm: 29. There is a high local concentration, with six references to the Lord's voice. There is one reference where there

does not seem to be an object, Ps. 47:5. There is a certain level of ambiguity even on the level of who exactly is speaking. If it were man who is speaking, the closest object would most likely be God. But if it is God speaking here, the object is not so certain. There may not be a specific object being spoken of here, just a description of the scene.

Man addresses God in 29 places, and these incidents happen throughout the whole of the Psalter, from chapter 3 to 142. Man addresses man in six places, in no certain centralization. On the whole, the objects of man's voice are relatively easy to categorize. The first appearance (Ps. 3:4) is typical of many in this category: "I was crying to the Lord with my voice [*qol*] and he answered me from His holy mountain..." (NASB). The last appearance is another typical example of the use of man's voice directed to God: "I cry aloud with my voice [*qol*] to the Lord; I make supplication with my voice [*qol*] to the Lord" (NASB).

This lends itself to easy categorization, except for a few psalms that might be speaking to God and man at the same time. Far less than the object of God, man is man's object of voice in six places, and two of these are shared with God being the object. Psalm 26:7 and 118:15 both are used in the context of praising God, but there are pointers to give the impression of its simultaneous direction towards man. In the psalmists' praise to God they are also speaking to those around them. At the same time, they are singing to God and singing to each other.

There is one object of voice that does not fit our neat categories. In Psalm 103, man addresses the angels, telling them in verse 20 to "bless the Lord" and equates the angels as those "mighty ones" who are obedient, obeying the "voice [*qol*] of his word." Here man is using voice, but not his own. David is appropriating God's voice and

directing it to the angels. There are some interesting overlaps here of man's use of the voice of the Lord directed to heavenly beings.

Of each of these three players, creation is the most difficult to categorize. Creation addresses God in six places, and there is at least one overlap with addressing man. There is also one occasion of creation addressing itself. The categories are a bit more fluid when creation comes to the stage.

Psalm 77 is a circumstance where it is clear to see creation discourse with God. In verses 17 and 18 *qol* is used to describe the sound of nature, the sound of the skies and of thunder. However, there are other areas where this clarity is not matched. Psalm 19:3 is one of two references to man as object and also has God as its object. David writes that there is knowledge being revealed in nature and later on writes of the law of the Lord. This would seem to demonstrate that creation has good instruction for us, and in somewhat of a similar way of God's law having good instruction for us. At the same time in verse one, creation is praising God. This two-way system of address is similar to the previous man-man/man-God discourse found in Psalms 26:7 and 118:15.

There is one interesting situation of *qol* where creation is speaking to creation. In Psalm 104, God is exercising his power over creation. In verse seven He accomplishes this by using the voice of creation, the sound of His thunder. Here, at the hand of God, creation directs its voice to creation, in order to bring about His order.

The nature

Each voice has a certain overall personality present in the Psalter. Speaking broadly, when God speaks it is in a form of judgment, when man speaks it is for restoration and when creation speaks it is either primarily submission or rebellion to God's order.

God has two general ways of speaking to man: in judgment and in redemption. God's voice of judgment towards men occurs the most often (four times) with there only being one instance of voice being used in the sense of redemption.

Psalm 106 is one example of the voice of God being used in judgment. In verse 25, we find those who did not listen to "the voice of the Lord" and their consequence is being cast down and scattered in verses 26 and 27, with the verses following clearly illustrating more provocation of the Lord's wrath.

On the other hand, even though this only occurs once in the Psalter, the Lord's voice does also bring redemption. Psalm 95 paints a clear picture of this. In verse seven, we are told that He is our God and that He looks after us, then to be encouraged to "hear His voice," connecting the two ideas of hearing the voice of God and being one of His own.

Unlike the two ways of speaking to man, when God speaks directly to creation, it is in judgment. This only comes about in one chapter, 29. Six times the voice of the Lord is in power of creation. This voice "breaks the cedars" (v. 5), "flashes forth flames of fire" (v. 7) and "shakes the wilderness" (v. 8). All this emphasizes God's glory, the One who "sits enthroned above the flood."

In the Psalms, man uses his voice more than God and creation, so it is no surprise to see a more nuanced nature of his voice. The five categories found were speaking to God for judgment, speaking to God for restoration, speaking to God for judgment and restoration, praise/thanksgiving, and rebellion.

The first three categories often blend together, but there are times where man has more of a pure judgment or pure restoration in mind. In verses 2 and 3 of Psalm 5, the

psalmist is crying to God not for restoration, but for judgment. The verses following outline what the Lord does to those who are wicked. This chapter seems to be the closest case of voice (and the only chapter) used in pure judgment.

The area of pure restoration is the most popular in the Psalms. Calling out to God in times of trouble is one of the main topics that the Psalms deal with and, occurring at least 13 times, it is also the most popular use of man's voice found in the Psalms. Psalm 86 is one example among many. *Qol* shows up in verse six, referring to David's prayer of deliverance. He is asking God to "save" him and "be gracious" and "gladden" his soul.

The case could be made where the previous two categories (pure judgment and pure restoration) are really just part of the next category, speaking to God for judgment and restoration, as the two are often not far apart. But there are some Psalms that are more apparent in their mix of judgment and restoration than others. This category gets used at least six times, but again, these lines can be a bit hazy. Psalm 6 can serve as a useful model of this judgment/restoration heading. Verse 8 finds voice being used to describe David's "weeping" or "crying." This "crying" is clearly a plea for restoration, but a restoration associated with themes of judgment. He prays that his enemies will be "ashamed" and "greatly troubled." As is true for this psalm, the same goes for its category: many times man's voice cries out to God for restoration through judgment. Judgment, in itself, is seen as a form of restoration. This can be incredibly helpful, as the two are often (and unfortunately) viewed as opposite sides of the spectrum.

The next category is praise/thanksgiving. There are at least 7 places where this context shows up in the Psalter. Psalm 47 begins with the phrase "O clap your hands, all

peoples; shout to God with the voice [*qol*] of joy.” These are moments of pure praise or pure thanksgiving offered up to God.

There remain one last category for man’s voice, and its existence is based on not being able to fit under the previous other headings. It is labeled “rebellion” and there is found only one use, in Psalm 74, where voice is used to describe those who are against God.

The nature of creation’s voice can be classified into two broad categories: submission and rebellion. These could also be labeled order and chaos, for when creation is in order it is submissive to God and when creation is in chaos it is in rebellion to God. The categories share an equal amount of emphasis, almost splitting right down the middle for the eight psalms where creation’s voice shows up.

Psalm 104, though not readily apparent, is under the “submission” heading. In verse 12, the birds “lift up their voices.” Some interpretation is necessary for the designation of submission. Ultimately, the reason is due to the birds fulfilling their created being, submitting their selves to the created order of God.

In contrast to submission we find rebellion as the context of the voice of creation. In Psalm 93, the waters rage in opposition to God’s power in verse 3. In the next verse, the psalmist tells us that God is stronger than these rebellious waters.

What can we learn?

There are quite a few things that we can take from understanding these conversations. Of first importance, we have found that God’s voice speaks to man and creation in order for us to see that “throughout OT, *qol* is primarily associated with intelligible sounds, of which the revelation of God’s voice takes precedence. God speaks,

and it is the duty of humankind to obey.”⁴ We find examples of those who are obedient (humankind and creation) to God and those who are not. The consequences for not obeying God are very real and very terrible.

The voice that man projects in the Psalms is one of crying out to God. This presupposes a few things that are helpful for us today. We can cry out to God because He is present and with us. Crying out to God presupposes that He hears us and will come to our aid (as in Pss. 6, 18 and 28). The psalmists also give us models on how to ask for help. As outlined earlier, judgment and redemption are often very closely linked.

The very fact that creation has a voice is something to ponder. There are instances where man can do much good to listen to creation’s voice, as evidenced in the power of natural revelation. Creation’s voice also removes Gnostic tendencies; it roots the Psalms in the grit and grime of real daily life. This is also true of metaphors in general: time and time again creation is seen as good and necessary for the Christian life. These metaphors “bring us closer to the material world [and] at the same time they bring us closer to God.”⁵

We can learn a great deal from the voices present in the Psalms and this study barely scrapes the surface. The more we learn about how God, man and creation interact in their proper orders, the more we can seek to be obedient to God and treasure His creation.

⁴ Domeris, “Qol,” 3:901.

⁵ Eugene Peterson, *Answering God: The Psalms as Tools for Prayer* (New York: HarperCollins, 1989), 74.

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