

## **“The Voice as the Sound of Many Waters” in the Book of Revelation in Light of Old Testament Semantics: A Threatening Message, or One of Beauty?**

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The forms of expression in the apocalyptic literature both in and outside the canonical Bible are unquestionably rich. The polysemanticity, the conditional Sitz im Leben of these texts that serves to build up their imagery makes generous use of the Hebrew Bible as well as the created world, human relationships and emotions, and chromatic symbolism, which is creative freedom in the construction of visions and can be interpreted ad absurdum by the contemporary reader who is not acquainted with the works of Salvador Dali, for example. It is worth noting that this is neither flat nor static imagery. The dynamism that the inspired author notes or perhaps gives it is also attractive because it has many aspects. One such noteworthy theme found in the Book of Revelation, for instance, is the auditory dimension. In addition to the verbs describing speech, whose accumulation is unique to the Johannine literature, there appear two forms expressing crying (which is described twice using the word κόπτω and six times using κλαίω), the sound of a bugle (σαλπίζω is used ten times), screaming, a loud proclamation (κράζω eleven times and κηρύσσω once), or song (ᾄδω three times), as well as οὔαι (usually translated as “complain,”<sup>1</sup> fourteen times). Meanwhile, combinations of “thunder,” “voices,” “lightning,” and “earthquakes” are used in various constellations in Revelation 4 : 5, 8 : 5, 11 : 19, and 16 : 18, while φωνή, the sound of falling cities (translated as “sound” and “noise”) is used fifty-five times. The unique description of the latter is especially interesting. The inspired author not only emphasizes its intensity (μεγάλη) in numerous categories or its source (and, at the same

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1 For more, see: J. Nowińska, *Oὔαι w Apokalipsie św. Jana – wyraz bólu, groźba czy przestroga ze strony kochającego Boga?*, [in:], „*To urzeczywistniajcie w Kościele, co w Chrystusie Jezusie*” Flp 2, 5. *Księga pamiątkowa dla Księdza Profesora Jana Flisa w 70. rocznicę urodzin*, pod red. P. Goniszewskiego, C. Korca, Szczecin 2015, p. 507–521.

time, its unique nature: φωνή μου ορφωνή βροντής), but he also compares it to other designations. Among the many elements that are compared with φωνή in the Book of Revelation, it is worth noting the expression ὡς φωνή ὑδάτων πολλῶν, which is most frequently translated as “the sound of many waters”<sup>2</sup>).

## 1. The Unique Construction of the Expression and Its Impact on Semantics

The expression under analysis appears three times in the last book of the New Testament (Revelation 1 : 15, 14 : 2, and 19 : 6), although not always in the same lexical order. In the first two verses it is used in the form φωνή... ὡς φωνή ὑδάτων πολλῶν, while in the last it is used without the introductory φωνή. The first of these developed comparative constructions is fairly typical of the Book of Revelation. In this book, it appears a total of three times (Revelation 1 : 15, 9 : 9, and 14 : 2), while in the entire Septuagint it appears four times (Jeremiah 51 : 55; Ezekiel 1 : 12, 10 : 5, and 43 : 2), half of which appear in the phrase ὕδωρ πολύ (which is relevant to the topic under discussion). Because of the duplication of the leading term, it seems to emphasize in particular the auditory effects or, having observed it from the perspective of onomatopoeia, put emphasis on the mere presence (phenomenon) or the voice. It is possible that the doublet created here serves to accentuate above all the latter. This is likely especially because through the accumulation of the word φωνή in a unique sequence and because of the context the author of the Book of Revelation appears to draw a personal, immanent, and specific reality; the question that remains is if he draws only one such reality.

The last verse featuring the term under analysis describes a phenomenon in which the writer to a certain degree distances himself from such semantics precisely thanks to the help of ὡς. This is seemingly like a voice; in other words, he emphasizes some dissimilar element, one that perhaps cannot be precisely defines. The suggestion of reality that transcends this simple concept and does not allow for limitations or the use of semantics only for the appropriate term becomes present in it.<sup>3</sup> At the same time, the fact that this is a voice

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2 Translation mine.

3 Cf. W. Popielewski, *Alleluja! Liturgia godów Baranka eschatologicznym zwycięstwem Boga (Ap 19, 1–8)*, Kielce 2001, p. 141.

becomes evident here, because the appropriate nomenclature, although it is not only or not completely a voice, is used here. This form, somewhat in a "clean" form, appears in Revelation 6 : 6 devoid of any attributes. The last book of the New Testament compares the voice to some sort of reality eleven times: a bugle (Revelation 1 : 10, 4 : 1), the sound of many waters (Revelation 1 : 15, 14 : 2), thunder (Revelation 6 : 1, 14 : 2), the sound of carriages led by many horses rushing to war (Revelation 9 : 9), the onomatopoeia ὡς καθαρωδῶν καθαριζόντων ἐν ταῖς κιθάραις αὐτῶν (Revelation 14 : 2) and a great crowd (Revelation 19 : 1 and the parallel sixth verse). Thus each of the aforementioned elements is characterized by a great accumulation of sound because of its unique nature or because of the number of sources that produce it. This supposes the force of impact as well as the near impossibility of ignoring or evading it. The context of particular phrases indicates the reason why such a form and purpose were used.

From the semantic perspective, the expression ὡς φωνὴ ὑδάτων πολλῶν is interesting because it contains both phonetics and imagery additionally strengthened by the expression πολλή. Because the auditory aspect – the application of this expression always depends on the context of the voice – is an important dimension of the Book of Revelation, the contents are always based on the outlined image of many waters. Regardless of the time when he or she was born, upon hearing this term the listener first imagines many waters known from everyday life (depending on where one lives, these could include rivers, whirlpools, or sea waves) and only then begins to "hear" them. In order to interpret this correctly, it is worth looking at the Old Testament background of this expression and its contents and implications, because the root of the inspired author's thinking can be found there.

## 2. The Message of the Image of Many Waters in the Old Testament

It is significant that consideration of the climate of Palestine as well as *Sitz im Leben* are taken into consideration in the expression describing voice under analysis. This context shows the conditions that the inspired authors also had in the mental sphere. The lack of water in this area was related to the absence of rivers apart from the Jordan and the presence of only ravines. This it is unsurprising that it is a treasury nearly as valuable as gold as well as a component of the mental image of abundance and happiness (as can

be seen, for example, in the four rivers that are located in Eden according to Genesis 2 : 10-14). Ravines only functioned on occasion, depending on rainfall. During the rainy seasons, precipitation caused the sudden flooding of riverbeds as well as all canyons and other depressions in the ground.<sup>4</sup> It also flowed into a few irrigation channels.<sup>5</sup> The movement of these then-huge bodies of water, which occurred quickly because of the unevenness of the land, was accompanied by intense noise as well as the frequent destruction of nearby areas. Flowing streams flowed into the Jordan or into the sea, and in these places the sound of water became loud, intensified by the currents it encountered. It is also possible that the sound of many waters was known to the Jews thanks to observing streams flowing from Mount Lebanon.<sup>6</sup> The theme of the flood introduced in the Book of Genesis makes us aware that the sound of tumultuous rain and the racket of flooding waters were also known. This existential underpinning is developed in an interesting way in the thinking of the Biblical authors.

The expression ὕδωρ πολύ is used in the Septuagint to describe abundance that satisfies yearning (Numbers 20 : 11; 2 Chronicles 32 : 4) or a climate conducive to development (especially Ezekiel 31 : 5), fertility, or a richness of fruit (Ezekiel 17 : 5, 8; 19 : 10; 31 : 7). In Jeremiah 51 : 13, the theme of living above great waters also appears (Hebrew Bible: על־קַיִם רְבִיִּים, LXX ὕδασι πολλοῖς) in the description of Babylon; it is also references in Revelation 17 : 1.

The aquatic element is also highlighted in the way that God is presented in the Bible, both with regards to His identity as well as the way He is evoked and His activity.<sup>7</sup> The principle of creating metaphors (images) based on observations of the surrounding world and the rules functioning in it is of fundamental value to the Semites and thus the Biblical author used all the aspects of ὕδωρ πολύ and the depth of his perceptivity could be surprising.

In addition to being a symbol of abundance and progress, the comparative expression for voice analyzed here can be found in the Old Testament as a threatening image, the activity of an enormous power hostile to man and more powerful than he, yet nonetheless subordinate to God (Psalm 32 : 6). In 2 Samuel 22 : 17 (and, analogously, in the parallel text in Psalm 18 : 17), this is indicated by the context (the entire passage is David's song), which is God's

4 Cf. M. Bednarz, *Ziemia uμίλωana przez Boga. Geografia Ziemi Świętej*, Tarnów 2000, p. 194.

5 Cf. S. Hałas, *Pustynia miejscem próby i spotkania z Bogiem*, Kraków 1999, p. 304.

6 Ibidem.

7 For more, see: W. Pikor, *Soteriologiczna metafora wody w Księdze Izajasza*, Lublin 2009, p. 73–99.

calling for help and the description of Divine intervention through the forces of nature and its reception through human experience. In this text, the image of many waters is outlined as the first after a theophanic presentation. Due to the atmosphere of terror in which it is contained, it can be considered to be a bridge leading to the image of the enemy in verse 18n. A similar context is found in Psalm 144 : 7. Here, the aspect of complete overwhelming, a situation without a solution, and threats from all sides that seem to negate all alternative solutions is accented. This indicates that the image is used in a metaphorical and parallel form with a plea for liberation.

This theme is also used to present a form of destruction as a force in God's hands, a tool of His activity, and an element of the vision of the future in Ezekiel 26 : 19 and 32 : 13, for example.

In Song of Songs 8 : 7, it appears to be synonymous the greatest of all possible forces in the natural world. This is indicated by the arrangement of the context: the outlining of the size and power of love (four comparative elements in Song of Songs 8 : 6: death; She'ol; the flame of the fire; and Yahweh, the flame of judgment) and the presentation of a reality that cannot be destroyed (great waters that are incapable of extinguishing the fire of love and rivers in which it cannot drown like foreign armies that attack the ground).

Meanwhile, in Isaiah 28 : 2 (here, the Hebrew Bible places כְּבִיר in the clause of the apposition, not כְּבִיר, as in other texts; the Septuagint translates it as ὕδατος πολύ) this description is used to present God's messenger as a third comparative element in the image of His power. This sequence appears to accumulate (and thus the image of many waters takes the strongest position), while the entirety is supposed to show the power of God's activity and His domain over the earth.

Psalm 77 : 20 refers to the expression under analysis, bringing to the fore the image of Moses leading across the sea during the escape from Egypt. It is worth noting that in this context the inspired author ties the voice to many waters in neither a metaphorical nor comparative way. Instead, he places one after the other, introducing the image of mighty waters fearful (ἐφοβήθησαν in the Septuagint) before His face, dynamically reacting to His presence (or subordinate to His commands, as in verse 18). This theme is elaborated in Habakkuk 3 : 15. However, in Psalm 77 : 20 itself the emphasis is not placed on God's confrontation with ὕδωρ πολύ, but on the subtle, non-demonstrative, yet authoritative guide of the Chosen People, authoritative in that he realized what he had intended (the pronoun "yours" is used three times) and in the secret,

not entirely comprehensible Divine Presence, traces of which are hidden. The construction of the expression “waters” through climate-related analogies gives the impression of the intensification of their power and greatness.

Psalm 107(106):23 adds the impression of a space whose enormity is accentuated through its comparison with depths in an analogy (verse 24) to this image. Similarly, Wisdom 10 : 19 situates it next to the concept of the sea (the mentioned name of this reservoir is reminiscent of an exodus, but it also distances itself from being perceived as a personal force hostile to Israel). A similar semantic aspect is made visible in Isaiah 23 : 3 and in Isaiah 11 : 8 (in this text, there consistency with regards to the translation of the Septuagint, although there are differences with the Hebrew Bible) as well as in Ezekiel 27 : 26.

The Old Testament also uses the expression under discussion as an image of noise. Isaiah 17 : 12n uses the words: כְּשֹׁאֵן מִיַּם כְּבִירִים “The surging of nations that surge like the surging of mighty waves!” Isaiah’s use of onomatopoeia intensifies the impression that ties together sound with power and in fact allows one of feel the pressure caused by the force of the waters.<sup>8</sup> However, an analysis of Biblical places where the Hebrew שֹׁאֵן is used makes one differentiate it from קוּל and understand it in the meaning of waves; the accent is placed on the image that gives the noise, and not on the noise itself. Thus these texts will not be discussed in a contextual analysis of this topic. These nuances are emphasized by Jeremiah 51 : 55, where the above-mentioned term is subordinated to קוּל; the Millennium Bible translates this as “the clamor of the voice.” At the same time, this resolves the problem of the semantic accent, which is on the voice and not on a visualization of it, in the expression under analysis. Nonetheless, from the perspective of psychology the latter remains the first received stimulus and it equally clearly bolsters the expressiveness of the sound, also giving it a spatial dimension, as we will see in future analyses.

The presented multidimensionality of semantics applied to the comparative element of “many waters” opens new interpretative horizons of the expression in the title of this article, not allowing for the reduction of it to being just one aspect.<sup>9</sup>

8 Cf. *Księga Izajasza*, part 2: *Rozdziały 13–39*, wstęp, przekład z oryginału, komentarz T. Brzegowy, Częstochowa 2014, p. 158–161.

9 It is difficult to admit that H. G. May, as cited by H. Witzkyk in his commentary to Psalm 29, was right in believing that מִיַּם רְבִים was merely the representation of all cosmic forces hostile to God:

### 3. The Tying Together of Voice with the Image of Many Waters in the Old Testament

The comparison of "voice" to "the sound of many waters" makes one think<sup>10</sup> of such a visualization that is incapable of drowning out sound. This is a very expressive force. At the same time, this voice takes control over all sounds that appear in the surroundings; it dominates yet at the same time fully absorbs one's attention, not allowing it to escape its experience or message. Thus it is impossible for someone who encounters "the voice as the sound many waters" to not hear it or to evade it. The force of phonetics is simply too great.

In the Hebrew Bible, the tying of the voice to the sound of many waters takes place in Jeremiah 51 : 55 (Septuagint: Jeremiah 28 : 55); Ezekiel 1 : 24, 43 : 2; Psalm 93(92); the Septuagint avoids this form in Ezekiel 43 : 2, while it uses it in the psalm of voice (Psalm 29[28]:3). Because the fragment of Jeremiah's prophecy and Psalm 93 make the described voice concrete by describing it as a noise made by waves and rivers, only the texts of Ezekiel and Psalm 29(28) will be analyzed. The latter situates God's voice above immense waters; however, it does not associate it with noise. At the same time, it refers back to the above-mentioned semantic bank: the aspect of rule and power, victory and control over history.<sup>11</sup>

In the case of the Book of Ezekiel, the tying together of the voice with the sound of many waters appears within the description of the so-called glory of Yahweh.<sup>12</sup> The auditory impression is relegated to second place, after visual stimuli, and it results from the movement of the subject and its getting closer. After all, it becomes tied to a very mobile part: to the wings. The complicated (at least according to contemporary readers) image of a living being appears to create here the definition and essence of life – whose source, origin, and center are in God because each of the described processes is dependent on the Spirit – through elements emphasizing mobility, dynamics, and harmony (the placing of elements in relation to each other). In this arrangement, the voice

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"Some cosmic connotation of *mayim rabbim*." Za: H. Witczyk, „*Pokorny wolał i Pan go wysłuchał*” (Ps 34, 7a). *Model komunikacji diafonicznej w Psalmach*, Lublin 1997, p. 75.

10 The theme of the recipient's associations is very important in Gadamer's hermeneutic concept of pre-understanding the Biblical text – cf. W. Pikor, *Soteriologiczna metafora wody w Księdze Izajasza*, op. cit., s. 13.

11 Cf. H. Witczyk, *Teofania w psalmach*, Kraków 1985, p. 179–180.

12 For more, see: W. Pikor, *Kompozycja Ez 1, 4–28*, <http://prorok.edu.pl/wyklady/chwala-jahwe-w-ez.php> (10.07.2015).

appears to be tied to communication.<sup>13</sup> However, it is worth noting one more fact. The analysis of the passage in which Ezekiel 1 : 24 appears allows us to notice how characteristic the theme of firmament is (in addition to voice tied to the metaphor of wings); it is this theme that seems to outline the context. The Hebrew קַיִץ appears here four times (the Millennium Bible faithfully reproduces this theme).

<sup>22</sup> Over the heads of the living creatures, something like a **firmament** could be seen,  
seeming like glittering crystal,  
stretched straight out above their heads.

<sup>23</sup> **Beneath the firmament**

their wings were stretched out, one toward the other.  
(Each of them had two covering his body.)

<sup>24</sup> Then I heard the sound of their wings, like the roaring of mighty waters, like the voice of the Almighty. When they moved, the sound of the tumult was like the din of an army. (And when they stood still, they lowered their wings.)

<sup>25</sup> **Above the firmament**

over their heads  
something like a throne could be seen, looking like sapphire. Upon it was seated, up above,  
one who had the appearance of a man.

In Ezekiel 1 : 25, there is a clear tying of the voice to the firmament, while the reality of the sound located under it is merely similar to the voice of the Almighty, while above the firmament identification of it with God's person leaves no doubts. This is indicated by the semantic center of these verses that is God Himself. The firmament has the function of a boundary, while the description of the voice finds a point of reference only in God. A medium or anticipation – directed towards the reality of God; however, there are no enclosures above Him and the encounter with the voice occurs directly – can appear under the firmament. It is worth noticing that the presence of the “voice as the sound of many waters” in this space (according to Pikor, the wings are an element that binds, between the space above and below the firmament<sup>14</sup>) is conducive to its emission and dispersion, thus emphasizing its auditory aspect and beauty.

13 Cf. W. Pikor, *Teologia Chwały Jahwe w Ez 1, 4–28*, p. 8, <http://prorok.edu.pl/wyklady/chwala-jahwe-w-ez.php> (10.07.2015).

14 Cf. W. Pikor, *Kompozycja Ez 1, 4–28*, op. cit., p. 6.



The very description of this voice, in whose central part the comparisons referenced in the title of this article, is worth noting. Several elements appear here:

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|---|---|
| Then I heard the sound of their wings,                                  | like the roaring of mighty waters,<br>like the voice of the Almighty, <sup>15</sup> |
| When they moved, the sound of the tumult was                            | like the din of an army.  |
| (And when they stood still, they lowered their wings.) (Ezekiel 1 : 24) |   |

The Septuagint interprets this verse and presents it in the form: *καὶ ἤκουον τὴν φωνὴν τῶν πτερυγῶν αὐτῶν ἐν τῷ πορεύεσθαι αὐτὰ ὡς φωνὴν ὕδατος πολλοῦ καὶ ἐν τῷ ἐστάναι αὐτὰ κατέπαυον αἱ πτέρυγες αὐτῶν*. Because the author of the Book of Revelation was familiar above all with the texts of the Hebrew Bible, it seems appropriate to analyze this version.

The expression *ὡς φωνὴ ὕδατων πολλῶν* is the first element in the description of the sound of the wings of living beings, or the form of an explanation of the dynamics of life (see above) and at the same time equivalent to "the voice of the coming Almighty." This context suggests that the semantics of the comparison under analysis will instead balance between these two types of realities or stand close to the latter comparative expression. In the first case, one quickly comes to think that *ὡς φωνὴ ὕδατων πολλῶν* accumulates within itself all the previously mentioned semantic aspects present in the texts of the Old Testament containing the expression "many waters" – the beauty of creation, multiplicity, richness, and God's great power and strength – because in these texts the sound of great waters refers to God and to creation (life). Meanwhile, if we take into consideration the relation between comparative expressions, such as: "the sound of many waters" or "the voice of the coming Almighty," as juxtaposing them even in a sequence such as that above supposes that there is no discrepancy between them. Here the themes of strength, beauty, and multitude (richness, abundance) is exposed and can be known. This thesis is supported by Ezekiel 43 : 2, in which both expressions refer back to each other and all the elements (the voice, the sound of many waters, coming, God) appear: "and there I saw the glory of the God of Israel coming from the east. I heard a sound like the roaring of many waters, and the earth shone with his glory." This seems especially important to understanding

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15 This translation is based on the Hebrew Bible.

the expression ὡς φωνὴ ὑδάτων πολλῶν in the Book of Revelation, especially since the theme of the coming God is essential to this book.<sup>16</sup> The direction from which Yahweh's glory comes makes one think of the symbolism of new life, rebirth, and liberation ascribed to Him in the Bible. They are coherent with contents that Semites associated with the concept of water. Thus it is possible that the purpose of the construction of Ezekiel 43 : 2 is to emphasize the theme of rebirth, the regaining of strength, and life-giving power in the theme of the voice of the Almighty.

Recognition of the sound of the sea in the comparison under analysis by Homerski<sup>17</sup> is in opposition to the comparison with God's voice. The Jewish mentality was conditioned by unpleasant historical experiences related to possessing an exceptionally long coastline contained within its borders. It was often necessary to fight against enemy armies on the coastal plane, which from the psychological perspective was for Israel synonymous with defeat, because it never possessed so large an army that the very sight of it would be capable of making an impression on its enemies. Similarly, the Israeli army was poorly equipped and thus its limited fighting capacities led to its nearly notorious defeats. Additionally, the lack of a fleet and the odd generations-old incapability of creating it compounded the mistrust and ambivalence towards the sea. In the Jewish consciousness, it was a decidedly hostile and constantly threatening force that could not be conquered by human effort.<sup>18</sup> Thus it could not be a comparative element that was concordant with God's identity. It was seen as a defender, not as an aggressor. What's interesting, it could serve the seas as a vehicle, but the Bible never presents His attributes through use of this element.

#### 4. The Elusiveness and Internal Power of the Experience of Voice in Book of Revelation

The last book of the New Testament situates voice ὡς φωνὴ ὑδάτων πολλῶν in two different contexts. Revelation 1 : 15 is the description of someone similar

16 For more, see: J. Nowińska, *Bóg przychodzący w ujęciu Apokalipsy św. Jana*, [in:] *Misterium słowa. Modlitwa*, red. D. Czaicki, Kraków 2014, p. 249–266.

17 *Księga Ezechiela. Wstęp, przekład z oryginału, komentarz, ekskursy*, oprac. J. Homerski, Poznań 2013, p. 63 (Biblia. Stary Testament, 11.1).

18 Por. J. Nowińska, *Motyw wojny dobra ze złem w Apokalipsie św. Jana*, Warszawa 2006, p. 52.

to the Son of Man. The two remaining passages connect the term under analysis to the expression “I heard” after the image of the Lamb standing with the army on Mount Zion in Revelation 14 : 2, and to the prophetic vision of the destruction of Babylon in Revelation 19 : 6.

The voice is clearly attributed in Revelation 1 : 15: ἡ φωνὴ αὐτοῦ ὡς φωνὴ ὑδάτων πολλῶν. This expression has no parallels in this book; however, it is semantically related to the expression φωνὴ μου in Revelation 3 : 20. This is the only case in which voice is directly tied to Jesus. Aune sees in this comparison a fusion of Ezekiel 43 : 2 (which is analyzed above) and Daniel 10 : 6.<sup>19</sup> However, the latter passage focuses on words, and not on the voice itself. Meanwhile, the reference to the passage in the Book of Ezekiel seems very appropriate, while in the immediate context Ezekiel 43 : 2 and Revelation 1 : 15 connect voice with light, although fundamental terminology is used: Yahweh’s glory (Ezekiel) and the figure similar to the Son of Man (Revelation) are different.<sup>20</sup> The situation of the comparison under analysis in Revelation 1 is interesting because it is preceded by a certain inconsistency. It takes place after the description of the luminous elements pertaining to the figure and before the reference to the shiny requisites and the last observation of the glow emanating from the same person. Although in this context “the voice as the sound of many waters” seems to be a conflicting interjection, the fact that it is parallel to Ezekiel 43 : 2 allows one to reference here the theme of life most frequently tied to water and sun (the east in Ezekiel 43 : 2). Thus it is possible that the nearly central position of the expression under analysis<sup>21</sup> in the description of a person similar to the Son of Man is supposed to direct the reader towards the topic of life and arouse hope in rebirth and rescue. This thesis seems correct in light of the declaration in Revelation 1 : 17b-18: „Do not be afraid. I am the first and the last, the one who lives. Once I was dead, but now I am alive forever and ever. I hold the keys to death and the netherworld.”

In Revelation 14 : 2, the comparative element mentioned in the title of this article was added to the voice from heaven in the original construction:

19 D. A. Aune, *Revelation*, Dallas 1997, vol. 1, p. 96–98; por. R. H. Charles, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Revelation of St. John*, Edinburgh 1971, vol. 1, p. 29.

20 A. Y. Treuting all the images of Yahweh in the Old Testament in a total fashion, Collins sees one of the attributes attesting to God the Father’s connection to Jesus – *The Apocalypse*, Wilmington 1979, p. 12–13.

21 Por. G. A. Krodol, *Augsburg Commentary on the New Testament Revelation*, Minneapolis, Minnesota 1989, p. 96.

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|---------------------------------|---------------------------------|
| I heard a sound from heaven     | καὶ ἤκουσα φωνήν ἐκ τοῦ οὐρανοῦ |
| like the sound of rushing water | ὡς φωνήν ὑδάτων πολλῶν          |
| or a loud peal of thunder.      | καὶ ὡς φωνήν βροντῆς μεγάλης    |

|   |                      |
|---|----------------------|
| The sound I heard                                 | καὶ ἡ φωνὴ ἦν ἤκουσα |
| was like that of harpists playing their harps     |                      |
| ὡς κιθαρῶδῶν κιθαρῖζόντων ἐν ταῖς κιθάραις αὐτῶν. |                      |

On the pages of the Bible, the voice from the heavens is unambiguously tied to God;<sup>22</sup> hence the semantic coherence of the images from the texts from the Book of Revelation referenced above is beyond doubt. However, there are small differences in the immediate context. In the case of Revelation 14 : 2, at first glance the context seems more similar to the third passage from Revelation containing ὡς φωνὴ ὑδάτων πολλῶν (Revelation 19 : 6). The inclusion of expressions related to the perception of the voice in Revelation 14 : 2 (καὶ ἤκουσα φωνήν – καὶ ἡ φωνὴ ἦν ἤκουσα) cuts into the series of comparisons ὡς φωνή, which direct the reader's attention to the process of listening. Thus it seems that the purpose of the comparative elements describing the voice is to emphasize its phonetics. The way in which 2 and 1 are arranged as well as their semantics and especially the parallelism of the clauses in Revelation 14 : 2a suggest the presence of two auditory elements. The expressions “sound of rushing water” and “loud peal of thunder” clearly put emphasis on the intensity of the sound. This is indicated in the descriptions of greatness present in both comparative elements. Kiddle considers the climate in this case to be especially worth noting.<sup>23</sup> It differs from the expression “like that of harpists playing their harpists” not only because of the lack of the introductory ὡς φωνή in Revelation 14 : 2b, but also with respect to the comparative material. Here, the accent appears to be placed on the aesthetic impression not only because of onomatopoeia, but also semantics. The presence of the latter comparison, which is held at a distance from the others and at the same time breaks its severity and strength, thus suggesting multidimensionality and many tones of the voice that is heard (Ford believes that this is a mixture of Divine, human, and angelic voices or sounds<sup>24</sup>). This also refines the force that presents

22 Cf. J. Nowińska, *Głos z nieba w J 12, 28 – jego percepcja i wymowa teologiczna w świetle Biblii*, „Ruch Biblijny i Liturgiczny” 68 (2015) nr 1, p. 17–46, <http://dx.doi.org/10.21906/rbl.8>.

23 Cf. M. Kiddle, *The Revelation of St. John*, London 1949, vol. 1, p. 266.

24 Cf. J. M. Ford, *Revelation. Introduction, translation and commentary*, New York 1975, p. 232.

comparisons with Revelation 14 : 2, making them closer to man, overcoming fear and introducing the aspect of fondness to "the voice as the sound of many waters," since at the same time it is as pleasing to the ears as the music of strummed cords of the harp. This corresponds with the overtones of the scene in which the text of Revelation 1 : 15, in which the one hearing the voice reacts to its strength with fear, after which he immediately experiences Jesus' calming, soothing voice, is situated. Is this because the full beauty of creation and God's concern for it, a force always standing at man's side contained in the Old Testament understanding of the comparative element of this expression, is contained in the image of "the voice as the sound of many waters"?

Aune ties "the voice sound of many waters" to the song mentioned in Revelation 14 : 3.<sup>25</sup> The interpretation of this expression puts emphasis on frightening loudness, while the voice itself is ascribed to the singing crowd, based on the coherence of the 144,000 in Revelation 14 : 1 and Revelation 7 : 4nn. However, an analysis of the Book of Revelation from the perspective of the understanding of φωνή ἐκ τοῦ οὐρανοῦ, which in no place in this book is applied to the description of a crowd of people, precludes such a hypothesis. This fact makes the song in Revelation 14 : 3 the only response to God's voice. Meanwhile, the emphasized aspect of the novelty of the song and the introduction of living beings representing the entirety of creation,<sup>26</sup> as well as old men, the image of the old and new Israel, harmonized with the aforementioned message of the comparison to the voice of many waters foreshadowing life, rebirth, and salvation.

Meanwhile, in Revelation 19 : 6 the expression under analysis appears in the image contrasting with the lack of a voice from which Babylon suffers amidst the pleiad of sounds glorifying God's victory. An arrangement whose nature is reminiscent of a buckle enters the composition of the arrangement:

19 : 1 After this I heard

what sounded like the loud **voice** of a **great multitude** in heaven, saying:

ὡς φωνήν μεγάλην ὄχλου πολλοῦ ἐν τῷ οὐρανῷ

19 : 5 A voice coming from the throne

said:

Καὶ φωνὴ ἀπὸ τοῦ θρόνου ἐξήλθεν

<sup>25</sup> D. A. Aune, *Revelation*, op. cit., vol. 2, p. 806.

<sup>26</sup> Cf. J. Nowińska, *Bóg przychodzący w ujęciu Apokalipsy św. Jana*, op. cit., p. 255.

19 : 6 Then I heard

*something like the sound of a great multitude*

ὡς φωνὴν ὄχλου πολλοῦ

**or the sound of rushing water**

καὶ ὡς φωνὴν ὑδάτων πολλῶν

or mighty peals of thunder,

as they said

καὶ ὡς φωνὴν ὑδάτων πολλῶν

The omission of the introductory φωνή before the ὡς φωνή ὑδάτων in the above-mentioned passage and the connection of the voice to the act of listening suggest that the person listening has a problem with unambiguously qualifying auditory experiences.<sup>27</sup> He does not unambiguously recognize it as the voice, as in previous fragments. A reading of Revelation 19 : 6 allows for such conclusions. The inclusion of the expression ὡς φωνὴν ὄχλου πολλοῦ between Revelation 19 : 1 and 19 : 6 makes this an auditory impression that is even stronger and emphasizes its importance for the narrator.<sup>28</sup> As in previous texts, accumulation in the significant number of three expressions describing greatness and power seems to be directed towards the evocative power of sound. Interestingly, Revelation 19 : 6 also contains “the voice as the sound of many waters” between the metaphor of the great crowd and the greatness of thunder, yet it does not bring forth an aura of fear or escape. In the next verse, the significance of this is strengthened by words ascribed to this reality. The fact of speaking can be an argument in favor of the fact that a typical voice is described in Revelation 19 : 6. However, it is equally an interpretation of the meaning of the internal experience. The plural form of the used participle λεγόντων, however, requires one to look for the appropriate form of the subject. It can only be the expression “thunder,” which at the same time seems to put into question the reference of the text to auditory experience described using ὡς φωνὴν ὄχλου πολλοῦ. The connection of the sound of thunder with the voice “from heaven” in the same sequence had already taken place in Revelation 10, which sanctions the separate verbal message from ἡ φωνὴ ὡς φωνὴ ὑδάτων πολλῶν.

27 Cf. D. A. Aune, *Revelation*, op. cit., vol. 2, p. 1028.

28 W. Popielewski sees this as a noteworthy manifestation of God's power – *Alleluja! Liturgia godów Baranka eschatologicznym zwycięstwem Boga (Ap 19, 1–8)*, op. cit., p. 243.

## 5. Fear or Beauty?

“The voice as the sound of many waters” possesses great semantic richness in the Book of Revelation. The description of the internal experience applied here – it seems that based on the undertaken analysis one can easily call it the experience of God – contains within itself above all the compelling impression of being overwhelming. Both impact and space are noted here. Through the assistance of this description and the juxtaposition of it with the sound of a great (powerful) lightning flash, the author of the Book of Revelation seems to create the most powerful voice in nature, both with regards to its intensity and expressiveness. The insurmountable intensified auditory aspect creates conditions in which no listener is overlooked. “The voice as the sound of many waters” begins to dominate the cacophony of sounds in the world as well as in man’s interior and at the same time gives hope that one can refer back to it at any moment, as it no longer levels anything. Its existence cannot be denied. The voice as the sound of many waters thus evokes not so much a feeling of being threatened as the experience of a life-giving God and His concern for man and the world. The very phonetics transmit a message related to abundance, the fulfillment of desires, and the space for development, which is not ephemeral, but strong and impossible to drown out. Interestingly, it is not conditioned by any predispositions or accomplishments on the part of the person. They are simply offered up. Thus it is not surprising that summons to listen appear in the Book of Revelation six times, while the decision that belongs to the person has no basis on the explanation that the voice was not perceived. Thus why does man who hears God speaking in a voice like the sound of the waters continue to not believe that he is hearing God?

### Abstract

#### **“The Voice as the Sound of Many Waters” in the Book of Revelation in Light of Old Testament Semantics: A Threatening Message or One of Beauty?**

The sentence ἡ φωνὴ αὐτοῦ ὡς φωνὴ ὑδάτων πολλῶν isn’t very commonly found in the Bible, despite the fact that the subject of God’s voice is one of the main motifs not only in the Old Testament. It is used twice in Ezekiel and three times in the Book of Revelation. Both connect this motive with God to describe His Identity and deeds. The “many waters” do not only mean force, danger and terrible rule in the Bible. They are also a metaphor for abundance, which a good condition for progress, because water gives life. So “the voice as the sound of many waters” is the message of power, liveliness, beauty, and care. It is so strong a voice that nobody and nothing is capable of overcoming

it. Everybody who wants to can hear it. It is like the voice embraced from all sides. The Book of Revelation describes Jesus' voice (Rev 1 : 15) and the voice from heaven (Rev 14 : 2) in such a way. Also for John, the mystery of internal experience (Rev 19 : 6) avoids any categorization. But for God, it is the preferred way to communicate with human beings.

**Keywords:** voice; many waters; life; force; danger; experience

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