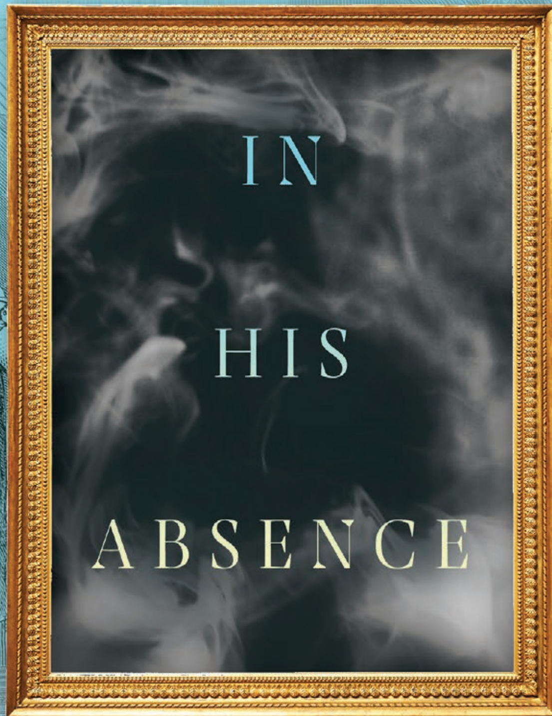
CHLOE T. SUN

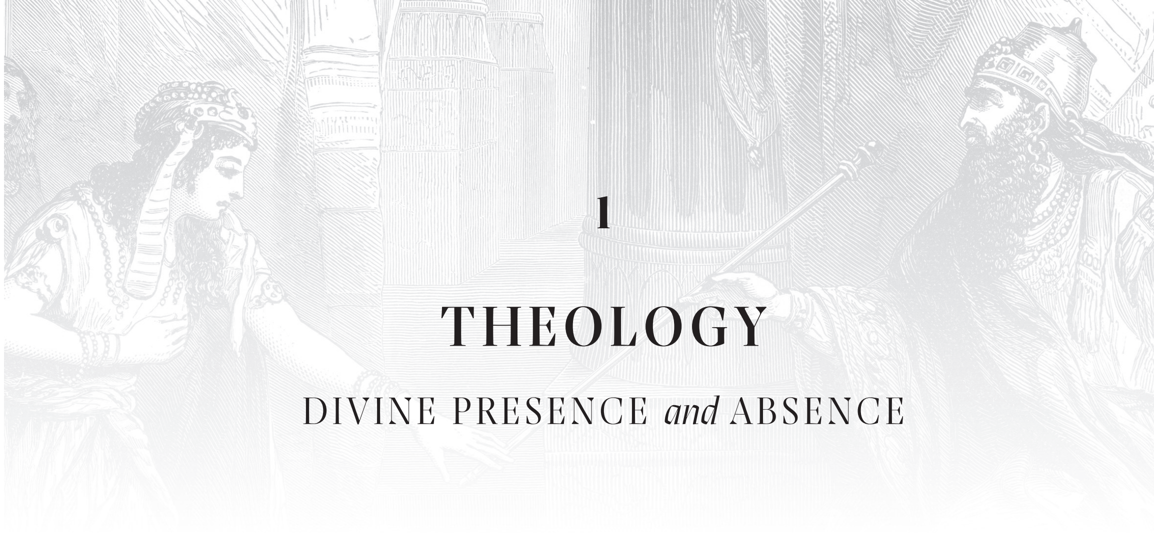
CONSPICUOUS



STUDIES IN THE SONG *of* SONGS *and* ESTHER

InterVarsity Press
ivpress.com

Taken from *Conspicuous in His Absence* by Chloe T. Sun.
Copyright © 2021 by Chloe Tse Sun. Published by InterVarsity Press,
Downers Grove, IL. www.ivpress.com.



1

THEOLOGY

DIVINE PRESENCE *and* ABSENCE

My God, my God, why have You forsaken me?

PSALM 22:1

If God is explicitly present in every single book of the Bible, how can we make sense of the reality that people do sense divine absence in their lives? Past scholarship has devoted much attention to the absence of God in the book of Esther, and to a lesser extent the theology of absence in Song of Songs, but rarely does this scholarship place these two books together to investigate how this unique literary feature of the absence of God's name contributes to the theology of Hebrew Scripture.

Therefore, this chapter paints in broad strokes a picture of theological inquiries on the theology of divine presence and absence in the Hebrew Scripture.

As a part of the Writings in general and as an essential component of the Megilloth in particular, together having a close affinity with wisdom, Song of Songs and Esther demonstrate a unique yet often overlooked fact—that the way in which God works in this portion of Scripture differs from that in the Torah and the Prophets. Divine absence forms incomprehensibility, which is intrinsic to the ethos of God. Together with divine presence, divine absence presents a fuller picture of who God is. As a result, these two scrolls supplement and complement what the rest of the biblical books lack. This

ivp | InterVarsity Press

chapter concludes with the thesis that the absence of God in these two biblical books is a theological necessity if one attempts to articulate an Old Testament theology. The dominant mode of divine presence in other biblical books is not the whole picture of God if it does not include and integrate this theme of divine absence. The theme of absence also helps to align theology with real life, especially for those who experience suffering, trauma, loss, crisis, uncertainty, or evil in this world. In light of the global pandemic in 2020 and its aftermath, the inquiry of the absence of God cannot be more pertinent.

DIVINE PRESENCE AND ABSENCE IN SCHOLARSHIP

In *Where Is God? Divine Absence in the Hebrew Bible*, Joel Burnett observes, "The theme of divine absence in the Hebrew Bible involves a crisis of relationship." In the same book, he states, "The theme of divine absence goes hand in hand with the problem of theodicy."[1] In the minds of the believers, God should be present at all times, especially during the times when they need him the most. Yet the lived experience of many believers speaks otherwise. Relationship, by nature, is mutual and dialogical. When one party remains absent, silent, or uninvolved, it creates a relational crisis. I would like to suggest further that divine absence not only creates a crisis of relationship, but also a crisis of intellect and a crisis of faith. By *intellect* I am referring to human reasoning and comprehension. If God is omnipresent, how and why would he be absent or choose to be absent? If we appeal to the compassion of God and to his special relationship with his chosen people, where is God when his people call on him but he is not there, as many lament psalms indicate? By *faith*, I mean the kind of conviction that God is present even though he cannot be felt, and the kind of belief that God is there even though he remains silent and hidden. Divine absence reflects a serious theological

[1]The literary review in this chapter is not comprehensive or exhaustive but representative. See Joel S. Burnett, *Where Is God? Divine Absence in the Hebrew Bible* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2010), 43, 86. In another article, Burnett traces the theme of divine absence in selected ancient Near Eastern texts and the Hebrew Bible and concludes that the perception of divine absence was not a concern limited to ancient Israel alone. Rather, divine absence is a basic religious concern in ancient Israel's broader West Semitic context. See Joel S. Burnett, "The Question of Divine Absence in Israelite and West Semitic Religion," *CBQ* 67 (2005): 215-35.

ivp | InterVarsity Press

crisis, which is worth reckoning and grappling with. Yet scholarship on Old Testament theology has relegated this theological theme to the margins.[2] Only in recent years has the subject of divine absence started to appear in individual monographs and gained gradual momentum in the study of the theology of Megilloth.[3]

Past scholarship on the theology of divine presence and absence can be segmented into three major but also overlapping approaches.[4]

1. Diachronic: This approach advocates the position that divine presence gradually decreases and is replaced by divine absence. At the same time, human characters gradually take center stage, with the book of Esther as the ultimate example of this, in which the name of God is entirely absent, but human responsibility comes to the fore.
2. Dialectic: Divine presence and absence is perceived as a dialectical relationship in which divine absence cannot be conceived apart from divine presence. In this view, there is divine presence in absence and

[2]For instance, Bruggemann's *Old Testament Theology* does not include Song of Songs and Esther. See Walter Brueggemann, *Old Testament Theology: An Introduction* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2008). His earlier work, *Theology of the Old Testament*, sees laments and complaints as Israel's countertestimony. Yet Song of Songs is mentioned only once (342), and the book of Esther is not mentioned at all. See Walter Brueggemann, *Theology of the Old Testament: Testimony, Dispute, Advocacy* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1997), index of scriptural references. House's *Old Testament Theology* is a book-by-book treatment of the Old Testament's theology. For the book of Esther, he titles it "The God Who Protects the Exiles," which may sound too positive and downplays the issue of divine absence. For Song of Songs, House titles it "The God Who Oversees Male-Female Sexuality," which again, interprets a book without God's name as if he were in fact present. See Paul R. House, *Old Testament Theology* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1998), 463, 490. Waltke's *Old Testament Theology* places the book of Esther under the umbrella of divine providence, whereas he sees Song of Songs as a type of God and his people. He neglects the motif of divine absence. See Bruce K. Waltke, *An Old Testament Theology: An Exegetical, Canonical, and Thematic Approach* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2007), 163-64. The book of Esther is not mentioned in Moberly's *Old Testament Theology*, and Song of Songs is mentioned only in passing and mostly appears in the footnotes. See R. W. L. Moberly, *Old Testament Theology: Reading the Hebrew Bible as Christian Scripture* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2013). The latest book by Duvall and Hays relegates both Song of Songs and Esther to less than one page each. See J. Scott Duvall and J. Daniel Hays, *God's Relational Presence: The Cohesive Center of Biblical Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2019), 90, 109-10.

[3]For example, Brad Embry, ed., *Megilloth Studies: The Shape of Contemporary Scholarship*, HBM 78 (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix, 2016). Brittany N. Melton, *Where Is God in the Megilloth? A Dialogue on the Ambiguity of Divine Presence and Absence* (Leiden: Brill, 2018).

[4]Melton's book also groups past scholarship on divine presence and absence similarly for the first two camps. She names them (1) decreasing trajectory from divine presence to divine absence and (2) recurrent divine hiddenness/absence. See Melton, *Where Is God*, 14, 18.

ivp | InterVarsity Press

divine absence in presence. The genre in question is concentrated primarily on the lament psalms and the exilic prophets.

3. Canonical: Recent scholarship is starting to pay attention to the theology of the Writings, particularly the presence and absence of God in Wisdom books as well as the theology of Megilloth. Interest in the latter is gaining increasing momentum.

Throughout all three major approaches, the book of Esther has captured the imagination of scholars, whereas Song of Songs continues noticeably to be overlooked. The following synopsis of scholars and their works serves as representative of different approaches and is not meant to be exhaustive by any means.

Diachronic: From divine presence to divine absence. The proponents of this approach use a linear, narrative approach to portray the character of God. Many of them perceive a development or evolvement of the character of God and his activities throughout the course of the Old Testament narratives.

God as a dramatic persona. In the early 1980s, Dale Patrick wrote a biography of God. He claims that God appears as a *dramatis persona* in the Bible. He argues that the rendering of God in the Bible conforms to the principles that govern the mimetic arts. Patrick uses characterization and dramatic action as ways to present God as a consistent character who speaks and acts. This rendering of God proves his identity. For Patrick, there is a consistency of characterization in the biblical descriptions of God as God moves in bodily form among his creatures without harmful effect. The call of Moses provides God with a biographical identity because God identifies himself as "the God of the fathers." The call of Moses also portrays God as one with emotions as he identifies with the suffering of his people. In addition, God also displays consistent virtue, including his power and intelligence, to rule history and to save his people.

For those character traits that are inconsistent, Patrick considers them "out of character." He cites an example from Exodus 4:24-26, where God assumes the guise of a demon, attacking Moses at night, which is inconsistent with his character elsewhere. When the literary approach to the study of the Bible was at its peak in the eighties, Patrick's work advanced

ivp | InterVarsity Press

this conversation, which opens a trajectory to interpret the character of God as a literary figure. In so doing, God has become susceptible to the reader's analysis rather than being perceived as a transcendent deity to be revered and received incontestably. Patrick acknowledges the difficulty in establishing criteria for assessing God's character. However, he contributes by painting a portrait of God that involves a development of character as well as drawing attention to God's speech, action, and emotion, thus presenting God like a "real" character before readers' eyes.[5]

God gradually disappears. In the 1990s, the prime supporter for this position was Richard Elliot Friedman. In his groundbreaking work, *The Disappearance of God*, Friedman observes the plot of the Bible. He notes that the presence of God first appears to be visible, active, talking to people face to face, and performing miracles, but then progressively becomes hidden, silent, and eventually disappears in the book of Esther. Language that conveys divine presence includes "the spirit of God," "God appeared," and "God said," but these terms gradually disappear as the story line of the Bible unfolds. The presence of God that is apparent, that is a matter of public knowledge at the beginning of the biblical narrative, has turned into a hidden presence, a matter of belief or of hope. Friedman cites examples of God's presence as a flame of fire to Moses (Ex 3:2), as the column of cloud and column of fire, and as the "glory of Yahweh" that is visible to human eyes (Ex 16:7; Lev 9:6; Num 14:10). When God appears on Mount Sinai, fire and thunder accompany his presence and inspire a sense of awe and terror (Ex 19:19). God even issues the Ten Commandments with his divine voice (Ex 20:1-17).[6] Aside from God's public and visible presence to his people, he also appears to individuals such as Moses, speaking directly to him, even mouth to mouth (Num 12:6-8). Friedman traces God's direct interactions with the patriarchs, Joshua, Aaron, Samuel, David, and Solomon to further his argument of divine presence in the Torah and most of the historical books. At the end, he comes to the book of Esther.

---

[5]Dale Patrick, *The Rendering of God in the Old Testament* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1981), 1-2; Amelia Devin Freedman, *God as an Absent Character in Biblical Hebrew Narrative: A Literary-Theoretical Study* (New York: Peter Lang, 2005), 48-52, 160-62, 167.

[6]Richard Elliot Friedman, *The Disappearance of God: A Divine Mystery* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1995). The revised edition is titled *The Hidden Face of God* (New York: HarperSanFrancisco, 1997), 15, 28.

ivp | InterVarsity Press

Friedman cites Mordecai's words to Esther in Esther 4:14 and highlights two phrases: "Who knows?" and "from another place."[7] These two phrases present a striking contrast to the earlier biblical narratives, where the visibility and activity of God are apparent in the public domain. Friedman sees Esther's ascent to the Persian palace as by worldly means and not by divine involvement, as in the case of Joseph's rise. He states, "The narrator does not suggest that this is a divine plan, and Mordecai's words convey that Mordecai is depicted as truly not knowing for sure." In Esther, the presence of God is no longer publicly visible and has turned into a hidden presence, falling into the realm of personal belief. Friedman further remarks that this is only half of the story.[8]

The other half of the story reveals the other side of the same coin, namely, that the weight of human responsibility gradually increases as the storyline of the Bible progresses. In other words, there is a transition from divine visibility to human responsibility. To demonstrate this fact, Friedman uses a parent-children analogy. In the Bible, God acts like a parent, and the people he created are like his children. When Adam and Eve take the forbidden fruit and eat it, they act like naughty children. As the Bible's story line moves forward, Abraham questions God (Gen 18), and Jacob fights God (Gen 32). Human beings are confronting their Creator, and they are gaining participation and power in the divine-human relationship.[9] In his own words, "In the Bible, God creates humans, becomes known to them, interacts with them, and then leaves." For Friedman, this divine exit from the Bible is exemplified in its extreme by the book of Esther. He sees a shift in the divine-human balance, with Eve symbolizing humans' initial estrangement from God and Esther being credited with ensuring humans' salvation.[10]

Friedman's work is both convincing and troubling. For him, God does seem to disappear gradually as the story line of the Bible progresses. God's presence and activities do seem to give way to his absence and silence as

[7]Esther 4:14: "If you keep silent at this time, relief and deliverance will arise for the Jews from another place, and you and your father's house will perish; and who knows whether you have attained royalty for just such a time as this?"

[8]Friedman, *Disappearance of God*, 28-29.

[9]See chap. 2, "The Divine-Human Balance," in Friedman, *Disappearance of God*, 30-59.

[10]Friedman, *Disappearance of God*, 58, 76.

ivp | InterVarsity Press

the story advances. At the same time, human characters do seem to take matters into their own hands. The book of Esther does leave out the name of God entirely, and this is replaced by the actions and autonomy of the human hero and heroine. These are undeniable facts. Yet there is something we do need to consider further.

First is the question of canon. To which canon does Friedman refer? Friedman's argument presupposes only a portion of the Bible, namely, the Pentateuch and the historical books, which is not the whole story line of the Hebrew Scripture, let alone the storyline of the whole Bible. The story line of this portion of the Bible indeed begins with Genesis and ends with Esther. However, the book of Esther is not the last book in the Christian canon. In the Christian canon, Malachi is the last book, and God does speak in the book of Malachi.[11] In the Hebrew canon (here I am referring to the Masoretic Text), the last book is Chronicles, where God's activity is conveyed through his stirring up the spirit of Cyrus, king of Persia, to issue an edict, allowing God's people to go up to Jerusalem (2 Chron 36:22-23). To pick and choose a portion or a corpus of the Bible and then attempt to determine its plot only tells a partial story, not the whole story. The order of the biblical books varies with different canonical traditions of the Scripture, and this suggests that different communities of faith present different versions of the portrayal of God in different time periods. For example, the Greek version of the book of Esther does include the name of God more than once.[12] Seen

[11]Malachi begins with God's chastisement of Israel, recounting their sins (Mal 1), and ends with God's promise to send Elijah the prophet before the coming of the great and terrible day of the Lord (Mal 4:5). God's presence, words, and activities are quietly visible and apparent.

[12]To discuss the different versions of Esther is a complicated task. Basically, there are two versions of the Esther scroll in two divergent biblical canons: the MT as the Hebrew Bible we know, and the Greek version known as the Septuagint (LXX). There are six passages in the LXX that the MT does not have or may have lost. See Jon D. Levenson, *Esther: A Commentary*, OTL (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 1997). The name of God is absent in the MT but present in the LXX. De Troyer claims that the problem of the absence or presence of God in the book of Esther should not be seen as a problem only within the book of Esther itself but also within the *books* of Esther, meaning the different versions of Esther. Apart from the LXX, there is also another Greek version of Esther, known as the Alpha Text, which mentions God even more than the LXX does. De Troyer does raise a good point in her research on the Greek texts of Esther, namely, that the problem is no longer the presence and absence of God but what kind of God has been created in the books of Esther. See Kristin De Troyer and Leah Rediger Schulte, "Is God Absent or Present in the Book of Esther? An Old Problem Revisited," in *The Presence and Absence of God: Claremont Studies in the Philosophy of Religion, Conference 2008*, ed. Ingolf U. Dalferth, RPT 42 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2009), 35-40, esp. 37, 40. Since the scope of this

ivp | InterVarsity Press

through the trajectory of biblical canon, Friedman's argument of the "disappearance of God" collapses accordingly.

Second, although Friedman retells the biblical story from only a portion of the Christian canon, which yields an incomplete story, it does provoke troubling thoughts, because God's name does disappear from the book of Esther. This undeniably forms a significant contrast to the presence of God as portrayed in Exodus. This fact alone calls for inquiry. What Friedman may have missed is that God may not work the same way in the Torah as he does in the Writings. The "disappearance of God" or the "hidden face of God" does not necessarily mean that the character of God has changed or evolved through time. The difference in genre and in the historical time period of Esther versus Exodus should be taken into consideration when one attempts to reconcile or make sense of the dynamics between divine presence and absence. I will return to this point later in the next chapter when we discuss the wisdom element in Song of Songs and Esther.

God is like a human character. Following Friedman's arguments, Jack Miles, in his national bestseller, *God: A Biography*, continues a similar thesis, tracing the "biography" of God from a creator in Genesis to a liberator in Exodus, and then ending with the book of Esther as "Absence" and Chronicles as "Perpetual Round." He compares the book of Esther with the exodus story and suggests that regardless of the intent or purpose of the book of Esther, the absence of the divine name is precisely its effect, the point of the story. He states that the story lines between Exodus and Esther are quite similar, since both involve an averted genocide, but the story of Exodus epitomizes divine presence and activity, whereas in the story of Esther, Esther and Mordecai become the incarnation of God's redemptive action. Miles specifically clarifies that Esther and Mordecai are not "God incarnate," because if one calls them that, then the word *God* would have to appear, which is not the case in the book of Esther.[13] Unlike Friedman, who ends his retelling of the biblical story with Esther, Miles ends it with Chronicles,

book is limited to the MT, we will focus on this version with the absence of God's name. For more on the three versions of Esther, see Tricia Miller, *Three Versions of Esther: Their Relationship to Anti-Semitic and Feminist Critique of the Story*, Contributions to Biblical Exegesis & Theology 74 (Leuven: Peeters, 2014).

[13]Jack Miles, *God: A Biography* (New Work: Vintage Books, 1995), 361.

ivp | InterVarsity Press

particularly with the prayer of David in 1 Chronicles 29:10-19, where Miles construes the prayer as "God's farewell speech." He takes the last few words in 2 Chronicles, "Let him go up," as part of a musical round that harks back to the first few lines of Ezra 1.[14]

As for Song of Songs, Miles uses "Sleeper" as the chapter title, based on the Song's recurrent adjuration formula: "Do not wake or rouse love" (Song 2:7; 3:5; 8:4). Juxtaposing Isaiah and Hosea with Song of Songs, Miles sees a "grievously estranged older couple finding their way back to the love of their youth." Thus, he thinks that Song of Songs cannot be read apart from the tales of God and Israel. The images presented in the Song, with a secret garden, luxury, and safety, do not ring true to the Jewish community in Jerusalem, which was characterized by want, bitterness, and anxiety. Miles focuses our attention on the silence of God in Song of Songs and asks, "Where is he? What has happened?" In addition, Miles places the book of Job alongside Song of Songs and reads God in the book of Job as an overpowering character whose dealings with Job renders his innocence questionable. God's appearance at the end of Job should serve as a moment of truth, yet it also becomes the moment of death because the pervasive mood of the book "is one not of redemption but reprieve." Miles further remarks that the development of the character of God almost breaks down in the book of Job. It is the Song of Songs that breaks this mood by changing the subject, thus saving God's life.[15]

Miles treats God as a literary character, much like a "real human being" with personality, emotions and shortcomings. Miles's God appears to be a

---

[14]The last few verses of 2 Chronicles and the first few verses of Ezra 1 are identical. "Now in the first year of Cyrus king of Persia—in order to fulfill the word of the Lord by the mouth of Jeremiah—the Lord stirred up the spirit of Cyrus king of Persia, so that he sent a proclamation throughout his kingdom, and also *put it* in writing, saying, 'Thus says Cyrus king of Persia, "The Lord, the God of heaven, has given me all the kingdoms of the earth, and He has appointed me to build Him a house in Jerusalem, which is in Judah. Whoever there is among you of all His people, may the Lord his God be with him, and let him go up!"'" (2 Chron 36:23).

"Now in the first year of Cyrus king of Persia, in order to fulfill the word of the Lord by the mouth of Jeremiah, the Lord stirred up the spirit of Cyrus king of Persia, so that he sent a proclamation throughout all his kingdom, and also *put it* in writing, saying: 'Thus says Cyrus king of Persia, "The Lord, the God of heaven, has given me all the kingdoms of the earth and He has appointed me to build Him a house in Jerusalem, which is in Judah. Whoever there is among you of all His people, may his God be with him! Let him go up"'" (Ezra 1:1-3).

[15]Miles, *God, A Biography*, 328, 335, 338, 405.

ivp | InterVarsity Press

complex character who is subject to human beings' scrutiny. If one reads the Bible honestly and follows Miles's presentation of God, a lot of what he says would ring true. For instance, God does appear to be capricious, sometimes without reason, and at other times his presence is nowhere to be seen. At times when he is supposed to speak, he remains silent. Borrowing Friedman's parent-children analogy, when we read about God in the Bible, we are reading him from the perspective of young children looking at our parents. From a child's mind and observation, God could appear as distant, difficult to understand, and unpredictable, and may disappear or leave without saying why. A nicer term for this kind of behavior for God is *mysterious*. Children never understand their parents as long as they remain children. Children are incapable of seeing from their parents' perspective. Even when the children grow up and become adults, and even when the children themselves become parents one day, their parents are still not fully comprehensible from the children's vantage point.

From the perspective of relationship, if a person has a personal relationship with God, then divine absence would pose a serious challenge to that relationship, as Burnett asserts. However, if a person does not have that kind of relationship with God and simply reads the text as it is, then the issue is no longer a crisis in relationship but one of human intellectual inquiry. The outcome of reading God as a character, then, would be very different from one who reads the same subject out of a personal relationship with God. For example, Qoheleth's portrayal of God seems distant and incomprehensible (Eccles 3:11; 5:2).[16] There is no suggestion in Ecclesiastes that the author has any personal interaction with the divine. There is no single dialogue recorded in the book that hints at that. Qoheleth seems to take us on an intellectual journey to probe the question of meaningful living under the sun. Yet in Job, it is apparent that regardless of Job's complaint or protest of divine injustice, he has a personal relationship with God, and because of that the presence of innocent suffering poses a crisis in his relationship with God. Although God in Job appears to be transcendent and incomprehensible, which is very much similar to the portrayal of God in

[16]Here I use Qoheleth to refer to the author of Eccles 1:12–12:8 and Ecclesiastes to indicate the whole book.

ivp | InterVarsity Press

Ecclesiastes, the outcomes of Ecclesiastes and Job are quite different.[17] The former thrives with contradictions and doubts, whereas the latter is satisfied after the unjust experience of innocent suffering, and at the end he dies happy.

God is an absent character. Along the same vein as Friedman and Miles, in *God as an Absent Character in Biblical Hebrew Narrative*, Amelia Freedman perceives the presence of God gradually withdrawing as the biblical narratives progress. Sometimes, God uses stand-ins to represent his presence, such as the angel in Genesis 18, the judges, King David, and the prophets. Other times, the narrator speaks about God in his absence, as in 1 Kings 19:11-12, or the human characters talk about God, as in the story of the servant meeting Rebekah in Genesis 24:34-49. Overall, Freedman perceives a contradiction emerging in the biblical narrative that God is apparently a major character, but he appears in most of these narratives only indirectly. In light of God's absence, Freedman uses four methods, namely, narrative criticism, reader-response criticism, intertextuality, and feminist literary criticism to examine God as an absent character in the Hebrew Bible. Rather than adopting a block of narratives for the investigation, Freedman uses individual narratives first to reach a more nuanced reading of God as a character. Therefore, she rejects Miles's approach, because she thinks that he fails to read individual narratives on their own terms and tends to overgeneralize the character of God based on larger blocks of narratives. Miles also fails to distinguish the poetry and the narrative portions of the book of Job and construes God as one who is "manipulative and controlled." Freedman selects four methods to examine four individual narratives in turn. They are the Joseph narrative, the succession narrative, the book of Esther, and the book of Ruth. For each method, she first presents several scholarly works that advocate for the approach. Then she analyzes the strengths and weaknesses of the approach. Afterward, she examines how each particular approach contributes (or does not contribute) to the understanding of God as an absent character. For example, through narrative criticism, the text acknowledges that God's presence is behind the

[17]See Chloe Sun, "Ecclesiastes Among the Megilloth: Death as an Interthematic Link," *Bulletin for Biblical Research* 27, no. 2 (2017): 185-206, esp. 205-6.

ivp | InterVarsity Press

scenes of human actions and interactions, as revealed in the Joseph narrative. Through intertextuality, Freedman juxtaposes the ancient Greek novel *Chaereas and Callirhoe* as an intertext with Esther. She describes the similarities shared between these two texts as well as their points of departure. Reading Esther through the lens of Chaer, Freedman argues that God is neither present nor active in the book. In addition, the character's level of assertiveness has direct bearing on the amount of divine presence and activities. Since Esther does not need God's assistance in saving her people, Freedman concludes that God in Esther is indeed absent.[18]

At the end of her research, she affirms that each method has its merit. The choice of method has a lot to do with the reader's interpretive goal, the type of questions the reader is asking of the biblical narrative, and the degree of information that a particular biblical narrative provides about the character of God. Since each chosen method has its own strengths and weaknesses, the outcome of the inquiry does not yield a complete picture. And since Freedman's work is limited to biblical narratives, lyric poetry such as Song of Songs and prophetic texts are not chosen as texts to be examined. This further creates an incomplete portrayal of God as an absent character. The four texts chosen are from different portions of the Old Testament, but although the activities and involvement of God in the Joseph narrative, the succession narrative, Ruth, and Esther do have some common ground, they do not represent the whole corpus of Scripture.

Moving the end to the center. In *Portraits of a Mature God,* Mark McEntire took a diachronic approach by tracing the development of the character of God from Genesis to "the end of the story," that is, Ezra-Nehemiah. Like Friedman and Miles, McEntire attempts to paint a portrait of God that has undergone character evolvement. Yet, McEntire differs from Friedman and Miles in that he proposes to move the end of the story toward the center, that is, to allow the latter books in the Hebrew Bible that depict God as in the shadow to speak for themselves rather than allowing these books to recede to the background and remain overshadowed by the earlier books in the Bible. Patrick, Friedman, and Miles start from the beginning and then trace the character of God from there to the end of the Bible. The

[18]Freedman, *God as an Absent Character*, 2-5, 105-17.

ivp | InterVarsity Press

problem of this angle, according to McEntire, is a result that focuses more on the present, the visible and active side of God in the earlier biblical books. The selection of this order determines the subsequent trajectory of how one constructs Old Testament theology. Additionally, tracing a development of divine character in the order of the biblical canon is hindered by the uncertainty of the historical timeline of these books. McEntire says that following the character of God through narrative time will arrive at an articulation that is not complete because the voice at the beginning portions of the Bible is too loud and the voice at the end of the story is too timid.[19] I will return to this latter point at the end of the chapter.

A balanced, thorough theology without a predetermined trajectory or theological agenda can only be achieved through rethinking one's entry point. Should we start from the earlier story, or the end of the story, or somewhere in the middle? Different entry points would yield different outcomes of the character of God. In McEntire's analysis of the end of the story, Ezra-Nehemiah receives the most attention. Daniel also receives considerable space, but Esther is mentioned in less than a page, and Song of Songs is not included at all.[20] The present work will attempt to complete what McEntire's book lacks.

Summary. The diachronic description of the character of God along the timeline of the historical narratives presents a logical but also problematic portrayal of God from an active deity to a passive deity, then eventually a retreating or withdrawing deity. Throughout the course of biblical narratives, the character of God and his level of activities appear to evolve and develop over time. All the aforementioned treatments of this aspect of God render him as a literary character, very much like a real human being. While these treatments attempt to provide an "objective" view of who God is as reflected in the Scripture, they are not without problems. The first problem is the issue of canon, which I mentioned earlier. Which biblical canon are we following? When the order of the books is arranged differently, which

[19]Mark McEntire, *Portraits of a Mature God: Choices in Old Testament Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2013), 7, 21. In chap. 1, McEntire provides a literature review of representative scholars and their works in the portrayal of divine character, with very keen and helpful remarks.

[20]Proverbs, Ruth, and Job are also included, but the space devoted to these books is far less than that devoted to Ezra-Nehemiah and Daniel. See McEntire, *Portraits of a Mature God*, chap. 6, esp. 199.

ivp | InterVarsity Press

portrayal of God are we talking about? The choice of canon determines its outcome. Another problem, as McEntire points out, is, Where should we begin painting the character of God, from the beginning of the biblical canon or from the end? The two approaches would yield completely different results. If we were to start painting the picture from the middle, what result would it yield? Last but not least, the absence of God in Esther has been acknowledged widely in this approach, but Song of Songs is still marginal in contributing to the discussions concerning the presence and absence of God.

Dialectic: Divine presence in absence and absence in presence. This position places divine presence and absence as a dialectical and sometimes paradoxical relationship rather than a dichotomy. It acknowledges the prevalence of this theme and its complexity through the Hebrew Scripture. Roland de Vaux thinks that the presence and the absence of God alternate. God conceals himself as much as he shows himself. As the psalmists demonstrate, God hides himself so that his people will return to him and seek him. De Vaux also thinks that the salvation history (German *Heilsgeschichte*) of Israel is retrospective. That is, the plan of God is only made clear after the promises have been fulfilled in Jesus.[21] In de Vaux's point of view, to do a biblical theology or an Old Testament theology has to take the whole Scripture into consideration and not just certain books. Below are some of the major representatives of this approach.

The elusive presence of God. In the late twentieth century, Samuel Terrien was one of the first scholars to construe divine presence and absence not as a bipolar relationship or a mutually exclusive phenomenon but an intricate, interwoven, "two sides of the same coin" kind of relationship. He describes this nature of God as "the elusive presence." When speaking of God's hiddenness, Terrien cites the prophet Isaiah's words that God hides his face and hides himself during the exile (Is 8:17; 45:15). The confession

[21]Roland de Vaux, "The Presence and Absence of God in History According to the Old Testament," in *The Presence of God*, *ed.* Pierre Benoit, Roland Murphy, and Bastiaan van Iersel (New York: Paulist, 1969), 7-20, esp. 17-18, 20. From de Vaux's point of view, a biblical theology or an Old Testament theology has to take the whole Scripture into consideration and not just certain books. One of my purposes for this chapter is to see the place and the contribution of two biblical books in light of the Old Testament, rather than seeing them apart from the rest of the Old Testament.

ivp | InterVarsity Press

of this lament itself suggests a confession of faith. For Terrien, to be aware of divine hiddenness is to remember God's presence and to yearn for the return of that presence. Therefore, he asserts that "the presence of an absence denies its negativity." He quotes Blaise Pascal, "A religion which does not affirm that God is hidden is not true. And a religion which does not offer the reason [of this hiddenness] is not illuminating." On the Latin version of the verse in Isaiah 45:15, *Deus Absconditus*, Terrien prefers the meaning of its Hebrew original—a self-concealing God. The Latin translation renders the phrase with a passive participle, whereas the Hebrew original uses a reflexive sense, and thus it stresses divine freedom and sovereignty.[22] Divine hiddenness is a result of God's own choice. By stressing the problem of the elusive presence as a result of God's freedom, Terrien attempts to divert the problem to the divine realm, but this does not solve the issue on the human level. What are human beings supposed to do during the times of God's elusive presence? Are we supposed to accept it passively and silently, or are we supposed to protest and question God and make it his problem?

Terrien observes in some psalms that the psalmists are constantly begging for the presence of God, whereas others try desperately to flee from his presence. As a result, Terrien describes this God as a "haunting God." He cites Psalm 139 as an example to illustrate this conflicted nature of yearning and dread for the divine presence.[23] In other words, divine presence may not be perceived as all positive, and divine absence is not all negative. In times of divine absence, the desire for his presence grows even more intently, and this creates the theological notion of "the presence in absence." This is precisely what appears in Song of Songs. In the absence of the male lover, the female lover's heart for him grows even fonder, to the point of feeling physically sick (Song 5:8). Likewise, in Esther, the absence of the explicit reference to God's name makes many readers attempt to read God into the text. The search for the divine presence intensifies precisely when his name is absent.

---

[22]Samuel Terrien, *The Elusive Presence: The Heart of Biblical Theology* (Cambridge: Harper & Row, 1978), 1, 321, 474.
[23]Terrien, *Elusive Presence*, 326-31.

ivp | InterVarsity Press

In the theology of Terrien, the paradox between divine presence and absence can be understood in terms of wisdom, Torah, and Jesus.[24] In all three respects, God's presence is displayed and sensed through his absence. Hence, the term "presence in absence" is conceptualized as well as materialized in biblical theology. Terrien captures the paradox of divine presence and absence with a keen observation and acute insight. Freedman, though, criticizes Terrien's approach as synthetic; that is, he deconstructs biblical narratives for the information they yield and fails to take individual narratives or the difference in genre and voices into account.[25] Although Terrien's approach is confessional for the most part, his understanding of the subject has influenced subsequent literature.

Lament psalms as an expression of divine hiddenness. Many scholars have noticed the theology of divine absence appearing recurrently in the Psalms and the prophetic books.[26] For example, Samuel Balentine studies the hiding of the face of God in the Old Testament. The expression "hiding of face" occurs twenty-nine times in the Hebrew Scripture, twenty-three of which occur in the Psalms and the prophetic books. Sometimes the hiding of God's face is due to the sins or transgressions of the psalmists. At other times, the cause for the hiding of God's face is unclear, since the psalmists protest due to their innocence and cannot comprehend the reason for divine hiddenness. However, the consequence of divine hiddenness is stated unmistakably: that the psalmist or his community is separated from God. This separation is manifest in three major ways: (1) that God refuses to see, hear, or answer their prayers (Ps 10:11; 13:4; 69:18; 102:3); (2) that God

[24]Terrien, *Elusive Presence*, 473, 476.

[25]Freedman, *God as an Absent Character*, 3-4.

[26]For example, Anderson quotes lament psalms as an expression of the failure of covenant theology. See Bernhard W. Anderson, *Contours of Old Testament Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1999), 244-46. Doyle devotes a chapter to the theme of divine presence and absence and argues that this theme is a biding element in the composition of the Psalms. The genre of petition to God in distress appears mostly in Ps 52–64. The metaphor of divine absence has to be read between the lines, and in most cases, the psalmists' confidence in divine presence transcends that of divine absence. See Brian Doyle, "Where Is God When You Need Him Most?," in *The Composition of the Book of Psalms*, ed. Erich Zenger (Leuven: Peeters, 2010), 377-79. Dunn's studies on the imageries of the sanctuary in the Psalms explore the theme of divine presence and concealment. One of his conclusions regarding divine concealment in the Psalms is that God's absence is mysteriously mediated through creation. See Steven Dunn, *The Sanctuary in the Psalms: Exploring the Paradox of God's Transcendence and Immanence* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2016), 80-81.

ivp | InterVarsity Press

is absent from the place of cultic worship (Ps 27:9); and (3) that the psalmist faces death or confinement to Sheol (Ps 22:16; 102:4; 143:7). The phrase "hiding the face" appears predominantly in the lament psalms and is accompanied by expressions of protest. The hiding of God's face indeed contributes to a crisis in the divine-human relationship.[27]

Outside the Psalms, the expression "hiding of face" occurs frequently in the prophetic books, mostly in the context of human sin and principally with regard to Israel's collective unfaithfulness toward God. The prophetic books involved are mainly from the eighth to the fifth century BCE, at the time of the exile.[28] The consequence of the divine hiding of face in the prophetic books shares striking similarities with that of the lament psalms. It involves different ways and degrees of people's separation from God. Balentine summarizes the cause for God's hiding of face in the Psalms as ambiguous but less ambiguous in the prophetic books. In the latter case, the hiding of the face is a manifestation of divine judgment on Israel's apostasy.

Overall, the expression "hiding of face" appears in contexts of lament and judgment. Lament is a form of human expression of distress to God, while judgment in the prophetic texts comes from God and is addressed to human beings. Since lament directed to God serves as a way to cope with God's hiddenness, Balentine understands the experience of divine hiddenness as an integral part of Israel's faith. For him, God is both hidden and present, far and near. This realization makes room for doubt and despair in the faith experience. For Balentine, the hiddenness of God does not seem to emerge as a problem. Rather, it is a natural manifestation of who God is. Balentine does not attempt to explain away divine hiddenness. What he tries to show is that divine hiddenness is necessary for God and for Israel. For God, both divine hiddenness and divine presence are part of being God. For Israel, divine hiddenness is not merely a punishment for its disobedience or the inability to perceive his presence; rather, both the experience of divine presence and of absence reflect the nature of Israel's faith journey

[27]Samuel E. Balentine, *The Hidden God: The Hiding of the Face of God in the Old Testament*, Oxford Theological Monographs (Oxford University Press, 1983), 45, 50-65. Balentine indicates one positive use of the phrase "hiding of face" in Ps 51:11, where David entreats God, "Do not cast me away from Thy presence." See *Hidden God*, 58.

[28]Balentine, *Hidden God*, 159, 163. Balentine also acknowledges that the hiddenness of God does not just appear during the literature of this period but also prior to this period and after (160).

ivp | InterVarsity Press

with God. When one takes all these instances into consideration in one's theological discourse, then one may understand the idea of the absence of a present God.[29]

In his *Theology of the Old Testament*, Walter Brueggemann expounds eloquently on divine hiddenness, ambiguity, and negativity. His argument on divine hiddenness revolves around the lament psalms, in which Israelites cry out, "How long, O Lord?" (Ps 6:3; 13:1-2; 35:17; 62:3) "Why do You stand afar off?" (Ps 10:1; 22:1; 43:2; 44:23-24) and, "Where is your God?"[30] These interrogatives both reflect the real experience of the psalmists and pose a threat to theodicy. These questions originate from a restless persistence that amount to a "reprimand of Yahweh, who has not done for Israel what Israel has legitimately expected."[31] The other genre in which Israel questions divine injustice and hiddenness is the genre of complaint, which appears in Lamentations, in psalms about exile, and in the prophetic texts regarding the exile.[32] The experience of the exile raises a question about God's sovereign power. If God is all-powerful, why did he not prevent exile from happening? The sense of abandonment incurred by the exilic experience reverberates throughout Lamentations and the book of Isaiah: "Why do You forget us forever?" (Lam 5:20); "But Zion said, 'The Lord has forsaken me'" (Is 49:14).[33] In another article, Brueggemann recounts the consequences of the loss of lament. One is the loss of a genuine interaction between God and human beings. The other is the stifling of the question of theodicy.[34]

Employing a courtroom metaphor, Brueggemann identifies these expressions of divine hiddenness, ambiguity, and negativity as the counter-testimony that functions to cross-examine Israel's core testimony where

[29]Balentine, *Hidden God*, 65-72, 77, 157, 172-73, 175-76.
[30]Ps 79:10; 115:2, or "Where is your steadfast love?" in Ps 89:49.
[31]Brueggemann, *Theology of the Old Testament*, 319.
[32]These psalms include the experience of the exile and the destruction of the temple. See Ps 74:1, 10-11; 79:5, 10; 89:46.
[33]Brueggemann identifies four texts (Ps 22; Lam 5:20; Is 49:14; 54:7-8) as "texts that linger, not yet overcome." All four texts have divine inattentiveness in common. See Walter Brueggemann, "Texts That Linger, Not Yet Overcome," in *Shall Not the Judge of All the Earth Do What Is Right? Studies on the Nature of God in Tribute to James L. Crenshaw*, ed. David Penchansky and Paul L. Redditt (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2000), 21-41.
[34]Walter Brueggemann, "The Costly Loss of Lament," *JSOT* 36 (1986): 57-71, esp. 60-61.

ivp | InterVarsity Press

God is present, active, powerful, and faithful to his promises. The countertestimony, he argues, is not an act of Israel's unfaithfulness, but a "characteristic way in which faith is practiced."[35] The latter statement echoes Balentine's notion of perceiving divine hiddenness as an integral part of Israel's faith. McEntire criticizes Brueggemann's presupposition of naming the present and active God as "the core testimony" and his hiddenness as the countertestimony. While acknowledging the validity of Brueggemann's portrait of God as a tension-filled character, McEntire argues instead that "the weight of the 'core testimony' seems to anchor the divine character to a position that restricts the potential for dynamic character development."[36] For McEntire, the dialectic between Israel's core and countertestimony obscures the diachronic aspect of God's character. What if Israel's countertestimony is framed as its core testimony, and its core testimony is framed as its countertestimony? How would that affect the subsequent trajectory? How would that affect one's perception of God and the understanding of Old Testament theology? I believe the outcome would be quite different.

In light of the pervasive and serious nature of the problem of divine hiddenness, Brueggemann rejects the traditional approaches to tackle the issue, including (1) disregarding such texts; (2) justifying divine hiddenness through human sin; (3) seeing divine judgment as a case of human misperception—that God only "seems" to be abandoning us; (4) philosophical subtlety, that even though God is "experienced" as one who abandons, that experience contains within it an assumption of cosmic aspect of presence, that is, the dialectic notion of "presence in absence" or "absence in presence"; and (5) the "evolution" of God, that God has developed from an unsettling character into one with fidelity and justice.[37] The fourth approach is the one Terrien accepts. Brueggemann acknowledges its attractiveness but rejects it based on two indications: (1) The reasoning of "presence in absence" or

[35]Brueggemann, *Theology of the Old Testament*, 318.
[36]McEntire, *Portrait of a Mature God*, 4.
[37]Brueggemann, "Texts That Linger," 27-30. The position that God "evolves" is similar to the notion proposed by Friedman and Miles. Yet in their views, God evolves from presence to absence, whereas in the aforementioned position God evolves from absence to presence. Brueggemann cites the incident of Job as an example of the second traditional approach. See Brueggemann, "Texts That Linger," 28.

ivp | InterVarsity Press

"absence in presence" is subtle in ways that Israel would not have entertained, and (2) the reasoning requires a judgment that is against the clear, uncomplicated statement of the text. It would not solve the problem of what to do with these texts.[38]

For Brueggemann, the bottom line of all these approaches is that its proponents intend to protect the character of Yahweh, but Yahweh has to run the risk that belongs to him alone in the memory of Israel.[39] Rather than defending Yahweh's character, Brueggemann calls for Yahweh to defend himself. Brueggemann's courtroom metaphor presents a vivid contest between divine negativity and Israel's testimony. The result is tension between Israel's core testimony and countertestimony. What is absent from Brueggemann's picture of Old Testament theology is reference to Song of Songs and Esther. How do these two books fit in with his courtroom metaphor? How can one testify for or against God when God's name is not even mentioned in the book or when the imagined courtroom is not there?[40]

John Goldingay distinguishes laments from protests and thinks that *protests* is a better description than laments, since *lament* implies an acceptance of victim status, whereas protests do not. Laments may lack a specific audience, but protests are addressed to someone with power. Based on the texts of protests from the Psalms, Goldingay develops one trajectory of Old Testament theology under the rubric of "how one lives with God." Its context involves prayers of "confronting, calling out, summoning, crying out, asking questions, asking for grace and attention and encounter, challenging and claiming." Although divine hiddenness and divine absence are not at the forefront of Goldingay's theology of prayer, he articulates the issue through psalmists' expressions, such as "asking to be heard and seen and thought about," "asking for encounter with Yahweh," and "holding Yahweh to account."[41]

---

[38]Brueggemann, "Texts That Linger," 30.

[39]Brueggemann, "Texts That Linger," 31.

[40]Brueggemann's other books on Old Testament theology also dismiss Song of Songs and Esther altogether. See Walter Brueggemann, *Old Testament Theology: Essays on Structure, Theme, and Text*, ed. Patrick D. Miller (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992); *Old Testament Theology: An Introduction*; *An Unsettling God: The Heart of the Hebrew Bible* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2009).

[41]John Goldingay, *Old Testament Theology*, vol. 3, *Israel's Life* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2009), 209, 219, 221, 224.

ivp | InterVarsity Press

Patrick Miller, in his study of the relationship between prayer and divine action, comes up with several insightful observations: (1) the active involvement of God in the human situation is invoked by cries to God, by prayers for help; (2) petitionary prayer is fundamentally an act of persuasion, seeking to lure or coax God into responding to the cry for help; (3) intercession is primarily made by the leaders seeking to evoke a change of heart in the intent of God to judge a sinful people. Such intercession is expected by God and incorporated into the divine activity; (4) the prayers of Scripture consistently expect and receive a response from God in a word that has a particular character to it; (5) trust in God is a dimension of the context of prayer and also part of the transforming act; (6) God's providential activity is understood under the rubric of blessing. His providential activity is also to preserve and enhance life as demonstrated by the absence of prayer in the story of Joseph; (7) God's inscrutable work is asserted indirectly in the dialogues of the book of Job where God meets Job from the divine side rather than with words or deeds of deliverance; (8) the cry to God for help in one's suffering and distress implies that there is a moral ground to the universe; and (9) the imagery of God who hears in heaven the cries for help reflects the world in all its particularity with God who rules and acts for the world and in the world.[42]

Although Miller draws scriptural references from both the Torah and the Prophets, the prayers in the Psalms provide the primary basis for his theology of prayer. Prayers, particularly petitionary prayers in the form of cries for help, imply the reality of divine absence in the experience of their petitioners. Yet, when we come to Song of Songs and Esther, there are no such prayers directed to God. Even in the most daunting crisis of the Jewish diaspora in Persia, there was no prayer offered to God. Questions remain as to why that is the case. Those texts prompt us to ask, How do we comprehend divine presence and activity apart from prayers being offered to God?

The book of Ezekiel as an expression of divine presence in absence. Divine hiddenness in the psalms of distress persists as an issue with which the

[42]Patrick D. Miller, "Prayer and Divine Action," in *God in the Fray: A Tribute to Walter Brueggemann*, ed. Tod Linafelt and Timothy K. Beal (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1998), 211-32.

ivp | InterVarsity Press

psalmists grapple. Yet, it does not encompass all the questions regarding divine absence in the human experience. The presence of the lament psalms in relation to divine absence has indeed generated profound interest in scholarly endeavor. The other frequently observed genre regarding divine absence appears in the prophetic books, particularly texts addressed to the exilic community of Israel. Among these texts, the book of Ezekiel typically receives the most attention.[43] For Ezekiel, the theological issue at stake is not just about divine absence but also divine presence. The two are in a dialectical relationship, so the reader cannot speak of one without the other.

John Kutsko's study addresses the complexity of the paradox of divine presence and absence in Ezekiel. He structures Ezekiel according to this overriding theme. Ezekiel 1–11 focuses on the shift from divine presence to divine absence, while Ezekiel 40-48 revolves around the shift from divine absence to divine presence. The middle of the book, Ezekiel 12–39, concerns preparation for destruction, oracles against the nations, and preparation for restoration. Kutsko asks a fundamental question being raised in the exile: How can God be present when the temple has been destroyed and the Israelites have been relocated to a foreign place? Additionally, in an aniconic tradition, when the gods are represented by graven images in Babylon and Yahweh is not, how can people perceive Yahweh's presence and worship him there? Therefore, Kutsko sees the theme of God's absence and presence as the cord that holds the composition of the book of Ezekiel together.[44]

Kutsko presents an intricate relationship between divine presence and absence in Ezekiel that centers on the exile. According to Kutsko, the exile underlines three fundamental issues: (1) theodicy: Why is Israel in exile? (2) theophany: Where is God in exile? and (3) theonomy: What power does God have in exile? The exilic experience forces Ezekiel to confront Israel's defeat and deportation and to face the loss of national and cultic identity.[45] For Ezekiel, exile is understood as "the wilderness revisited." Ezekiel

[43]The book of Daniel also receives some attention. See Hans van Deventer, "Daniel, Prophet of Divine Presence and Absence," in *The Lion Had Roared: Theological Themes in the Prophetic Literature of the Old Testament*, ed. H. G. L. Peels and S. D. Snyman (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2012), 221-34.

[44]John F. Kutsko, *Between Heaven and Earth: Divine Presence and Absence in the Book of Ezekiel* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2000), 1, 4, 150. The title aptly captures the contents of the book.

[45]Kutsko, *Between Heaven and Earth*, 4.

ivp | InterVarsity Press

employs the mobile glory of Yahweh (*kəbôd-YHWH*) to portray the complementary nature of God's presence and absence. In the exile, God's absence is implied by the absence of his temple, but since the glory of Yahweh is mobile, as in the journey of wilderness wandering, God's presence transcends a physical locale. This mobility of the glory of Yahweh serves as a means to convey divine judgment. At the same time, it emphasizes divine presence in exile.

For Kutsko, the temple serves as a structuring device in the book, where Ezekiel adapts the Priestly tradition of a wilderness sanctuary to emphasize divine judgment and divine guidance. The temple is a stage that links divine presence and absence. The two both exist as polar opposites and complement each other. The absence of the temple does not equate with the absence of God. In the exile, God himself becomes Israel's sanctuary (Ezek 11:16).[46] Therefore, Kutsko argues that for Ezekiel's theology, "exile is both a means of punishment and an opportunity for divine presence."[47] He concludes that Yahweh's presence will not fail in front of the Babylonian idols, the loss of the temple, or the victorious enemy of the nations. Yahweh is apparently absent, but is present in exile.[48] Kutsko's articulation of divine presence and absence in exile contributes to Ezekiel's understanding of this paradox and demonstrates Terrien's notion of divine presence in absence. In this sense, divine presence and absence coexist as a dialectical relationship throughout Israel's history, particularly in lament psalms and in the exilic texts.

Ezekiel scholar Daniel Block recognizes five specific dimensions of Yahweh's abandonment in the Old Testament: (1) Yahweh's absence from an individual; (2) Yahweh's absence from his people, Israel; (3) Yahweh's absence from the land of Israel; (4) Yahweh's absence from Jerusalem; and (5) Yahweh's absence from his sanctuary.[49] Block identifies the motif of divine abandonment in the ancient Near Eastern texts and concludes that

[46]Kutsko, *Between Heaven and Earth*, 99-100.

[47]Kutsko, *Between Heaven and Earth*, 152. For details regarding the glory of God in the wilderness tradition, see chap. 3.

[48]Kutsko, *Between Heaven and Earth*, 4, 154.

[49]Daniel I. Block, "Divine Abandonment: Ezekiel's Adaptation of an Ancient Near Eastern Motif," in *The Book of Ezekiel: Theological and Anthropological Perspectives*, ed. Margaret S. Odell and John T. Strong (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2000), 16-17.

ivp | InterVarsity Press

this same motif appears in Ezekiel but with adaptation. Based on Ezekiel 8:12; 9:9, the people of Judah perceive divine abandonment not in terms of their sin or apostasy, as one would expect, but as a betrayal of Yahweh's earlier commitment to them. They reverse the logic that divine abandonment of the land is due to the sin of the people of Israel. Instead, they sin because they perceive Yahweh as abandoning the land. Through this reversal of cause and effect, Ezekiel intends to demonstrate the extent of Judah's perversion. Ezekiel offers several rationales for Yahweh's abandonment, including people's action as well as his own volition. The latter reveals the freedom of Yahweh, who cannot and will not be forced to leave his temple by the sin of his people or the Babylonian king. Yahweh remains sovereign "not only over the fate of his people, but over his own destiny as well."[50] Ezekiel's vision of the future restoration of the temple, people, and land reflects Yahweh's commitment to his people even if he chooses to leave the temple. Block's conception of the absence of God once again brings out the dialectic between God's response of his people's sin, on the one hand, and God's own free choice, on the other.

When rethinking divine presence and absence, Steven Tuell argues for treating the written text as a replacement of the temple in conveying the concept of divine presence. Tuell proposes that the divine glory links the three major sections of the book: thus, the first vision of divine presence in Ezekiel 1–3 as the glory revealed to the exiles beside the River Chebar, the absence of God in Ezekiel 8–11 as God abandons the temple and the city, and divine presence as reinhabiting the future temple in Ezekiel 40–48 in the prophet's eschatological vision. Tuell notes from Priestly tradition that divine presence is always conveyed through a fixed sacred space, a cultic image, or a king, but this is not the case in Ezekiel. In Ezekiel, the divine glory does not appear in the boundaries of a fixed sacred space; rather, it comes to the prophet in exile, in a foreign land. The divine glory does not take place on a sacred mountain, as in the Sinai theophany. Instead, it appears in the valley of the River Chebar, among the exiles.

Building on the research of several scholars, Tuell is convinced that the words of Ezekiel should be taken as a written composition. The prophecy

---

[50]Block, "Divine Abandonment," 36, 42.

ivp | InterVarsity Press

comes to him in the form of a scroll, which is covered with words front and back. Ezekiel is then asked to eat it (Ezek 2:8–3:3). The consistency of style and theme of the scroll further supports it as a written composition. For Ezekiel, his prophecies become the bridge connecting Yahweh and the exilic community. In this way, the text of Ezekiel itself has become a medium for the divine presence in exile. When the people of Israel in exile read this scroll, they would have been aware of God's presence with them.[51] The exile profoundly transforms the understanding of divine presence. It is no longer a fixed external symbol but a mobile icon. Ellen Davis has long noticed that Ezekiel was a written text, which was both the locus and medium of the prophetic enterprise.[52] Tuell ties this understanding of the text to the theme of divine presence and absence.

Two other studies also focus on the divine presence and absence in Ezekiel. William Tooman's study centers on divine presence in relation to covenant and the structure of the book of Ezekiel. He sees the covenant and divine presence going hand in hand. The breaking of the covenant results in divine absence. Likewise, the new gift of divine presence accompanies the unbreakable covenant with an incorruptible people. Tooman demonstrates this interconnectedness of covenant and presence through the vision accounts and oracles of deliverance in Ezekiel.[53] Moreover, John Strong stresses that the *kābôd* of Yahweh is his hypostasis.[54] Ezekiel attempts to maintain Zion theology to affirm Yahweh's presence in the earth and on the divine throne. The aspects of Zion theology include Yahweh enthroned as the divine king during the exile. One day, he will return and again be accessible through his temple on Zion.[55]

---

[51]Steven S. Tuell, "Divine Presence and Absence in Ezekiel's Prophecy," in Odell and Strong, *Book of Ezekiel*, 97-116.

[52]Ellen F. Davis, *Swallowing the Scroll: Textuality and the Dynamics of Discourse in Ezekiel's Prophesy*, JSOTSup 78 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1989), 133.

[53]See William A. Tooman, "Covenant and Presence in the Composition and Theology of Ezekiel," in *Divine Presence and Absence in Exilic and Post-exilic Judaism*, ed. Nathan McDonald and Izaak J. De Hulster (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2013), 151-82.

[54]Strong borrows from S. Dean McBride's definition of *hypostasis*. It is "a quality, epithet, attribute, manifestation or the like of a deity which through a process of personification and differentiation has become a distinct divine being in its own right." See John T. Strong, "God's *Kābôd*: The Presence of Yahweh in the Book of Ezekiel," in Odell and Strong, *Book of Ezekiel*, 72.

[55]Strong, "God's *Kābôd*," 69-95.

ivp | InterVarsity Press

Jill Middlemas argues for “multiple imaging” to understand the theology of divine presence in absence, which summarizes the multiple understandings of the presence of God in his absence. She defines multiple imaging as a literary technique of using many images (metaphors) of Yahweh. These metaphors not only serve as literary devices that replace an idea but also “exert cognitive force by which their use generates new meanings, promotes associations, and results in the interaction and response of an audience.” The focus of such is on idolatry and the meaning and implication of aniconism in Yahwistic tradition. Middlemas concludes that the result of using multiple imaging is resistance to forming God in a single, concrete, and stable form. For her, divine presence is near and at the same time far. God emerges as both transcendent and imminent, and this dual nature realizes the theology of divine presence in absence.[56]

Summary. So far, we have seen that the theology of divine presence in the exile can be conceived through the *kābôd* theology and the written text. Divine presence in absence indeed presents itself in multifaceted manners. Studies on the theology of divine presence and absence culminate in the genre of lament psalms and prophetic texts, especially those texts that originate in the context of the exile. Both genres are rooted in Israel’s experience of its God. While some studies are confessional in nature, defending God’s character, other studies raise candid questions regarding the injustice of divine hiddenness. Stephen Davis thinks that when contemplating the two opposing qualities of God, such as

> God is absent and God is present.
> God is transcendent and God is immanent.
> God is unlike us and God is like us.
> God is hidden and God is revealed.
> God is silent and God speaks.

the danger of focusing too much on the left side of God is that God will become too distant and therefore irrelevant to human life and concerns. On the other hand, the danger of going too far to the right side is either anthropomorphism or idolatry. A sensible Christian thinking of God, he proposes,

[56]Jill Middlemas, “Divine Presence in Absence: Aniconism and Multiple Imaging in the Prophets,” in McDonald and Hulster, *Divine Presence and Absence*, 183-211, esp. 206-7.

ivp | InterVarsity Press

is one that must be done in tension between the opposite poles of transcendence and imminence. Both sides of the claims are true, and neglect of either side leads to false theology.[57] This is precisely the paradoxical tension between divine presence and absence.

In Old Testament theology, the second approach—that is, conceiving a dialectical relationship between divine presence and absence—seems to overpower the first approach, that of seeing a decreasing trajectory from divine presence to divine absence in the chronological arrangement of the Christian and the Hebrew canons. In the examples of lament psalms and the exilic prophetic texts such as Ezekiel, the boundary between the disappearance of God and a God who is present in absence blurs. Nevertheless, in the second approach, although the texts of protest appears in the forefront as a way to comprehend the paradox of divine presence and absence, it presupposes the existence of God. Both the psalmists and Israel address God as a specific dialogic partner to express their protests: "My God, my God, why have You forsaken me?" (Ps 22:1). "The Lord does not see us; the Lord has forsaken the land" (Ezek 8:12). Although experienced by the psalmists as an absent God, he is without doubt present in the minds and souls of the psalmists. By contrast, when we come to the literary absence of God in Song of Songs and Esther, how do we articulate the theology of divine presence and absence? The second approach, though it contains provocative thoughts and profound insights, fails to address this grave theological concern. This leads us to the third approach.

Divine absence in the Writings. In recent scholarship, there has been a growing interest in the theology of the Writings. Among the books in the Writings, the image of God and his action in Wisdom texts has received particular attention. The Megilloth also gains increasing significance as a distinct corpus in both Jewish and Old Testament theology. As previously observed by Friedman, Miles, and McEntire, the visibility and activity of God gradually diminishes as the biblical books progress to the end. If we take the canon of the Hebrew Bible, with its tripartite division—the Torah, the Prophets, and the Writings—into consideration, the trajectory of a

---

[57]Stephen T. Davis, "God as Present and God as Absent," in Dalferth, *Presence and Absence of God*, 147-60, esp. 149-50.

ivp | InterVarsity Press

disappearing God emerges. This trajectory at the same time presents a dialectic relationship between divine visibility and divine invisibility, particularly in the Psalms and in the exilic and postexilic books, such as Ezekiel and Ezra-Nehemiah.[58] Therefore, the first two approaches are not mutually exclusive but overlapping.

In the third approach, divine activity in the Writings appears drastically different from that in the Torah and the Prophets. So it is helpful first to locate the place of Wisdom in the Writings.[59] Since the twentieth century, scholars have sought to do so. The so-called center approach, such as Walter Eichrodt's statement that covenant is the center (*mitte*) of Old Testament theology, fails to do justice to the entire realm of the Old Testament, because the concept of covenant is not a dominant theme in Israel's Wisdom tradition.[60] Likewise, Gerhard von Rad's salvation history (*Heilsgeschichte*), which runs through the historical narratives of Israel, does not receive the same significance in wisdom books.[61] In order to confront this phenomenon, von Rad later wrote *Wisdom in Israel* as a way to counterbalance what the tradition-historical approach fails to resolve.[62]

The place of Wisdom in Old Testament theology. By nature, Wisdom theology is not concerned with national interests such as covenant, Israel's history, Jerusalem, temple worship, idolatry, or restoration from the exile. Rather, its theological basis lies in creation, and its concern is universal. Von Rad perceives that Israel was aware of the power of God in all spheres of life, and so Israel speaks of the world in all its inexplicableness. Therefore, there are limits to human wisdom, in light of the unsearchable nature of the world and divine presence, as in the story of Job.[63] Although Israel, its

---

[58]The motif of divine presence and absence in postexilic Judaism can be conceived through the perspectives of the spirit of Yahweh, the temple vessels, the rebuilding of the temple, and the written law code. See the various articles in McDonald and Hulster, *Divine Presence and Absence*.

[59]For the purpose of the present study, we will only consider primarily the books of Proverbs, Job, and Ecclesiastes as wisdom texts in the Christian canon. Though what constitutes "wisdom texts" is contested, it is one way of grouping the aforementioned three books. Due to the scope of the study, the text of Ben Sira and other ancient Near Eastern wisdom texts are not included.

[60]Walter Eichrodt, *Theology of the Old Testament*, 2 vols., trans. J. A. Baker (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1961, 1967).

[61]Gerhard von Rad, *Old Testament Theology*, 2 vols., trans. D. M. G. Stalker (Edinburgh: Oliver & Boyd, 1962, 1965).

[62]Gerhard von Rad, *Wisdom in Israel* (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 1972).

[63]Von Rad, *Wisdom in Israel*, 106-8.

ivp | InterVarsity Press

history, religion, and culture are not at the center of its theology, wisdom theology nevertheless is a vital part of Scripture and needs to be reckoned with. Wisdom scholar Leo Perdue responds to the "collapse" of the use of the history of the Israelite religion as the trajectory for doing Old Testament theology. Instead, he proposes a more inclusive approach, in which one acknowledges the diversity of interpretations in the canon, the multiplicity of theologies under the dynamic matrix of creation and history, the recognition of how biblical texts and their theologies have been construed within the history of interpretation, and critical reflection between theologies of the Old Testament and past interpretations with the horizons of meaning that derive from contemporary discourse.[64] In his earlier work, *Wisdom and Creation*, Perdue attempts to locate the place of wisdom in Old Testament theology by evaluating several approaches, such as the relationship between history and creation, wisdom from the canonical theology, and wisdom from feminist theology. Each of these approaches offers significant understandings of the place of wisdom in Israelite faith. He concludes that wisdom theology is theologically grounded in cosmology and anthropology. It affirms a universal orientation to faith and ethics. The role of Woman Wisdom also challenges the predominant image of male metaphors for God.[65] Therefore, Perdue asserts that wisdom and creation are integrated concepts within Old Testament theology.

In previous decades, the place of wisdom in Old Testament theology was typically dismissed or excluded by those who wrote Old Testament theology.[66] In recent decades, however, those who undertake the task of doing Old Testament theology often include wisdom in their endeavors, though they differ in their methods. For instance, Goldingay places "wisdom"

[64]Leo G. Perdue, *Reconstructing Old Testament Theology: After the Collapse of History* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2005), 347-49.

[65]Leo G. Perdue, *Wisdom and Creation: The Theology of Wisdom Literature* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1994), 34-48.

[66]Such as Eichrodt, von Rad, and Brueggemann. There are a few exceptions. For example, Zimmerli places "wisdom" under "life before God." See Walther Zimmerli, *Old Testament Theology in Outline*, trans. David E. Green (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1978). Kaiser places Wisdom literature in Israel's historical timeline under "Sapiential Era." See Walter C. Kaiser Jr., *Toward an Old Testament Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1978), 165-81. Though Anderson identifies covenant as a major contour of Old Testament theology, he nevertheless incorporates wisdom in his part 3, "Trials of Faith and Horizons of Hope." See Anderson, *Contours of Old Testament Theology*, 237.

ivp | InterVarsity Press

under "humanity," alongside God, Israel, the world, and the nations in his *Old Testament Theology*.[67] John Kessler situates wisdom theology as one of the theologies of the Old Testament alongside creation theology, Sinai covenant theology, promise theology, Priestly theology, and others. He frames wisdom theology as "the relationship of faith seeking understanding."[68] R. W. L. Moberly titles his last chapter "Where Is Wisdom?" in his *Old Testament Theology*. He argues that the figure of Job illustrates one primary dimension of wisdom—his reactions to adversity in Job 1–2 present the right human response to God. The poem in Job 28, on the one hand, ascribes the "place" of wisdom to God. On the other hand, wisdom is accessible to humans, but only to those who display the appropriate qualities, thus reaffirming the piety of Job in Job 1–2.[69]

Recently, Julius Steinberg examined the place of wisdom in an Old Testament theology by using a thematic and structural-canonical approach. Steinberg chooses the canonical book order of Baba Batra due to its standing as the oldest source of Jewish tradition, dated to about 200 CE. In accordance with that ordering of the Writings, he divides the books into two series: the wisdom series and the national-historical series. The former includes Ruth, Psalms, Job, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and Song of Songs. The latter includes Lamentations, Daniel, Esther, Ezra-Nehemiah, and Chronicles. The first series represents the house of David, whereas the second series points to the house of God. Thus, the wisdom series reflects the way of the individual with God from sorrow to joy, whereas the second series reflects the way of the nation back to God from sorrow to joy. In terms of the place of wisdom in Old Testament theology, Steinberg follows Perdue, connecting wisdom with creation theology and anthropology. He sees Song of Songs as a wisdom book and situates it as a follow-up to Ecclesiastes, elaborating on the love between a man and a woman in Ecclesiastes 9:9, "to enjoy life with the wife of your youth."[70] Steinberg's research

[67]John Goldingay, *Old Testament Theology*, vol. 2, *Israel's Faith* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2006), 576-96.

[68]John Kessler, *Old Testament Theology: Divine Call and Human Response* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2013), vii, 447.

[69]Moberly, *Old Testament Theology*, 243-77, esp. 243, 271.

[70]Steinberg defines a "structural-canonical" approach as one that addresses the level of individual books but also the larger literary horizon of small collections of books and the canon of the

ivp | InterVarsity Press

provides a helpful link in perceiving the interconnectedness within the books of the Writings, particularly the two series, with two varied themes and focuses. Yet these two ways and two houses do not take into account the absence of God's name in Song of Songs and Esther. In Baba Batra's arrangement of the books in the Writings, the canonical connection between Song of Songs and Esther with the other books in the same category suggests their affiliation.

Burnett devotes a whole chapter to the theology of divine presence and absence in wisdom books. Like Perdue, he grounds the theology of wisdom in God's creation of the world. Because the nature of wisdom has to do with universal concerns of daily life and not with national events or crises, Burnett stresses that divine presence and absence are difficult to distinguish. Wisdom confronts divine hiddenness in the world and humanity's need to search for divine presence. For wisdom, divine presence often appears as divine absence. As Burnett suggests, "Wisdom is concerned with discerning the difference between the two." He also offers another vital observation that wisdom accentuates the moral implications of divine presence in the created order and in mundane human lives. In such a context, divine absence goes hand in hand with the problem of theodicy. In wisdom books, the issue of innocent suffering creates a relational crisis marked by divine absence.[71] Among the three traditional books in wisdom, Job receives the most attention in regard to the theology of divine absence compared to Proverbs and Ecclesiastes.[72]

In a festschrift to Walter Brueggemann, *God in the Fray*, the editors arrange the structure of the book according to the three divisions of the

Hebrew Bible. See Julius Steinberg, "The Place of Wisdom Literature in an Old Testament Theology: A Thematic and Structural-Canonical Approach," in *The Shape of the Writings*, ed. Julius Steinberg and Timothy J. Stone with the assistance of Rachel Marie Stone, Siphrut 16 (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2015), 97, 150, 153, 160-67.

[71]Burnett, *Where Is God?*, 85-86.

[72]The wisdom personified in Proverbs has been taken as a medium or a hypostasis of God. In Ecclesiastes, God is present in the world, but his presence is beyond human reach. See Burnett, *Where Is God?*, 101-14. In an article, Pleins articulates divine silence during Job's suffering as God listening to him. God's silence gives way to the terrifying reality of God's presence, and God's speeches at the end of Job balance and answer the silence of God. The silence of Job during God's speeches also balances out his previous vocal remarks to God. See J. David Pleins, "Why Do You Hide Your Face? Divine Silence and Speech in the Book of Job," *Interpretation* (July 1994): 229-38.

ivp | InterVarsity Press

Hebrew Bible: God in the Torah, God in the Prophets, and God in the Writings. In the section on God in the Writings, two of the six chapters are devoted to Job. For the other chapters, two of four discuss prayers and complaints. Both of these two chapters make references to Job.[73] Within Israel's wisdom tradition, the predicament of innocent suffering directly challenges theodicy as well as divine absence. David Clines says Job's complaint about God's allowing wrongs to continue unchecked and being absent in governing the world is a serious theological problem. He focuses on Job 23–24, where Job intends but fails to find God (Job 23:8-9). For Job, not only can God not be found, but God is also not obliged to listen to the protests of human beings, because whatever God desires, he does (Job 23:13). In addition, Job criticizes God for being absent and for not carrying out the judgment for which God alone is responsible. From the beginning of the book to the end, God remains "above the fray," while human beings are caught "in the fray."[74] God's hidden presence in creation—the personified wisdom as divine presence in Proverbs—and the transcendent yet elusive presence of God in Ecclesiastes cannot balance out or explain away the reality of innocent suffering in Job as well as divine silence during Job's suffering. In this sense, the book of Job is similar to the lament psalms in that the experience of divine silence and absence is deeply felt and the issue of theodicy persists.[75] Melton's research on the aspects of divine presence and absence in wisdom books is helpful. She identifies the close affinity between wisdom and the presence of God and

[73]Miller, "Prayer and Divine Action," and Claus Westermann, "The Complaint Against God," trans. Armin Siedlecki, in Linafelt and Beal, *God in the Fray*. The other two chapters include one about Lamentations and one about Ecclesiastes.

[74]David J. A. Clines, "Quarter Days Gone: Job 24 and the Absence of God," in Linafelt and Beal, *God in the Fray*, 242-58, esp. 242, 250. Various research has addressed the issue of innocent suffering, theodicy, and rhetoric in the book of Job. A few among the many who place the issue of theodicy at the forefront of their book include Carl G. Jung, *Answer to Job*, trans. R. F. C. Hull (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1969); Saadiah Ben Joseph Al-Fayyumi, *The Book of Theodicy: Translation and Commentary on the Book of Job*, trans. L. E. Goodman (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1988); James L. Crenshaw, *Reading Job: A Literary and Theological Commentary* (Macon, GA: Smyth & Helwys, 2011).

[75]Crenshaw's summary of literature on the Wisdom corpus provides an overview of recent scholarship on wisdom theology. He concludes that the attempt to define wisdom yields little consensus among wisdom scholars, as he predicted two decades ago. See James L. Crenshaw, *Sipping from the Cup of Wisdom* (Macon, GA: Smyth & Helwys, 2017), 1:141-55, esp. 153.

ivp | InterVarsity Press

concludes that "God and wisdom are accessible in Proverbs, beyond grasp in Ecclesiastes, and elusive in Job."[76]

Megilloth. In addition to the significance of the place of Wisdom in Old Testament theology, an emergent interest in the study of the Megilloth as a coherent canonical collection has also blossomed in recent years, with attention given to the individual books within this collection, the interconnectedness among the five scrolls, and their respective links with the other books in the Writings.[77] The reason for its neglect in past scholarship is primarily the lateness of the Megilloth as a collection, since most scholars consider texts that are "early" or "original" to be more authoritative. The earliest attestations of the Megilloth as a group come from the Tiberian manuscripts of the tenth and eleventh century CE but may be earlier.[78] However, the tide has shifted in recent years due to the growing recognition among scholars that the later uses of Scripture are also an essential component of its interpretation. Therefore, the lateness of the Megilloth does not preclude how its interpretive tradition has been shaped.[79]

Although his primary research focus is on the compilational history of these five scrolls, in examining the macrostructure of the Megilloth, Timothy Stone observes that in four out of five scrolls, the motif of a prominent female set in relationship to a male character emerges. For example, Ruth and Naomi are the dominant characters in Ruth, complemented by Boaz; the female character in Song of Songs is complemented by her male protagonist; in Lamentations, Daughter Zion is complemented by a man of affliction in Lamentations 3; and Esther is complemented by Mordecai in the book of Esther. Ecclesiastes is an exception in this collection of scrolls. Stone also notes that the absence of God constitutes another dominant

---

[76]Brittany N. Melton, "'Oh, That I Knew Where I Might Find Him': Aspects of Divine Absence in Proverbs, Job and Ecclesiastes," in *Interpreting Old Testament Wisdom Literature*, ed. David G. Firth and Lindsay Wilson (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2017), 215.

[77]A program unit "Megilloth" has formed at the annual meeting of the Society of Biblical Literature, first as a consulting group for three years (2014–2016) and since 2017 as a formal meeting session.

[78]Timothy J. Stone, *The Compilational History of the Megilloth* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2013), 102-17.

[79]Amy Erickson and Andrew R. Davis, "Recent Research on the Megilloth (Song of Songs, Ruth, Lamentations, Ecclesiastes, Esther)," *Currents in Biblical Research* 14, no. 3 (2016): 298-318, esp. 298.

ivp | InterVarsity Press

motif among the Megilloth, where God is not mentioned in Song of Songs and Esther. In Ecclesiastes, God is in heaven, and human beings are on earth. In Lamentations, Daughter Zion pours out her grief, but God does not appear. In Ruth, God gives bread and a baby but remains behind the scenes throughout the whole narrative. However, Stone also mentions that although the Megilloth has these common motifs, the books are characterized more by their diversity than by their unity. The books are arranged in such a way that each has conversational partners with the other books in the Writings, and none stands alone.[80]

In researching the current scholarship and trends of the Megilloth, Amy Erickson and Andrew Davis discern "the relative absence of God as an active presence in the five books."[81] They summarize past scholarship that has responded to this issue in two ways: (1) ignored it or (2) argued for a robust theology of divine providence. The first response is reflected in standard theologies of the Old Testament. The second response can be seen in theological treatments of the books of Ruth and Esther, where "divine absence has proven not a challenge but an opportunity to assert God's constant but imperceptible oversight of human affairs."[82] Erickson and Davis observe that divine activities in Ruth and Esther seem to shape the understanding of divine activities in other books of the Megilloth.

These two heretofore prevalent responses seem to have shifted recently. For instance, two chapters from a recent monograph, *Megilloth Studies: The Shape of Contemporary Scholarship*, which came from papers read in a consultation group on the Megilloth at the Society of Biblical Literature, offer a more nuanced understanding of divine absence in the Megilloth. Among the issues that emerge in the book are gender, thematic frame, ethnicity and identity, and theology.[83] For instance, Garrett Galvin's chapter examines the horizontal theology in the Megilloth through four themes: female, narratives, wisdom, and suffering. These themes on female concerns may be overlooked in nonnarrative sections of the Hebrew Bible.[84] Galvin also

[80] Stone, *Compilational History*, 205, 207.
[81] Erickson and Davis, "Recent Research," 307.
[82] Erickson and Davis, "Recent Research," 308.
[83] Embry, *Megilloth Studies*.
[84] Garrett Galvin, "Horizontal Theology in the Megilloth," in Embry, *Megilloth Studies*, 125. By "horizontal theology," Galvin refers to the kind of theology that takes a character's experience,

ivp | InterVarsity Press

places Song of Songs under the tradition of Wisdom literature in the vein of Proverbs.[85] Stone considers the Megilloth to be held together by the gravitational pull exerted by the Wisdom corpus, which starts with Proverbs, just before the Megilloth, and Galvin furthers this argument by proposing that this gravitational pull does not stop with Ecclesiastes but includes Lamentations and Esther. Esther then becomes a figure of applied wisdom and functions as the counterpart to Joseph, only at a different geographical end of the diaspora. In sum, Galvin asserts that the theology of the Megilloth is a horizontal one that privileges human actors, who have to try to understand human suffering and see its connection to God, where meaning is found in human relationships and in the incarnation. This then forces human characters to reconsider how God acts in the world. Although I largely agree with Galvin's assessment of the horizontal theology, the part on human suffering does not seem to receive the same treatment in Song of Songs as in the other four books within the Megilloth.

In the same monograph, Megan Fullerton Strollo joins the discussion about the theology of the Megilloth by first distinguishing Christian biblical theology from the Jewish way of doing biblical theology. She argues that Jewish theologians have paid more attention to the books within the Megilloth. The incorporation of the annual Jewish feasts associated with the Megilloth demonstrates this phenomenon. She concludes that the theology presented in these five scrolls is one of a God who is distant and people who are capable of partnering with God. Thus, at the center of the theology of the Megilloth is divine absence and human responsibility.[86] While Strollo quotes from Marvin Sweeney's understanding of Jewish theologies as tending to focus on human responsibility, the text in question is Esther and not Song of Songs. The place of Song of Songs in the Megilloth and its contribution to biblical theology remains an area for further investigation and reflection. We may also add Andrew Davis's chapter in the same volume

---

praxis, and incarnation into consideration. It is a theology of everyday life, focusing on the concrete particularity of a lived experience within Scripture, as opposed to vertical theology, which emphasizes immutable concepts, timeless problems, and eternal arguments (see 126-27, 131).

[85]Galvin, "Horizontal Theology," 133.

[86]Megan Fullerton Strollo, "Initiative and Agency: Towards a Theology of the Megilloth," in Embry, *Megilloth Studies*, 150-60.

ivp | InterVarsity Press

on not construing the divine hidden hand behind the narratives of Ruth and Esther but instead focusing on the experiences of human characters. The theology of the Megilloth is "not so much a common theology but a common way of doing theology."[87]

As I finish a draft of this book, Brittany Melton's newly published *Where Is God in Megilloth?* brings a welcome change of perspective to the current scholarship of the subject in question. Some of my literary reviews inevitably overlap with hers but her focus is more on the whole Megilloth, whereas my focus is on the two scrolls within the same corpus. Melton's research concerns understandings of divine presence and absence through the atrocities of history, particularly the Holocaust, and literature as well as through a survey of scholarship on God in the Megilloth. She concludes that there is a lack of consensus among the scholarship on divine presence and absence in the Megilloth, and she attempts to rectify this by a dialogical reading of the five scrolls, which she names a "theological-literary approach" in the format of a "table conversation" based on Mikhail Bakhtin's dialogism.[88] In regard to Song of Songs and Esther, Melton therefore establishes a table conversation with the two scrolls by defending God's literary absence on the one hand, and God's ambiguous presence on the other hand. What is illuminating for me is her use of the text "who is that coming up from the wilderness" in Song of Songs 3:6 to consider the "who knows" passage in Esther 4:14. Her conclusion is that divine presence and absence in both books reflect a theological ambiguity and that these two aspects of God are held in tension with each other.[89] Melton's book contributes to the discussion of the role of God in the Megilloth and creatively brings all five scrolls into an interlocking relationship with one another. Her work is a significant resource for future studies of divine presence and absence in the Megilloth.

Summary. McEntire challenges the notion of Old Testament theology when it is examined from the beginning of the biblical narrative, because

[87]Andrew R. Davis, "Ruth and Esther as the Thematic Frame of the Megilloth," in Embry, *Megilloth Studies*, 7-19, esp. 10, 17.

[88]Melton, *Where Is God*, 13-38, 44. In this "table conversation," Melton asks: Who is there? What is said? What is for dinner? The seats of the table are occupied by the canonical books. Some speak, and some remain silent. See Melton, *Where Is God*, 54-55.

[89]Melton, *Where Is God*, 82-83.

ivp | InterVarsity Press

these narratives tend to focus on God's presence while less attention is given "to the parts of the Old Testament theology where God recedes into the background and becomes a subtle influence in various ways, rather than participating in the story as an active character."[90] Therefore, he proposes moving these latter biblical texts to the center of Old Testament theology in order to present a dynamic God. The Writings, which include the corpus of wisdom series and the Megilloth, belong to the texts in which God recedes to the background but exerts subtle influences as a character in the biblical stories. While one runs a risk by privileging the presence of God in the early biblical texts over the latter texts, where God recedes to the background, one also runs a risk by going in the other direction and privileging the latter texts over the earlier texts. In actuality, Scripture presents both portraits of God. He is both present and absent, transcendent and imminent, active and passive.

[90]McEntire, *Portraits of a Mature God*, 2.

ivp | InterVarsity Press

BUY THE BOOK!

ivpress.com/conspicuous-in-his-absence