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Gowan, D E

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THEOLOGY IN EXODUS

Biblical Theology in the Form of a Commentary

DONALD E. GOWAN

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As the book of Exodus begins, the descendants of Jacob had been living in Egypt for almost four hundred years (Ex. 12:40). The great vizier Joseph, who had saved Egypt and his family from famine, had been dead a long time, and the present government had no memory of his accomplishments that might prompt them to look with favor on those members of his family who lived in their midst. They were just aliens with an alarmingly high birth rate. The pharaoh impressed them into labor in his building projects at Pithom and Rameses, but if we are to make sense of the first chapter of Exodus, it seems there were more Israelites than could be used, and the population continued to increase, leading Pharaoh to adopt some severe birth control measures. He attempted to enlist the midwives who served the Hebrew women, ordering them to kill the male children who were born, but they deceived him, and when it became evident that wasn’t working, he ordered all Egyptians to take it upon themselves to kill male Hebrew children. In the midst of that suffering, the mother and sister of Moses hid him away in a basket floating on the river, and when the pharaoh’s daughter found him and took him as an adopted son, it seemed possible that the Hebrews might have gained a champion in a position of power. Moses’ first effort to do something on behalf of his people led to the loss of that power, however. He killed an Egyptian he found beating one of the Hebrews, but killing made him no hero in his people’s eyes and put his own life in danger from Egyptian justice, so he fled into the desert, where he married into the family of Jethro, the priest of Midian.

In the midst of this suffering and missed opportunity, God has done nothing, as the story is told. In two chapters (prior to Ex. 2:23–25), God has been mentioned only once, and that is in connection with the piety of the midwives, who “feared
God” and let the male children live, so God rewarded them. The author acknowledges that popular piety had not died out, as it never does, and tells us that the activities of these good people helped the Israelites at that time, but in no way does the author claim God himself intervened in this time of suffering. The pharaoh, the midwives, Moses’ mother and sister, the pharaoh’s daughter, and Moses himself are living by their wits, as these stories are told. Is it coincidence that the author omitted telling us what God was doing in all this, or are we justified in thinking that the absence of God is in fact a part of the story?

THE ABSENCE OF GOD IN EXODUS 1—2

On Their Own: Exodus 1:1–2:22

Many commentators have noted that God is rather conspicuously absent from the first two chapters of Exodus, but no one has seen fit to make much of that. John Durham says of Ex. 2:1–10 that “The omission of any reference to God in these verses is surely intentional,” and Terence Fretheim insists that “The nonmention of God must be given its full weight,” but Durham does not pursue the subject at all, and it may be questioned whether Fretheim has followed his own advice. Earlier in the same paragraph he has said, “the divine activity is unobtrusive,” and this is really in keeping with traditional interpretations, which have deduced God’s providential activity even where the authors of scripture have said nothing about it. How much can legitimately be made of the silence concerning God in these two chapters? The answer takes two forms: evidence of contrast between the way these stories are told and the way the neighboring materials in the Pentateuch are written, and the author’s explicit and powerful statement in 2:23–25 that now something different is about to happen.

Chapters 1—2 of Exodus are not the only place in the Pentateuch where the direct participation of God in human affairs is not described. The Joseph cycle in Genesis 37—50 has been contrasted with the earlier chapters of Genesis in this way, for throughout the life of Joseph no direct, divine intervention is recorded. The author of that cycle makes it very clear to the reader, however, that God has been at work behind the scenes, as he puts into Joseph’s mouth the true interpretation of what has been happening: “God sent me before you to preserve for you a remnant on earth, and to keep alive for you many survivors. So it was not you who sent me here, but God” (Gen. 45:7–8a). And the characters in the story mention God frequently, in every chapter except 37 and 47. We have been aware, then, of their relationship with God throughout the story. Turning the page, to Exodus 1—2, we find nothing said by the author or the author’s characters about what God is doing. That is in striking contrast to the rest of the book of Exodus, in which God is depicted as the dominant figure. God is mentioned in every chapter except 37—38 (which simply describe in detail the appurtenances of the
tabernacle), and furthermore, God speaks in every other chapter except 18 and 35–39. This God who is so active and so vocal in the rest of the book is silent and is a nonparticipant in the events of chapters 1—2. Consider how these stories might have been told, if the usual style of Old Testament narrative had been followed. Pharaoh might have oppressed the Israelites because God hardened his heart, as he does later in Exodus. An angel of the Lord might have instructed the midwives, as the angel intervened in Hagar’s distress in the wilderness (Gen. 21:17–19). We might have been given an annunciation of the birth of Moses, as was done for Samson (Judges 13) and Samuel (1 Samuel 1—2). God might have instructed Moses’ mother and sister in a dream, as he told Jacob how to increase his flock in Gen. 31:10–16, and might even have appeared in the same way to Pharaoh’s daughter, as he did to Abimelech, the Philistine king, in Gen. 20:3–7. We could have been told God’s opinion of Moses’ murder of the Egyptian, saving commentators much discussion of that ethical issue. Finally, Moses’ sojourn in the desert might have been described in a way similar to that used for Jacob’s sojourn with Laban (Genesis 29—31) or David’s flight from the wrath of Saul (1 Samuel 19—30: God is mentioned 107 times). But instead we hear only of human decisions and of their completely normal results.

This a rare piece of literature for the Old Testament, and as we shall see later, 2:23–25 show it is not coincidental. The absence of God here is deliberate, and thus it should be the object of some theological reflection, in the light of what is said elsewhere about God’s “hiddenness.” Exodus 1—2 are as “secular” as ancient literature could be. After the list of Jacob’s twelve sons in 1:1–6, we could substitute for “Israel” the name of any of the peoples that sojourned in Egypt, and no other change would need to be made. This could be literature from any ancient Near Eastern culture. These are stories about human beings motivated by fear (Pharaoh, Moses’ mother), affection for babies (the midwives, Moses’ mother and sister, Pharaoh’s daughter), and concern for the oppressed (Moses). In each case they do what they can, and whether there is any divine plan behind those human decisions remains unrevealed to us.

This is an accurate reflection of many occasions in human history when it is not clear, even to those most sensitive to God’s work in our midst, what God may be doing, if anything. The author of Exodus does not reflect on that, as other authors do, he just portrays it, but when we reread these chapters in the light of the way he makes his transition to God’s intervention in history (2:23–25), we see that reflection on our part is called for. Perhaps the book of Esther is the closest parallel in the Old Testament to these chapters, for in Esther God is never mentioned and people live by their wits and their courage. Deliverance for the Jews comes about because Esther is strong enough to follow her uncle Mordecai’s instructions (chap. 4) and because of a couple of fortunate coincidences (chap. 7). The Esther-like form of storytelling is only preliminary to the main event in Exodus 1—2, however, for deliverance does not come ultimately from human efforts, but from divine intervention, as the next chapter will show.
What was God doing, during those years the Israelites suffered under the Egyptians? That is the question asked at every occasion when an individual or a community suffers without any good explanation for it, and unfortunately it is not a question we can answer. The remainder of this chapter will be concerned with the various ways people have found to deal with it. Here in Exodus the author offers no answer, but deals with it in the way typical of the Old Testament, speaking of the time when God’s silence is broken, insisting the times of God’s absence do not last forever. In the meantime, people do what they can, and in this story that is none too good. Moses, who might have helped, has failed and is out in the desert somewhere, a fugitive from justice. In the meantime, then, the people groan under their burdens, and cry out. But for Old Testament writers, “outcry” is not so negative as it would sound elsewhere. The only response to outcry may be silence for a time, as it is here, but these writers tell of a God who insists, “when they cry out to me, I will surely hear their cry” (Ex. 22:23).³

**God Remembers: Exodus 2:23–25**

The silence of God and about God is then deliberately and dramatically broken by 2:23–25, transitional verses, but profoundly important theologically, both in their choice of words and in their location.

After a long time the king of Egypt died. The Israelites groaned under their slavery, and cried out. Out of the slavery their cry for help rose up to God. God heard their groaning, and God remembered his covenant with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. God looked upon the Israelites, and God took notice of them.

The transition from an account of purely human activities to a story dominated by the acts and words of God begins with the death of the king of Egypt under whom Moses had grown up. This is mentioned in order to suggest that now it might be safe for him to return to Egypt, as 4:19 confirms. The Hebrew expression introducing that sentence, “And it happened in those many days that the king of Egypt died . . . ,” is unusual, but in the light of what follows we can see it intends to emphasize a long period of unmitigated suffering for the Israelite people. The New English Bible paraphrases it most effectively: “Years passed. . . .” During those years the Israelites groaned because of their bondage, and they cried out. Now, our author places what can be seen and heard on earth side by side with what is happening to God in heaven. There are key words here which will answer two essential questions, as we deal with this theologically: How could the author know what was happening to God? And, did the author really intend us to read what has preceded as a portrayal of a time when, to all human perceptions, God seemed to be absent?

James Plastaras was the first, and almost the only, commentator to notice the relationship between 2:23–25 and the psalms of lament,⁴ but a good deal more can be made of that than he did, especially now, in the light of Samuel Balentine’s
work on the theme of the hiddenness of God. The verbs that occur in these verses of Exodus frequently occur together in the psalms of lament and in conjunction with terms concerning the inaccessibility of God. In response to the Israelites’ outcry (za‘aq, shawa‘), God is said to have heard their groaning, remembered his covenant, seen the Israelites, and known (without an object in the Hebrew text; RSV supplies “their condition”; NRSV uses “took notice of them”). Here the author makes the remarkable claim to know what is going on in heaven, to be able to tell us what is happening with God internally. The Old Testament uses a limited number of verbs of this type with God as subject, and we shall have to deal with most of them in studying the language about God that appears in Exodus. Old Testament authors were much more reticent than later theologians have been to claim they know something about “God in himself.” But here we find a cluster of such words, and as Plastaras noted, they tell us that God responded to the laments of Israel in bondage as Israel at worship over the centuries found God responded to their prayers for help.

Examples from the Psalter will show how these words go together in the language of prayer. Psalm 31 is a lament of the individual which, in its concluding praise section, refers to the psalmist’s outcry, which has been heard by the Lord, in the context of the sense of separation from God: “I had said in my alarm, ‘I am driven from your sight.’ But you heard my supplications when I cried out to you for help” (v. 22). In this one verse, the outcry (shawa‘), the feeling of God’s hiddenness, and God’s hearing and seeing are all present. Earlier, “see” and “know” appear, also in an expression of praise: “you have seen my affliction; you have taken heed of (NRSV; Hebrew: “known”) my adversities” (v. 7). Each of the key terms from Ex. 2:23–25, except “remember,” occurs in this psalm, plus the idea of God’s absence. A thanksgiving of the individual provides the missing term. Psalm 9 negates one of the most frequently used words for God’s absence, “forsake” (‘azav): “you, O LORD, have not forsaken those who trust in you” (v. 10). It brings together the cry and God’s remembering: “For he who avenges blood is mindful of [NRSV; Hebrew: “remembers”] them; he does not forget the cry of the afflicted” (v. 12), Then it calls upon God to see the psalmist’s continuing distress: “Be gracious to me, O Lord. See what I suffer from those who hate me” (v. 13). The same combinations of words may be found in Pss. 10:1, 11–12, 14, 17; 34:6, 15, 17f.

We can now see an answer to the question how the author of Exodus could dare to claim he knew what God heard, remembered, saw, and knew at this time in history. In their psalms the Israelites typically expressed their sense of a need for salvation (from enemies or illness) in terms of their being abandoned by God, of his hiding of himself, of not seeing or hearing them. When their prayers were answered, it was thus natural to say that God had heard them, had seen and known their distress, and had remembered. “Remember,” when used with God as subject, typically means that God has determined to initiate action. This is the language worshipers used to express their sense of the absence or presence of
God, and the author of Exodus has chosen that language to emphasize the emptiness of the lives of the Israelites before Moses' second effort to do something on their behalf.

We cannot know what sort of faith in God the actual slaves who escaped from Egypt, later to become Israel, may have had. The debates over their identity and number, and whether they knew the divine name Yahweh are inconclusive and will always remain so, barring some sensational manuscript discovery in Egypt. But if we read the story as it is told and compare it with other low points in Israel's history as the Old Testament tells it, we may conclude that this has been depicted as the darkest moment of all. Later they will find themselves in Canaan dominated by the Philistines (1 Sam. 4:1–7:2), with the ark of the covenant captured and the hereditary priesthood of the family of Eli brought to an end together with the destruction of the sanctuary at Shiloh (Jer. 7:12; Ps. 78:60). In spite of the efforts of Samuel and Saul their prospects for independence do not look good, but even then they have the memory of the exodus, of God's guidance through the terrors of the wilderness, and of their success in gaining access to the land to look back on. Much later everything will be lost with the fall of Jerusalem in 587 B.C.E.—land, king, temple, and hope (Psalm 137; Ezek. 37:11)—but they had at that time a long history and inspired persons in their midst to interpret their present disaster in terms of God's activity in their history (e.g., Ezek. 20:1–31), and to find in it a knowledge of the true nature of God which could lead to a new message of hope. At both of these low points a reason for their suffering is provided by scripture; it is the result of their abandonment of God, not his abandonment of them. But that is not true for Exodus 1—2.

These slaves have no history, and they are not accused of having done anything wrong. As the story is told, they know about the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, and about his promises, but at this point there is nothing they could point to as evidence that God keeps his promises. Unlike all later occasions when God seems to be silent and doing nothing, on this occasion there was nothing to remember. They could not say, "But in the past God did help us, in spite of our dire distress." Neither would they have had any basis for saying, "Actually, we deserve this." These chapters thus represent the worst of those periods of suffering when even people of faith struggle to find any indication that there may be a God who actually does anything in the world, and so our reflections on them already call to mind various modern efforts at a "death-of-God" theology. Those who do not necessarily deny the existence of God, but claim we can think only of a God who does not do anything, are close to the problem as these parts of the Old Testament saw it. As the cartoonist Walt Kelley had Pogo say, "God is not dead; he is just unemployed."

These chapters are thus the first significant occurrence of the theme of the absence of God in the Bible, but it will reappear in various forms. We shall next trace it through the Old Testament, then more briefly look for evidence of its persistence (and modification) in the histories of Judaism and Christianity, and
finally will return to Exodus 1—2 and the psalms of lament for a dialogue between them and contemporary theology.

THE ABSENCE OF GOD ELSEWHERE IN THE OLD TESTAMENT

The theme of the presence of God has been a popular subject in Old Testament studies, but its opposite has been generally neglected. Samuel Terrien acknowledged it to be an essential part of a study of presence in his theology, *The Elusive Presence,* but as James Crenshaw said of his book, “The adjective in the title hardly functions, so great is the sense of cultic presence.” A very useful recent study by Samuel Balentine supersedes earlier works, even though it focuses on one expression, the hiding of God’s face, and treats other expressions for the motif of God’s hiddenness more briefly. Since about one-half of the occurrences of the hiding of God’s face are found in the laments, and since we have found that the laments are the appropriate background to Exodus 1—2, it will be appropriate to begin with them and to use some of Balentine’s conclusions.

The psalms of lament express the sense of God’s absence more frequently and more bluntly than any other parts of the Old Testament. They use a wide range of vocabulary to express it, revealing how serious a problem it could be for the ancient Israelite. God is said to hide his face, or hide himself; he is accused of being distant, of forsaking his people, of sleeping, of forgetting, of remaining silent, of not hearing or seeing, and of having cast them off. Some of that vocabulary has already been apparent in the psalms quoted in the preceding section. In order now to take the laments in their own right, several other psalms will be cited, asking of them: What brought about such feelings? How did the psalmists account for God’s apparent absence? And how did they deal with it?

The absence of God is expressed in powerful words at the beginning of Psalm 22:

My God, my God, why have you forsaken [‘azav] me?
Why are you so far [raḥog] from helping me,
from the words of my groaning?
O my God, I cry by day, but you do not answer;
and by night, but find no rest. (vv. 1–2)

The feeling that God is far away is expressed here and twice more in the psalm (vv. 11, 19); distant because he does not help, so he is accused of having forsaken the psalmist and of not listening to his prayers. Those feelings have been brought on by the mockery of people around him (vv. 6–8); that they are enemies who now gloat over him because of the serious illness that has befallen him is indicated by vv. 16–18. Not a friend is mentioned, and the loneliness he feels includes the sense of having been deserted by God as well. Furthermore, the symptoms of his
illness have left him in the kind of severe pain that also produces extreme loneliness (vv. 14–15). The two problems displayed in Psalm 22 reappear throughout the laments. Sickness and, to a much greater extent, the presence of enemies and the absence of friends have created intense feelings of loneliness which are not (in the complaint portions of the psalms) alleviated by any sense of a spiritual presence giving them strength to face their troubles.

Enemies are the problem throughout Psalms 35, 44, and 89, which speak of silence and distance (Ps. 35:22), of sleep (Pss. 35:23; 44:23), of rejection (Pss. 44:9; 89:38f.), of hiding (Ps. 44:24), and of forgetting (Ps. 44:24), with a plea for remembrance (Ps. 89:47, 50). Wrath occurs in parallel with hiding in Ps. 89:46, reminding us that the distance of which Israel complains is not spatial. The absence of God they are lamenting is neither nonexistence nor physical distance, but the absence of his blessings, and the absence of blessing is called his wrath. This helps to account for the apparent contradiction of language when God is sometimes asked to turn away, because the physical sense of his wrath has become too overpowering (e.g., Ps. 51:9; Job 7:19; 10:20). The “Where?” question also is concerned with effective power rather than spatial presence. Enemies use it in its mocking form, “Where is your God?” to ask why God isn’t helping you (Pss. 42:3, 10; 79:10; 115:2; Joel 2:17; Micah 7:10). When asked by a believer, it may be a complaint over God’s lack of activity (Judg. 6:13; Isa. 63:11, 15; Mal. 2:17) or may be a virtual demand that God act, as when Elisha strikes the water with Elijah’s mantle, saying, “Where is the LORD, the God of Elijah?” (2 Kings 2:14).

The answer to our question as to how they accounted for God’s apparent absence is that they did not. We have found no explanations in the psalms just surveyed, and an important contribution of Balentine’s work on the hiddenness of God is the observation that there is a significant difference between the use of this concept in the Psalter and in the prophetic books. The prophets have rationalized it and regularly associate it with judgment for Israel’s sins. We shall look at one example of that shortly. But in the psalms of lament God’s absence is not explained as the result of sin; rather the psalmists express their bewilderment at his silence, and in Psalm 44 the community protests that they have certainly done nothing to deserve this (vv. 17–21). This is another aspect of the continuity between Exodus 1—2 and the laments, for no attempt is ever made in Exodus to explain why God delayed doing anything about the sufferings of his people in Egypt.

How did they deal with such depressingly feelings? The psalms make it clear that they didn’t give up. This violent language is in fact evidence of the strength of faith of people who were convinced God had both the power and the will to help them, and who will not give that up in spite of evidence to the contrary. So they deal with it by crying out, even when it seems they are crying into emptiness. And they waited (Pss. 37:7; 39:7; 40:1). And the waiting was possible because of the hope engendered by remembering that God had graciously worked with power in
the past (e.g., Pss. 22:3–5, 9–10; 44:1–8). We might sum it up by saying that insistence, persistence, and memory enabled them to prevail even without the answer to the question, Why?

It will suffice for our purposes to look at one example of the prophets’ use of the theme of divine absence, for they are consistent in explaining it as a problem that can be dealt with by repenting and living in obedience to God. It is very likely true that the sense of God’s absence may be the result of being conscious of one’s sinfulness, but that is actually a quite different problem from the one we have begun to trace through the history of the Jewish and Christian faiths. In Isa. 63:7–65:16 there appears a kind of “prophetic liturgy,” so called because various speakers appear and several genres are used, but there is a certain continuity suggesting the parts are to be read as a unit. This passage has been chosen because the lament genre is used and the vocabulary of absence appears in a significant way.

The liturgy begins with a hymn of praise (63:7–9), as is true of more than one lament in the Psalter (cf. Pss. 44, 89). God’s “presence” (literally, “face”), which will play an important role later in this book (Exodus 32—34), is explicitly mentioned as that which saved them in the past (v. 9). Soon the complaints about God’s absence in the present will be set over against that, but first something else from the past is introduced—Israel’s penchant for rebellion against their God, and God’s guidance for them in spite of that (vv. 10–14). Part of that memory is the lamenting question they had once asked, and which they will soon repeat,

Where is the one who brought them up out of the sea with the shepherds of his flock?
Where is the one who put within them his holy spirit,
who caused his glorious arm to march at the right hand of Moses,
who divided the waters before them to make for himself an everlasting name,
who led them through the depths? (Isa. 63:11b–13)

The prayer that follows (63:15–64:12) is strongly reminiscent of the psalms of lament, but differs from them in one way by its strong awareness of their sinfulness. Let us note the references to God’s absence:

Look down from heaven and see,
from your holy and glorious habitation.
Where are your zeal and your might?
The yearning of your heart and your compassion?
They are withheld from me. (63:15)
We have long been like those whom you do not rule,
like those not called by your name. (63:19)
... you have hidden your face from us,
and have delivered us into the hand of our iniquity. (64:7b)

After all this, will you restrain yourself, O LORD?
Will you keep silent, and punish us so severely? (64:12)
At one point, or perhaps two, they seem to blame their sinfulness on God, as if it was his absence that made them go astray:

Why, O LORD, do you make us stray from your ways
and harden our heart, so that we do not fear you? (63:17)

But the final section of the liturgy is an oracle from God, setting things straight. He has been present all the time, and his apparent absence has been entirely the fault of the people:

I was ready to be sought out by those who did not ask,
to be found by those who did not seek me.
I said, "Here I am, here I am,"
to a nation that did not call on my name.
I held out my hands all day long to a rebellious people,
who walk in a way that is not good,
following their own devices. (65:1–2)
... when I called you did not answer,
when I spoke, you did not listen. (65:12b)

Third Isaiah here follows the lead of the earlier prophets, whose chief concern was to justify the approaching end of the relationship between Israel and Yahweh in terms of Israel’s perennial failure to live up to the conditions of the covenant. This postexilic passage differs from the earlier prophets, who condemned Israel wholesale, in that it now sorts out the righteous from the wicked in Judaism of the restoration period (vv. 13–15). Presumably, then, it ought to be only the wicked who would suffer from the absence of God, but by the time of Third Isaiah other authors had learned better.

Among the various theories as to the main theme that runs through Job is that of the presence—perhaps better, accessibility—of God. Martin Buber has titled a chapter on Job "A God Who Hides His Face." Samuel Terrien claims it is the theology of presence, not the problem of suffering, which lies at the core of the book. André Neher, in The Exile of the Word, speaks of the lengthy silence of God, from chapter 3 through chapter 37. Job himself vacillates on this topic, as on every other except his own integrity. In chapter 7 he speaks of God’s hostile presence, from which he longs to be freed: "Am I the Sea, or the Dragon, that you set a guard over me?" (v. 12). "Let me alone, for my days are a breath" (v. 16). "Will you not look away from me for a while, let me alone until I swallow my spittle?" (v. 19). These are examples of the intense language of pain that dominates the first cycle of speeches. They also come from the only part of the book in which Job addresses God directly (with a few exceptions), as Dale Patrick has shown. In the first cycle Job is acutely aware of God’s presence as an enemy, but he can pray to his enemy, addressing him fifty times as "you." After that, he speaks to God four times in the first speech of the second cycle (16:7, 8; 17:3, 4) and four times in his final speech (30:20–23). Otherwise he talks about God. So
not only does God not speak throughout these many chapters, he is not even addressed from chapter 18 through chapter 29 (nor in Elihu’s speeches, chaps. 32—37).

Although Job is in terror before the God who seems to be torturing him so, he knows he has no other hope but that same God, and so we find him longing to take the risk of a face-to-face confrontation. Chapters 13 and 23 express that most vigorously: “See, he will kill me; I have no hope; but I will defend my ways to his face” (13:15). But he knows he is not strong enough for that and must ask for mercy: “[W]ithdraw your hand far from me, and do not let dread of you terrify me. Then call, and I will answer; or let me speak, and you reply to me” (vv. 21–22). But there is no reply, and from this point on the question whether humans have any access to God remains in the air: “Why do you hide your face, and count me as your enemy?” (v. 24). And later, now in the third person: “Oh, that I knew where I might find him, that I might come even to his dwelling!” (23:3). If that could be possible, Job would lay his case before God, and he is sure he would be acquitted (23:4–7). But,

[i]f I go forward, he is not there;
or backward, I cannot perceive him;
on the left he hides, and I cannot behold him;
I turn to the right but I cannot see him.
... he stands alone and who can dissuade him? (vv. 8–9, 13a)

At times Job seriously doubts whether God is tending to his business anymore: “Why are times not kept by the Almighty, and why do those who know him never see his days?” (24:1). “From the city the dying groan, and the throat of the wounded cries for help; yet God pays no attention to their prayer” (24:12). But with his last words he returns to his conviction that God is just; there is a hitch in the system somewhere so that Job cannot get access to the one who would surely vindicate him: “Oh, that I had one to hear me! (Here is my signature! let the Almighty answer me!) ... I would give him an account of all my steps; like a prince I would approach him” (31:35a, 37).

Job’s request is never granted; he cannot approach God, but God instead comes and speaks to him, with his own agenda (chapters 38—41). That seems to make all the difference to Job, according to the way most interpreters read his response: “I had heard of you by the hearing of the ear, but now my eye sees you” (42:5). One of the advantages of taking access to God as a major theme of the book is that this issue is resolved at the end; Job did not find God, but God found him. Two other much-discussed themes are not resolved; God refuses to discuss suffering or his justice, but that in fact leaves the book of Job in the same ballpark with Exodus 1—2 and the psalms of lament. No rationalization of the absence of God is ever attempted, but the issue is resolved by the coming of the God who saves. The same pattern of lament over suffering, which is not explained, but which is
resolved in a more than satisfactory way by the coming of the saving God, may be found in Habakkuk, including a reference to hiddenness in 1:2: "[H]ow long shall I cry for help, and you will not listen?"

At first Ecclesiastes might seem to have developed this theme in another way, but he does not in fact speak of an absent God, in the Old Testament sense of a God who does not act. The commonest verbs used with God as subject are natan, "give," and 'asah, "do, make." Koheleth speaks of a God who is active in the world (e.g., 2:24–26; 3:10, 13–15; 5:19–20); his problem is that he does not understand what it all means: "That which is, is far off, and deep, very deep; who can find it out?" (7:24; cf. 3:10–11; 7:14; 8:16–17; 11:5). He reveals no longing for God's nearer presence; unlike the typical Israelite, he does not see that as a solution to his problem. "Guard your steps when you go to the house of God; to draw near to listen is better than the sacrifice offered by fools; for they do not know how to keep from doing evil. Never be rash with your mouth, nor let your heart be quick to utter a word before God, for God is in heaven, and you upon earth; therefore let your words be few" (5:1–2).

A prophetic passage that does not lament the absence of God, but expresses wonder at it, seems an appropriate way to conclude our survey of this motif in the Old Testament. In Isa. 45:9–17 the God who hides himself is praised as the deliverer, and this seems to involve the same line of thought we have found in those passages that struggled with the hiddenness of God and found a resolution to their problem only with the coming of the saving God. As God refused to subject himself to Job's inquisition, so also God here rebukes those who want to know too much: "Will you question me about my children, or command me concerning the work of my hands?" (v. 11b). Then comes the promise of restoration from exile; in Second Isaiah's time it had not yet been fulfilled, but for the prophet the promise is good enough. It leads to his marveling words of praise, which from this time on in Israel's history become possible because of trust that even while God remains hidden, his promise is reliable:

Truly, you are a God who hides himself,
O God of Israel, the Savior.
All of them are put to shame and confounded,
the makers of idols go in confusion together.
But Israel is saved by the L ORD with everlasting salvation;
you shall not be put to shame or confounded
to all eternity. (Isa. 45:15–17)

REPRESSION OF THE THEME OF ABSENCE IN JUDAISM AND CHRISTIANITY

In the preceding section we considered some exemplary passages in which vocabulary dealing with God's inaccessibility appeared prominently. The motif is
certainly most obvious in the Psalter, with some reference to it occurring in thirty-three psalms, but it also appears in twenty-two other books. Many of the references intend to negate the idea, for example, “I will not fail you or forsake you” (Josh. 1:5), but the idea has to be present before anyone thinks it necessary to negate it. Thus Balentine concludes The Hidden God with the assertion that the experience of God’s hiddenness, like God’s presence, “is an integral part of Israelite faith. Both experiences derive from the nature of God himself.” Our reflections on the nonappearance of God in Exodus 1—2 have led us to other parts of the Old Testament in which Israel has struggled to understand those times in life when God does not seem to be available with any help. That is the problem which Auschwitz has brought to the contemporary consciousness in the most painful way possible, but we are beginning to see that it is not a completely new problem. The concluding section of this chapter will attempt to suggest some possibilities for new dialogue between the Old Testament and post-Auschwitz humanity.

Judaism

During the Second Temple period the Jews continued to suffer as minority groups living within pagan cultures, and suffering as a part of daily life is reflected in the literature of the so-called Intertestamental period (the Apocrypha, Pseudepigrapha, and Qumran writings). It is almost certain that the psalms of lament were prayed with real feeling many times, but a survey of the materials written during this period shows that the Jews did not continue to produce literature like the laments or the book of Job. They underwent the first attempt to wipe out the Jewish faith entirely, during the persecution ordered by Antiochus IV Epiphanes in 167–165 B.C.E., but that suffering is not described with language suggesting God’s absence. Several laments over the desolation of Jerusalem are included in 1 Maccabees (1:24–28, 36–40; 2:7–13; 3:45, 50–53), but the vocabulary we have been studying is missing. The emphasis in 1 and 2 Maccabees is on the heroic acts of those Jews who remain constant in their faith, especially in the martyr stories of 2 Maccabees 6 and 7. Since these people were being held up as examples of faithfulness, it would have been inappropriate to suggest that God was not involved, even though they were in fact not being rescued. God is present in their testimony, and their faith in his eventual vindication of them is said to have kept them from wavering (2 Macc. 6:26–31; 7:6, 9, 14, 16, etc.).

Other books, of the “edifying story” type (Tobit, Judith, 3 and 4 Maccabees), hold up examples of faithful living amid tribulation and seem to find it inappropriate to suggest that those heroes might have been maintaining their integrity without the conscious sense of God’s help (as Job did). Prayers for help continue to use the same appeals that appear in the Psalter (e.g., Bar. 2:16f.), but omit any strong expressions of the sense of God’s absence. The Psalms of Solomon, written during the first century B.C.E., at about the time the Romans
occupied Palestine, use the language of the laments at times. “He hath turned away his face from pitying them” (2:8) is used as the prophets used the expression, since: “According to their sins hath He done unto them” (2:7). The appeal “Make not Thy dwelling afar from us, O God; Lest they assail us that hate us without cause” (7:1) is not based on a sense of absence, for later the same psalm says, “While Thy name dwelleth in our mist, we shall find mercy; and the nations shall not prevail against us” (7:5).

Have the Jews lost the bold frankness of their ancestors? Is it too great a threat to piety to admit that under certain circumstances they have no sense that God is in their midst, doing anything? Or have they acquired some new insights into the way God works, enabling them to speak of their troubles and the ways they deal with them in different language? One of the common misevaluations of Second Temple Judaism by Christian scholars is the claim that the sense of God’s presence was greatly diminished by the priestly-dominated, legalistic form of their religion, and the claim that transcendence ruled their concept of God. However, if the wisdom literature is at all representative of the thinking of Judaism in general, there is evidence to the contrary. For the sages of this period, all of God’s attributes were present in divine wisdom, and wisdom was praised for being immediately present to them in daily life. Before Antiochus’s persecution, Sirach (ca. 190 B.C.E.) has divine wisdom say that God instructed her (wisdom) to make her dwelling in Jerusalem (Sirach 24:1–12), and then identifies wisdom with “the book of the covenant of the Most High God, the law that Moses commanded us as an inheritance for the congregations of Jacob” (24:23). Like the other sages, Sirach is wise enough to acknowledge that some of what God does remains a mystery to human beings, but that is no cause for anxiety (39:16–35), and he assures his readers that help from the Lord is unfailing for those who wait and trust (chapter 2).

After the anguish brought upon Judaism by the persecutions of Antiochus Epiphanes, another sage, the author of Wisdom of Solomon, took suffering more seriously than Sirach did, but did not lament over it the way earlier writers did. Appealing to the belief in resurrection that had begun to prevail in Judaism, he says:

But the souls of the righteous are in the hand of God,
and no torment will ever touch them.
In the eyes of the foolish they seemed to have died,
and their departure was thought to be a disaster,
and their going from us to be their destruction;
but they are at peace. (3:1–3)

Not even death can separate one from God, the witness of the martyrs has insisted, and in life one has uninterrupted access to God through divine wisdom:

In every generation she passes into holy souls
and makes them friends of God, and prophets;
for God loves nothing so much as the person
who lives with wisdom. (7:27b–28; cf. 7:22–8:1)

It must be concluded that the literature produced by the Jews during these troubled
times shows a strong sense of the continual presence of God with the faithful.

The Jews faced another catastrophe with the fall of Jerusalem to the Romans in
70 C.E., followed by Hadrian’s construction of a new city with a pagan temple
after 135 C.E. This time they heard no prophets declaring that this was God’s
judgment upon them for their sins, so there is ambiguity in their reactions to it.
Two apocalyptic works written between the two wars with Rome (2 Esdras and 2
Baruch) raised the question why God should have given victory to the more
wicked of the two, Israel and Rome. Each book purports to be dealing with the fall
of Jerusalem to the Babylonians in 587 B.C.E., but it is clear the real problem is 70
C.E. In the former book Ezra raises questions similar to those Habakkuk had asked
long ago: “Are the deeds of those who inhabit Babylon [i.e., Rome] any better? Is
that why it has gained dominion over Zion?” (2 Esd. 3:28–29). As he led up to this
challenge to God’s justice, we encounter the one use of the Old Testament
language we have been tracing: “You made an everlasting covenant with him
[Abraham], and promised him that you would never forsake his descendants”
(3:15). The dialogue between Ezra and God leads to an eschatological solution of
the problem of justice, with the promise elaborated in detail that the day will come
when God will make it all right. In spite of the passion with which Ezra makes his
pleas, however, the vocabulary of forsakenness is not prominent, and it does not
appear at all in 2 Baruch.

The ambiguity of the rabbis’ response to the loss of the Temple, and even of
access to the city of Jerusalem, is revealed most clearly in the Talmud. Very
negative statements are countered by a lengthy section of affirmations:

R. Eleazar also said: From the day on which the Temple was destroyed the gates of
prayer have been closed, as it says, Yea, when I cry and call for help He shutteth out
my prayer. [Lam. 3:8] But though the gates of prayer are closed, the gates of
weeping are not closed, as it says, Hear my prayer, O Lord, and give ear unto my
cry; keep not silence at my tears. [Ps. 39:12] . . . R. Eleazar also said: Since the day
that the Temple was destroyed, a wall of iron has intervened between Israel and their
Father in Heaven, as it says, And take thou unto thee an iron griddle, and set it for a
wall of iron between thee and the city. [Ezek. 4:3]25

Not since our work with the Old Testament have we found such extreme
statements about the absence of God. But the rabbis quickly set to work to
dismantle Eleazar’s position, taking a truly challenging verse, Isa. 49:14, as their
text: “But Zion said, ‘The LORD has forsaken me, my LORD has forgotten me.’ ”
They developed a parable based on the following verse, which concludes, “even
these may forget, yet I will not forget you.” What does God forget, they asked?
Answer: the sin of the golden calf. What will not be forgotten is God’s affirmation
at Sinai, “I am the LORD thy God.”26
Similar exegetical work was done, in the Midrash to Lamentations, on a verse that expresses poignantly the sense of absence: “Why do you forget us for ever, why do you so long forsake us?” (Lam. 5:20). The section provides an example of the rabbinic technique for interpreting scripture:

“Why do you forget us for ever, why do you so long forsake us:” Said R. Joshua b. Abin, “Four expressions were used by Jeremiah: rejecting, loathing, forgetting, forsaking. Rejecting and loathing: ‘Have you utterly rejected Judah? Has your soul loathed Zion’ (Jer. 14:19). And Moses answered, ‘I will not reject them, or will I abhor them’ (Lev. 26:44). Forgetting and forsaking: ‘Why do you forget us for ever, why do you so long forsake us.’ And Isaiah answered, ‘Yes, these may forget, but I will not forget you’ (Isa. 49:15).”

It seems that in order for Judaism to survive amid all the sufferings inflicted upon it during the centuries following 70 C.E. some repression of the language of absence was necessary. For Jews as much as for Christians, affirmation of the saving presence of God was confirmed in experience often enough that it could be and must be reaffirmed in every generation, although they might use scripture’s language of lamentation more readily than Christian worship did. The Passover Haggadah affirms the continuing presence in this way: “It was not one only who rose against us to annihilate us, but in every generation there are those who rise against us to annihilate us. But the Holy One, blessed be He, saves us from their hand.”

The New Testament

The triumph of the resurrection of Christ and the continuing experience of his risen presence in the midst of the early Christian communities meant that language of forsakenness had no natural place in the New Testament. In the few places where words of this kind occur, they are always negated (John 8:29; 14:18; Rom. 11:1, 2; Heb. 6:10; 13:5). There is one occurrence that must be taken seriously, however, and that is Jesus’ own use of the first words of Psalm 22: “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” (Matt. 27:46; Mark 15:34). It seems fair to say that for the writers of the New Testament, all the feelings of godforsakenness expressed by the writers of the Old Testament have been absorbed by Jesus on the cross. It is as if nothing more needs to be said about that, from their perspective. From our perspective, however, we must say more, for the Christian faith has not, in fact, completely done away with the sense of God’s absence.

It has been hard for Christians to take literally those words from the cross. What could Jesus have meant by them? The temptation is to read the whole Passion story in terms of the resurrection and to claim Jesus knew in advance how it would all come out, so could calmly face the pain and humiliation and death. But he did not face it calmly. He went into Gethsemane “distressed and agitated”
(Mark 14:34, NRSV), saying, "I am deeply grieved, even to death." Some texts of Luke say, "In his anguish he prayed more earnestly, and his sweat became like great drops of blood falling down on the ground" (Luke 22:43–44; missing from codices Vaticanus and Alexandrinus). Matthew and Mark testify that he cried out with a loud voice as he died. As Jürgen Moltmann has emphasized, Jesus did not die "a fine death." An even worse temptation, which must be quickly rejected, is to think that yes, Jesus went through all of this the way any human being would do, but that in his case, since he was divine, it was really a sort of demonstration—he could not really have felt abandoned by God. But that would be playing games with us. The church has rejected that as docetism.

The most frequently used way of alleviating the scandal of Jesus' apparent sense of having been rejected by God is to appeal to the fact that Psalm 22 ends with praise. It is said that Jesus may have recited the whole psalm on the cross and the evangelists cited only the first verse, or that even if Jesus said only that much, he knew it all, and those concluding verses would have been a comfort to him. But neither Matthew nor Mark offer any support for this. They leave us with the word "forsaken." And the saying was apparently too shocking for Luke and John to include in any form.

David H. C. Read has stated two other options in the form of a conundrum: "Was this Christ actually abandoned by God at this point?—a conception logically irreconcilable with the doctrine of the Trinity; or did He feel Himself to be so abandoned?—a conception scarcely less difficult to reconcile with orthodox Christianity?" He reaches a conclusion close to the former statement, as do several contemporary theologians: "It would seem then that atonement could not be complete, the experience would be unfulfilled, unless He had also been where sin is ‘when it is finished’—the death of the soul. This is hell—separation from God—and many have felt with Calvin that these words from the Cross are the best commentary on the profession of the Creed: ‘He descended into hell.’" Such a conclusion does affect our understanding of the doctrine of the Trinity. Karl Barth defined the deepest meaning of the incarnation with reference to the cry of dereliction:

The incarnation, the taking of the forma servi, means not only God's becoming a creature, becoming a man—and how this is possible to God without an alteration of His being is not self-evident—but it means His giving Himself up to the contradic-
tion of man against Him, His placing Himself under the judgment under which man has fallen in this contradiction, under the curse of death which rests upon Him. The meaning of the incarnation is plainly revealed in the question of Jesus on the cross: "My God, my God, why has thou forsaken me?"

Moltmann's use of Jesus' cry from the cross shows how far a theologian may go in taking its implications seriously for a restatement of the doctrine of the Trinity, claiming that trinitarian language is necessary in order to deal with questions such as, "Who is God: the one who lets Jesus die or at the same time the
Jesus who dies?” His response: “The Son suffers and dies on the cross. The Father suffers with him, but not in the same way.” And later:

[The doctrine of the Trinity is no longer an exorbitant and impractical speculation about God, but is nothing other than a shorter version of the passion narrative of Christ. . . . The form of the crucified Christ is the Trinity. In that case, what is salvation? Only if all disaster, forsakenness by God, absolute death, the infinite curse of damnation and sinking into nothingness is in God himself, is community with this God eternal salvation, infinite joy, indestructible election and divine life.]

This last sentence quoted from Moltmann points toward the conclusion that will be drawn here concerning Jesus’ cry from the cross as the center of all our consideration of the absence of God. Let us return to a straightforward reading of the Passion narrative as the account of how a righteous man, Jesus, died with the feeling of being completely alone. The evangelists make it clear that was no fault of his, that he had done nothing to deserve it. Very early in Christian history those data from the Gospels led to the development of theories of atonement (which need not concern us here). Jesus’ cry of dereliction was to be explained as the result of his assumption of the sins of all humanity, dying as an unforgiven sinner that others might be forgiven (cf. 2 Cor. 5:21 and Read’s conclusion cited earlier). As if theories of atonement were not difficult enough, it then became necessary to struggle with the conviction that Jesus was fully divine, leading to the kinds of statements about incarnation and the Trinity quoted above. But these should not lead us to ignore the implications of Jesus’ full identification of himself with other human beings (and not just with our sinfulness).

Martin Marty’s book A Cry of Absence offers perhaps the best commentary of that sort on Ps. 22:1 as Jesus shouted it from the cross. We have been dealing all along with the truth that the absence of God may be felt for many reasons (or apparently none), and that sin is only one of them. Marty deals with pain, both physical and emotional, and that in fact brings us closest to Jesus’ experience as the evangelists describe it. They talk about humiliation and bleeding and dying, not about atonement. Pain typically leads to outcry expressing one’s intense feelings of loneliness—it did for Jesus. About this, Marty says:

When I am henceforth lost in the wintry night, alone, I identify exactly with a cry already uttered: “O my god, I cry in the day-time but thou dost not answer, in the night I cry but get no respite” (22:2). The world in front of this text opens to me the possibility that by uttering the prayer, a prayer ofaloneness, I am not only alone. Someone in whom I trust has shouted it out before, in worse circumstances. What is more, Jesus cried out because a pledge seemed to be broken, and that seemingly was turning to reality. Because it seemed so, it was being broken. He was not supposed to be abandoned, yet he was abandoned. “The cry of dereliction”: under that term his shout enters the list of classic phrases. There are derelict ships and there was a derelict Son of God. . . . Those who trusted, even in abandonment, were not denied. The crucified victim was the only forsaken one, the true derelict. The rest of us die in
company, in his company. God certified his gift and his act and “raised him up.” Never again is aloneness to be so stark for others.34

With those final words of Marty’s we are getting a bit ahead of ourselves, to the promise “God is with us,” but that will come soon, in Exodus 3. The church said that separation from God was finished, with the resurrection, for the risen Christ had promised, “And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age” (Matt. 28:20). There seemed to be no place for “Why do you hide yourself?” in Christian worship, and it has not appeared. The Old Testament’s language of absence has been repressed, but the experience did not disappear from the Christian life. In our sketchy survey of Christian history we shall shortly look at one place in which absence was acknowledged.

Christian Mysticism

It would be beyond my competence to attempt to trace all the occurrences of the motif of the absence of God in Christian writing throughout the centuries, but one striking form of that experience can and should be noted before turning to the modern era. It appears in the writings of the mystics and was given its classic description under the evocative title “The Dark Night of the Soul,” by St. John of the Cross. Its unusual feature is that it is not the result of unwanted suffering inflicted by other human beings or by nature, nor does it just appear in the life of an ordinary person. The dark night of the soul is a regular part of the progress of those who undertake the discipline that they hope will lead them to ultimate unity with God. Evelyn Underhill explains it psychologically as an example of the law of reaction from stress.35 The discipline accepted by those who have undertaken the life of a mystic is so intense and unremitting that eventually exhaustion sets in and the sense of the presence of God which had been cultivated is lost. It seems that “God, having shown Himself, has now deliberately withdrawn His Presence, never perhaps to manifest Himself again.”36

St. John’s treatise “The Dark Night” analyzes the experience in detail, speaking of two kinds of darkness, the sensory and the spiritual. Each of them eventually makes its contribution to the mystic’s progress toward union with God, but they are terrible experiences to endure. The former purges the senses, the latter purges and denudes the spirit, for the aim of mysticism is the annihilation of selfhood, so as to do away with separation from God. So during the dark night, which for some has lasted months and years, God “leaves the intellect in darkness, the will in aridity, the memory in emptiness, and the affections in supreme affliction, bitterness, and anguish, by depriving the soul of the feeling and satisfaction it previously obtained from spiritual blessings. For this privation is one of the conditions required that the spiritual form, which is the union of love, may be introduced into the spirit and united with it.”37
Underhill says, "only a blind reliance on past convictions saves them from unbelief."\textsuperscript{38} In spite of the differences between this experience of absence and the others we have encountered, here is one element of continuity: the essential role played by memory during the times when there is no other support for faith. Nothing we have found before the literature of the mystics has spoken of the feeling of God's absence as anything of value; it has been something to endure, to triumph over, but as St. John described the dark night, and as others have chronicled their experiences, the way to mystical union with God must pass through that night. "And even though it humbles persons and reveals their miseries, it does so only to exalt them. And even though it impoverishes and empties them of all possessions and natural affection, it does so only that they may reach out divinely to the enjoyment of all earthly and heavenly things, with a general freedom of spirit in them all."\textsuperscript{39}

Nietzsche's announcement of the death of God is generally noted as the marker that identifies the appearance of a new feeling of the absence of God, characteristic of secularism. We need not rehearse that whole story in this context, but in the next section we will consider some ways in which the old motif of absence is influencing contemporary theology.

**SECULARISM AND THE ABSENCE OF GOD**

When Nietzsche's madman announced in 1882 that "God is dead, we have killed him," Nietzsche provided for the twentieth century a slogan that has been variously used. For some theologians, the "death of God" is not used to refer to his absence (nonexistence) but is used instead to speak of the participation of God the Father in the death of Christ\textsuperscript{40} and to mean that death was followed by resurrection. But others, both philosophers and theologians, mean that if there once was a God, there is no more—absence of the most thoroughgoing kind.

The rapid and revolutionary changes that occurred in scientific and historical research during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries have made radical changes in the thinking of not only philosophers and theologians but also ordinary people in the Western world. Efforts to explain everything past and present in rational ways led to the assumption that everything could be so explained, given time and cleverness enough. Thus miracles, long supposed to be clear evidence of God's activity in the world, came under the challenge of the theory that the laws of nature admit no exceptions. Once that was allowed, it did not take long to discover that God did not seem to be a necessary explanation for anything. For a time Deism provided a way to maintain belief in God as creator, but this was a God who had retired from involvement in the affairs of the world.

During the unparalleled advances in learning that took place in the nineteenth century, God seemed to fade away without a fight, as human beings took destiny
into their own hands. Until World War I and the events that followed it, humans seemed at least potentially to be able to do a better job of it without the unnecessary, and indeed trammeling, belief in God. For those without faith, the absence of God seemed to be not a problem, as it had been in the past, but instead, freedom from the tyranny of dogma and hierarchy. Those who still believed were left on retreat, as they attempted to find persuasive evidence for the active presence of God in the world. They had to resort to the “God of the gaps,” where science was concerned, or be satisfied with a solely personal God, the savior of their souls. Even that God was explained away as a “projection” by the positivists and psychologists.

This was a significantly new development in human history. Many people, since early history, had no doubt spent their entire lives without much concern whether there was a God or not, but now whole cultures took on that character. While for believers, the experience of God’s apparent absence, inactivity, at times was still as distressing as ever, the move in the twentieth century has been toward a majority of the population for whom the reality of God’s presence, activity, is not something ever to be taken seriously.41 The apparent triumph of secularism in the Western world has had significant effects on what twentieth-century theologians have said about the absence of God.42

William Hamilton, one of the exponents of death-of-God theology, wrote, “It used to be possible to say: we cannot know God but He has made himself known to us, and at that point analogies from the world of personal relations would enter the scene and help us out.” But he continued, “God is dead. We are not talking about the absence of the experience of God, but about the experience of the absence of God.”43 The “we” to whom Hamilton referred were theologians who intended somehow to continue to be Christians, with a “secular theology,” for a world in which God did nothing but human beings could still do something. These were people who felt the absence of God, but who took it to be permanent, so that the problem and the possible solution became quite different from what we have been tracing through scripture and its consequent history. Death-of-God theology had a short history. For most who accepted its presuppositions, theology of any kind probably seemed dispensable, and its optimism about human potential was already out of date in the 1960s.

Theists in the Western world face the same evidence for absence that led to death-of-God language, and we shall consider briefly some of the responses that have appeared. The same periods of trouble that have afflicted people since the beginning still recur, and for those who still find the Bible to be a source of help, they are being dealt with in traditional ways. Karl Rahner, in a book of prayers he called Encounters with Silence, wrote of one kind of absence:

When I pray, it’s as if my words have disappeared down some deep, dark well, from which no echo ever comes back to reassure me that they have struck the ground of your heart. Lord, to pray my whole life long without hearing an answer, isn’t that too
much to ask? You see how I run away from You time and time again, to speak with men who give me an answer, to busy myself with things that give me some kind of response. You see how much I need to be answered. And yet, my prayers never receive a word of reply.44

We are strongly reminded of the psalms of lament, when reading this prayer of Rahner’s, for everything in the book is directed toward God, with faith insisting that God must be hearing even though life provides no evidence for it.

Peter Hodgson’s study Jesus—Word and Presence speaks of two basic reasons for the experience of God’s absence in contemporary society.45 We have focused on secularism, but must now turn to the other, the heightened awareness of radical evil, especially as that has led to reflection on the Holocaust. For Jewish, and also Christian, theologians the question of what God was doing as that horror took place has raised in more critical ways than ever before issues of whether there is a God, if so what God’s nature must be, and whether faith is any longer possible. The literature is extensive, but for our purposes I shall discuss only two works by Jewish scholars. The first, The Exile of the Word: From the Silence of the Bible to the Silence of Auschwitz, by André Neher, has been chosen because the author is a biblical scholar who has used his expertise to produce a meditation on “biblical silence” in dialogue with the “silence of Auschwitz.”46 His use of the theme of silence is more wide-ranging than our study of absence has been. He speaks of the absence of God from the stories of Esther and Ruth, of the eclipse in Genesis 22, of apparent “distractedness” in the Joseph cycle, and of silence of various kinds in Job 3—37, Psalm 22, 1 Samuel 28 (Saul’s efforts to make contact), and 1 Kings 18—19, to mention only some of the major texts discussed. The title of the final section is significant, in the light of the effect the Holocaust has had on the Jewish community worldwide: “Silence and Perhaps.”

Neher has found that he must deal with the possibility that the absence of God is permanent, but in his Jewish tradition he also finds the “perhaps,” and he sees that can be read in a major as well as a minor key. In traditional rabbinic fashion he takes two Hebrew words, each of which can be read in two different ways. One is nəhəm, which will interest us when we come to Exodus 32. It is used of God’s repentance, of regret, discouragement in the face of failure, but another form means consolation, pulling oneself together in the face of failure. The other is a word we have already dealt with, ‘azav, which means “abandon,” but he also finds a meaning “gathering in.” So abandonment and gathering in belong together, he concludes. But the best we can say about the future is “perhaps.” He accepts the uncertainty that a better future may come but does not thereby deny that God is involved in it. God has given us something of value to do, and that must suffice.47

Emil Fackenheim has written extensively on the Holocaust, but his little book God’s Presence in History speaks most directly to our present concerns. He packed a wealth of insights into the rabbinic tradition and contemporary philosophy and theology into just a hundred pages, but for our purposes his
conclusions will be the most useful part. Some of the rabbinic material has been
dealt with earlier, and this section has just surveyed the trends characteristic of
secularism. Near the end of the book he sums up the resources from traditional
Judaism that are inadequate in the face of Auschwitz: divinepowerlessness,
otherworldliness, the redeeming power of martyrdom, the idea it could have been
just punishment for sin, the teaching that God shares Israel’s exile, and the image
of the eclipse of God. The issue now is whether the divine eclipse in the present
is total. “If all present access to the God of history is wholly lost, the God of
history is Himself lost.” Passover’s reenactment of deliverance at the Sea has been
a real event for the Jew because the God who had saved then was saving still. But
can that any longer be so?

Fackenheim’s response is that the Jews must endure, because if they do not,
Hitler will have won after all. “The Jew after Auschwitz is a witness to
endurance. . . . He bears witness that without endurance we shall all perish. He
bears witness that we can endure because we must endure; and that we must
endure because we are commanded to endure.” Thus Passover after Auschwitz
mixes the longing that has always been there with defiance, and that has made
endurance possible. Fackenheim’s understanding of the Jew’s relationship with
God is thus similar to that of Neher, although his vocabulary is different. “We are
here, exist, survive, endure, witnesses to God and man even if abandoned by God
and man.” So the spirit of the laments of the Old Testament, with their blunt
assessment of how bad it is and their insistence on not forsaking God even though
God seems to have forsaken them, reappears in new forms in these Jewish
interpretations of absence.

Can anything more be said to those who still believe in God in spite of his
apparent absence from the world in which we live? I believe our consideration of
the Old Testament suggests several points of dialogue. First, the sense that God
was not active did not lead Old Testament writers to think a new theology was
needed, as if they knew God’s absence was permanent. Even today, the Western
world is not as completely secular as we are tempted to think. Something other
than a theology without God is called for, if we are to take the not-quite-
despairing words of the Old Testament as a guide.

The Old Testament authors protest, and that is their most characteristic
reaction to the sense of absence. In Exodus 1—2 the first explicit key that the
author had been deliberately representing a time of absence was the reference to
the outcry of the slaves, and it was outcry that first led us to the laments. Protest,
complaint, challenges directed toward the absent God, the continued insistence
that there is a God who intends it to be better than this—these are distinctive
features of the faith of Israel. But moderns seem a bit timid by comparison. Except
for some discussions of the Holocaust, either they give up and are left with little
more than whimpering or they try not to think about it. “It’s all right to yell at
God” is not a message often heard in Christian circles, and that is because the Old
Testament tradition of faithful protest has not been well preserved.
Faithful protest is accompanied by two features of better repute: waiting and hoping. Isaiah had done what he could, to no avail; what was left for him was waiting: "I will wait for the LORD, who is hiding his face from the house of Jacob, and I will hope in him" (Isa. 8:17; cf. Hab. 2:1). But how can the waiting be anything more than resignation, accepting the pain without expecting anything better? How can they speak of hope? The psalmist cried out, "And now, O LORD, what do I wait for? My hope is in you" (Ps. 39:7). As Martin Marty wisely observed about that statement, "Everything here turns, then, on the character of the living God. This Presence on the horizon differentiates wintry spirituality from mere wintriness."  

What Israel knew about the character of God (after the exodus, so our author cannot write this way in chaps. 1–2) they got from their memory of what God had done, as Fackenheim has emphasized in his comments about Passover. The final point we can learn from the Old Testament is thus the critical importance of memory. I commented earlier on the fact that as the story is told, the slaves in Egypt had nothing to remember as they cried out to heaven, but we have seen that the outcries in Psalm 22 were interspersed with memories of what God had done for Israel and of the psalmist’s previous nearness to God. That made it possible to go on crying out to "My God," even though that God did not answer.

And the authors of the Old Testament books did not finally give up waiting because they were convinced that in spite of those inexplicable times of suffering, when too many die while they wait, in God’s good time he comes to save. That is the way the book of Job and the psalms of lament end, and that is the next act in the book of Exodus.