SPEAKING FROM THE GAPS:
The Eloquent Silence of God in Esther

Anne-Mareike Wetter

1. Introduction

Of all the books of the Hebrew Bible, the book of Esther presents the most consistently silent God. Indeed, God’s silence in this book is so pervasive that it is not even mentioned. Contemporary readers are puzzled, even distressed by this gap in the text: Why does God silently allow the almost-annihilation of his people? And why does he not speak out against the slaughter committed by the Jews themselves? God’s silence in the book of Esther seems to fall into Korpel and De Moor’s category of ‘incomprehensible divine silence’. Interestingly, the protagonists of the story are not concerned with these issues at all. They do not implore God to speak, nor do they reproach him for his neglect or try to rationalize it by speaking of their own guilt.

The complete silence of the narrative on the silence of God may explain why Korpel and De Moor do not mention the book of Esther, excepting a few footnotes. Their primary concern, as laid down in the preface, is the question:

What do people, in past and present, mean when they state that God is silent? This is something different from arguing that God is nonexistent, dead or absent. In these cases it is self-evident that God remains silent.

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2 Marjo Korpel and Johannes C. de Moor, The Silent God, Leiden 2011, 261–274.

3 Korpel and De Moor, Silent God, xi.
Korpel and De Moor apparently assume that God is absent from the book of Esther (otherwise they would undoubtedly have treated the book in more detail), making it ‘self-evident’ that he does not speak. Indeed, Korpel argues precisely this case in “Theodicy in the Book of Esther” and “De Ester Code”. Very briefly, her argument runs as follows: By means of a variety of hints, the author portrays the protagonists and the ‘Jewish’ community in Susa as integrated into Persian society to the point of a complete dissolution of their religious identity. If God is absent, it is because the ‘Jews’ in the story have made him so. Korpel explains the genocide as a consequence of the choice against God: once ‘Jews’ and ‘heathens’ are no longer distinguishable, ethics break down as well, resulting in the uncontrolled slaughter of innocent people. The author, himself an adept at Jewish/Israelite religious and literary traditions, intends the book of Esther as a narrative treatise against the assimilation witnessed so pervasively in ‘Jewish’ Diaspora communities. Ultimately, Korpel grants that God does act in the narrative on some level—the Jews are not destroyed but triumph over their enemies. However, the manner in which they triumph shows that God acts despite humans rather than with them.

Without wanting to dismiss Korpel’s reading out of hand, I suggest that a different approach is possible as well. Silent though God may be in the book of Esther, this does not necessarily imply a complete absence of the divine person or of faith in the latter. The countless allusions to literary traditions

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5 E.g., the protagonists’ names, misinterpretations of Jewish law (e.g., the claim that it was not permissible for a Jew to bow before humans), and the obvious ignorance of the community concerning Jewish rituals and festivals (fasting, Pesach etc.).

6 The absence or hidden presence of God in the book of Esther continues to spark scholarly debate. Generally speaking, it is possible to distinguish between three positions: a minimalist one, which denies any (traditionally) religious connotations in the book (e.g., besides Korpel, G. Gerleman, Esther [BKAT 21], Neukirchen-Vluyn 1973); a moderate one, which discovers subtle hints of faith in a limited number of textual details (e.g., C.A. Moore, Esther [The Anchor Bible 7B], Garden City, New York 1971; S. White Crawford, ‘Esther: A Feminine Model for Jewish Diaspora’, in: P.L. Day (ed.), Gender and Difference in Ancient Israel [Minneapolis 1988], 161–177; J.S. Burnett, Where is God?: Divine Absence in the Hebrew Bible, Minneapolis 2010, 2: God is ‘working behind the scenes’ in Esther), and a maximalist one, which reads the narrative as an eloquent testimony to Jewish religiosity in the (Eastern)