Divine Presence and Absence in Exilic and Post-Exilic Judaism

Edited by
NATHAN MACDONALD and
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Studies of the Sofja Kovalevskaja
Research Group on Early Jewish Monotheism
Vol. II

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Preface

The essays in this volume stem from a colloquium held in the Theologische Fakultät and the Paulinerkirche in the Georg-August-Universität Göttingen in May 2011. The theme of the conference was *Divine Presence and Absence in the Persian Period*. We are grateful to the Bundesministerium für Bildung und Forschung and the Alexander von Humboldt Stiftung who have funded the Early Jewish Monotheisms research group in Göttingen of which the conference was a part.

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Contents

Abbreviations

The bibliographies use the system of abbreviations found in S.M. SCHWERTNER, Theologische Realenzyklopädie: Abkürzungsverzeichnis, Berlin 1994[2]. In addition the following abbreviations are used:

ABD	Anchor Bible Dictionary (ed. D.N. Freedman)
BZAR	Beihefte zur Zeitschrift für altorientalische und biblische Rechtsgeschichte
CC	Continental Commentary
COS	Context of Scripture (eds. W.W. Hallo and K.L. Younger, Jr.)
DDD	Dictionary of Deities and Demons in the Bible (ed. K. van der Toorn)
HCOT	Historical Commentary on the Old Testament
HerBS	Herders Biblische Studien
LHBOTS	Library of Hebrew Bible/Old Testament Studies
NET	NET Bible (ed. W. Hall Harris)
NKJV	New King James Version
NSK.AT	Neuer Stuttgarter Kommentar. Altes Testament
OBO.SA	Orbis Biblicus et Orientalis, Series Archaeologica
TA	Tel Aviv
TDOT	Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament (eds. G.J. Botterweck, H. Ringgren and H.-J. Fabry)
TLOT	Theological Lexicon of the Old Testament (eds. E. Jenni und C. Westermann)
TOBITH	Topoi Biblischer Theologie/Topics of Biblical Theology

Introduction

NATHAN MACDONALD

The presence of the divine was an important concern for the inhabitants of the ancient Near East and is reflected in their cultic practice. Temples, sacrifices and rituals ensured the gods were near to those who revered them. The small Levantine kingdoms of Israel and Judah were no different. Around the time of the neo-Babylonian empire, however, the Israelite prophetic writings, begin to show unambiguous evidence of a changing attitude towards some widely shared assumptions about divine presence. In the idol polemic of Isaiah 40–48, for example, the ancient Near Eastern theology of images was rejected. In the ancient Near East it was apparent that the gods were not present in the same way that human beings are present to others and themselves. Consequently sophisticated theologies had developed to express the presence of the gods to the worshippers. The most important form of divine presence was embodiment in a cult image that resided in a temple. In Mesopotamia *pīt pî* ('mouth opening') and *mīs pî* ('mouth washing') rituals ensured the presence of the gods in the statues. The rituals recognized the earthly origins of the image, but insisted that in reality the statue had been born in heaven. The image received sacrificial worship and other forms of homage in the temple. It was 'a body of the god, but it did not exhaust that god's being'.[1] The idol-polemic in Isaiah 40–48 ridicules the images of the Babylonian gods and the craftsmen who made them. The divine images remain what they always were: wood and stone. For the composer of this idol-polemic YHWH had no image. In this respect the uniqueness of YHWH was expressed in concrete cultic practice and a distinctive understanding of divine presence.

How widely spread this altered sensibility was amongst ancient Judahites and Israelites is unclear and the extent to which it was rooted within traditional Israelite belief about representation of the divine. Many scholars hold that the decisive stimulus for a radical re-thinking of notions of divine presence was the fall of Jerusalem. In a significant contribution to the understanding of Israelite theologies of divine presence, *The Bodies of God and the World of Ancient Israel*, Sommer objects to giving too deci-

[1] SOMMER, Bodies of God, 23.

sive a role to the fall of Jerusalem in scholarly reconstructions of the development of ideas of divine presence. Thus, in his account of the priestly *kabod* theology, he speaks of a 'religious sensibility, a certain way of struggling with conflicting perceptions of the divine'. This stands in contrast to those reconstructions that make the priestly theology of presence the 'product of…one moment in history' which results in 'reducing it to nothing more than a historical reaction'.[2] There is considerable merit to Sommer's objection. The biblical texts show that scribes wrestled for centuries with how to describe Israel's experience of YHWH's presence. Indeed, the essays that follow describe some of that intellectual wrestling. Nevertheless, his strong contrast between attention to historical circumstances and perennial religious concerns is unhelpful. The book of Ezekiel's account of the movement of YHWH's *kabod* from the Jerusalem temple prior to the Babylonian attack on the city, for example, suggests that the events around the fall of Jerusalem in 586 BCE were a significant stimulus for thinking about divine presence. It is for these reasons that this volume focuses on divine presence and absence in the exilic and post-exilic periods.

The book begins with the larger issues of definition and theory with essays by two theologians. These are followed by two essays on the Old Testament's wider ancient context which discuss the Near East and the material culture of Palestine. The largest number of essays is devoted to the Old Testament itself. After an essay on the divine spirit that draws upon a wide selection of Old Testament texts, the remaining essays are arranged according to the order of the Jewish canon.

Divine Presence and Hermeneutics

Language of presence and absence is so ubiquitous in contemporary speech and writing that it is possible to forget just how tricky the concepts we use are; much more so when we talk about the presence or absence of God. No-one who has read even superficially in catholic sacramental theology could be in any doubt of this fact. For this reason the first two essays of the volume help provide some conceptual orientation, and raise many questions. They remind us that the language employed by biblical scholars does not have a self-evident meaning. In their concerns they anticipate some of the other essays in this volume that deal with subjects such as metaphor or symbolic presence.

[2] SOMMER, Bodies of God, 96–97.

Hart offers reflections on the nature of divine presence from a Christian theological perspective. Since the Christian theology of presence has its roots within the Old Testament Hart gently points out the value of a dialogue between the two areas of study. He observes how the idea of divine presence is both simple and also intellectually taxing. He develops a typology of the modes of divine presence from Dalferth. This typology articulates different modes of divine presence through a Trinitarian scheme. Hart's essay implicitly invites readers to reflect upon those modes of divine presence in relation to the Old Testament.

In the following essay Zachhuber offers some critical reflection on the categories of transcendence and immanence. He begins his investigation of the dialectical pair in the eighteenth century with Immanuel Kant, tracing something of their prehistory, but focusing especially on their use in nineteenth and twentieth century philosophical and theological thought. Zachhuber is careful to insist that he is not prohibiting the categories as useful for historical analysis. Nevertheless, his research reminds us that all our categories emerge from their own historical context, and their meaning is often far from self-evident.

Divine Presence in the Ancient Near East

The theologies of divine presence we find in the Old Testament were not created *ex nihilo*, even when it was formulated in conscious opposition to common Near Eastern forms of presence theology, as is the case in Deutero-Isaiah. Laments about divine abandonment and beliefs about temples, idols and amulets have a long genealogy in the ancient Near East. This common Near Eastern background is reflected in many of the essays on the Old Testament in the final section of this volume, most especially in those essays on the Book of Psalms and Ezra-Nehemiah. For this reason two of the essays in this volume are devoted to sketching in something of this Near Eastern conceptual background.

Ambos re-examines the Mesopotamian trope where kings claimed to restore a neglected or destroyed cult. Were these simply pious frauds or inventions of tradition as modern scholars have often asserted? Ambos examines three cases: the Akitu house of Aššur, the cultic image of Šamaš in Sippar, and the temple of Anu in Uruk. As Ambos shows the case for the temple of Anu being a pious fraud is less compelling than it has been thought to be.

Berlejung examines the use of amulets in first-millennium Palestine as a means of ensuring the divine presence in daily life. She provides detailed typologies of the main sorts of amulets, including the kinds of representa-

tions that appeared on them and the inscriptions they bore. Image and inscription acted together to fix positive powers to the wearer of the amulet and banish any evil powers. Examination of the amulets shows that they were not an autochthonous tradition, though the inhabitants of Palestine could freely combine elements from various neighbouring cultures. Berlejung identifies a new turn in amulet practice in the silver amulets from Ketif Hinnom and the practices described in Deut 6.6–9. They become vehicles for expressing right behaviour and teaching the official theology. They demonstrate how individual piety and official theology came to be bound together.

Divine Presence and Absence in the Old Testament

The majority of the essays in this volume are devoted to theologies of divine presence in the Old Testament. The essays cover a diverse set of topics, which reflects the many different perspectives on divine presence in the Old Testament.

MacDonald makes a case that the spirit of YHWH needs as much attention in discussions of exilic and post-exilic notions of divine presence as the classic ideas of the *shem* and *kabod* theologies. According to him this conceptualization of divine presence has been overlooked. MacDonald demonstrates that the vocabulary of spirit became more prominent in the post-exilic period, probably under the influence of the book of Ezekiel. He suggests that the spirit was seen as a constant presence with Israel through inspired leaders and argues that Israel's primary history was edited with this principle in view. Visions of the role of the spirit in the future were somewhat more diverse. Different views can be discerned in the various prophetic books including Isaiah, Ezekiel and Deutero-Zechariah. Nevertheless, later scribes sought to orientate these different perspectives to one another.

Cook tackles the familiar subject of Deuteronomy's theology of divine presence. He contests the common opinion that the name is a means of distancing YHWH from Israel. Instead, YHWH is personally and immediately available to Israel. What is needed, argues Cook, is a closer analysis of how God is both present and absent to the Israelites. In particular, Deuteronomy seeks to articulate a paradox. God is free and a radical, impenetrable other, but he is also close to his people and speaks to them. This paradox is expressed through Deuteronomy's theology of the divine name. God chooses where to place his name and be present to the people, but the name is a means by which a direct existential encounter with God occurred.

Tooman shows that whilst divine presence is a prominent concern in the visionary framework of Ezekiel, it is barely present in the oracular core. The questions that this raises takes us into the theological concerns of the book of Ezekiel and its redacational history. Tooman demonstrates that a closer examination of the oracles reveals a number of texts where divine presence is a significant concern. The restoration of the covenant – the central concern of the oracular core – is seen as coextensive with the restoration of the divine presence. This raises the natural concern that the people will again be disobedient leading to exile and further destruction of the temple. It is for this reason that the redacted form of Ezekiel emphasizes the spirit as a particular mode of divine presence that will ensure the maintenance of the covenant in perpetuity.

Middlemas examines the subject of divine absence in the prophets. She shows how the prophet's reconfigured the relationship between divine absence and images. Images no longer ensured divine presence, but the opposite: they drove YHWH from Jerusalem. The prophets resisted associating any imagery with YHWH within the cult. At the same time, the prophets explored a panoply of metaphorical images. Middlemas uses contemporary metaphor theory to show how Ezekiel and Hosea used metaphorical speech to convey divine presence.

Two essays explore divine presence in the Book of Psalms. Burnett explores the theology of the Elohistic Psalter (Psalms 42–83) with the aid of West Semitic inscriptions. Both inscriptions and the Elohistic Psalter appeal to the deity to overturn reproach and the woe that has been inflicted upon the appellant. The Elohistic Psalter envisages a reordering of the heavenly and earthly powers that are familiar from West Semitic inscriptions. In this re-ordered cosmos YHWH will be present and vindicate his people. Emmendörffer examines those psalms that respond to the destruction of the kingdom and the temple by complaining about God's distance from his people. These psalms use not only the pre-exilic complaint form to turn their appeals to God, but also show familiarity with the Mesopotamian laments over the destruction of the city. In their own way the psalms attest to the hope in God and the possibility of divine presence.

Finally, two essays discuss the books of Ezra-Nehemiah. Becking draws our attention to ancient Near Eastern texts that identify cultic vessels as symbolic representations of the divine. Can the same be said for the cultic vessels that were taken from Jerusalem and later returned with the exiles? Becking observes that various biblical texts anticipate the return of YHWH from exile, and notes how the cultic vessels are described as making a similar journey from Babylon back to Jerusalem. This suggests we see the cultic vessels as a symbolic representation of the divine. Becking notes that this perspective is consistent with Ezra-Nehemiah's view of God as

present in history, but whose actions are indirect and instrumental. In her essay Fried focuses on the question of divine presence in the temple. Ezra-Nehemiah depart from typical Near Eastern beliefs that YHWH is present in the temple, and reflect Greek notions of a deity in the sky. It is for this reason that an active altar could be present on the site without a temple building to house the deity. This altered perception of the divine had implications for how the Torah was understood. The Torah was a manifestation of YHWH. It was used for oracular guidance and received obeisance.

In its own way each of the essays in this volume challenges our understanding of the theology of emerging Judaism. They force us to go back and reconsider what we mean by expressions such as transcendence, immanence, presence, absence, iconism, aniconism. They confront us with the many diverse perspective on divine presence that find expression during the Babylonian exile and Persian period. At the end of this volume we might have a better sense of the different things that the earliest readers of the end of Ezekiel might have understood when they read the words, 'YHWH is there'.

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Complicating Presence

Inter-Disciplinary Perspectives on a Theological Question

TREVOR HART

1. Elusive Presence

It is by now a commonplace, perhaps a truism, to suggest that the prevailing climate of thought and of feeling in contemporary (modern or postmodern) European culture is that of 'a vivid sense of the absence of God'.[1] God survives, according to his self-satisfied executioners, only by clinging to culture as 'a phantom of grammar, a fossil embedded in the childhood of rational speech'.[2] But in at least one sense, therefore, the suggestion can be seen to be misleading. The postulate or dogma of God's *non-existence,* it seems, is not at all the same thing as the experience of God's *absence*, a sense bound up closely with the postulate of his presence, or at least the possibility of his presence.[3] In so far as the claim is true, furthermore, I want to suggest that far from being a consequence of the successful overthrow of our biblical heritage, the problem of God's absence (or, as we might say somewhat inelegantly, God's 'absence/presence') is bequeathed to us precisely by that same heritage, and in particular by its roots sunk deep in the soils of Hebraic and Judaic sensibility. For here, what we find is a theology of divine presence which is at once profound and problematic, which gives with one hand what it appears only to take away again with the other, compelling an epistemic and moral disposition which human beings 'come of age' have always found uncomfortable – namely, one of trust: trust in the God who makes himself present yet refuses to give himself over into human hands to be held onto or commandeered into our various programmes and agendas, who gives what is for us in his judgment sufficient, but never as much as we think we should actually like of his

[1] DALFERTH, Becoming Present, 33.
[2] STEINER, Real Presences, 3.
[3] Cf. DALFERTH, Becoming Present, 51; STEINER, Real Presences, 39.

presence (even though in reality it may often also be as much as, for the time being at least, we can bear).[4]

According to Terrien's eponymous essay in the field of biblical theology[5] it is a distinctive theology of divine presence (rather than one centred around the theme of covenant) which sets Israel apart most clearly from the religious cultures of her immediate neighbours, and provides the golden thread holding both the various stages of her historical development and the texts in her canon of Scripture identifiably together.[6] The peculiarity of this sense of presence is, Terrien suggests, precisely its persistent complication by and compounding with an attendant awareness of absence, a sense of isolation from the proximity of God.[7] It is a presence both undeniably real, and yet more often than not either remembered or (on the basis of divine promise) looked forward to, rather than experienced directly or 'purely'. It is, in this sense, we might say, both dialectical and eschatological. Ingolf Dalferth characterizes the whole history of Israel as one of 'suffering from the experience of God's absence, and…longing for his definitive and real presence'. Jesus' announcement of the kingdom of God, Dalferth suggests, must be understood in this light as the announcement that 'the time of God's absence had come to an end and that the longed for presence of God was about to begin here and now'.[8] But while in some sense Christians must hold this to be true, the dialectic is not resolved here into any Hegelian higher synthesis: the pulse of Hebraic iconoclasm beats powerfully in the breast of the New Testament too, and maintains a tension, as Terrien puts it, 'between divine self-disclosure and divine self-concealment'. In many ways, indeed, the presence of Christ in the world sharpens and heightens the tension, the presence of the Risen Lord remaining 'elusive' rather than available on tap, communicated by the Spirit who blows where he wills, and arising not as 'sheer presence', but shaped from first to last by elements of narrated past and future, that is to say of remembrance and hope (including the abiding hope for an unambiguous

[4] In related vein Kant refers to the 'wise adaptation' of our cognitive faculties to the demands of our 'practical vocation' rather than to 'that power of insight or enlightenment which we would like to possess' (KANT, Critique of Practical Reason, §IX, 151–152. Cf. BAILLIE, Presence of God, 162). Such considerations are, needless to say, hardly adequate by way of response in contexts where the sense of divine *absence* is one bound up inextricably with our suffering of life's horrors and terrors. Despite this, though, for wider purposes they are important to bear in mind.

[5] TERRIEN, Elusive Presence.

[6] TERRIEN, Elusive Presence, 27, 31.

[7] TERRIEN, Elusive Presence, 29.

[8] DALFERTH, Becoming Present, 50.

presence, when God will be known to be 'all in all').[9] If, as Dalferth properly insists, for Christian believers questions about divine presence and absence must be informed above all by considerations of Christology, therefore, we certainly should not expect the answers to those questions to be easily had, for at the heart of Christology we find events which serve precisely 'to intensify the sense of the absence of God rather than disclose God's presence'.[10]

Questions of presence and absence have spilled over identifiably from the explicit concerns of biblical religion and theology to generate some deep-seated anxieties in the patterns of our wider culture, and it is worth pausing at least to notice the resonances arising from their common (albeit often disputed or unacknowledged) paternity. Thus, according to Steiner,[11] the postmodern 'broken contract' between word and world, sign and thing signified, deeply questioning whether any 'presence' (authorial, readerly or other sort) may in fact reliably be discerned through our engagements with 'language' in the widest sense of the word, may confidently trace its roots and antecedents (if not its warrant) in the same biblical matrix of 'elusive presence'. Judaism, Steiner notes, is marked equally by its profound respect for the holiness of the divine presence and its attention to the sacred text as, in effect, an extension of the tent of meeting. One consequence of this, he argues, is the prominent phenomenon in Jewish culture of the textually secondary, keeping, as it were, a respectful distance from the *qodesh qodashim*, always preferring commentary – and commentary upon commentary – to those primary performances of the text which inevitably risk the idolatrous suggestion of semantic closure. Hermeneutic unendingness, 'reading without end', the midrashic gloss and marginalia not just on the sacred text but on all previous readings of it, deferring definitive resolution of questions of the text's meaning, all sustain a dialectic precisely similar (because in reality wedded) to the interplay of divine presence and absence, self-disclosure and self-veiling. 'The lamps of explication must burn unquenched before the tabernacle',[12] precisely because the presence discerned there is one not to be pinned down through the semantic, lexical and grammatical tools at our disposal, but always elusive and thus in a manner 'absent' (refusing more than a partial and fleeting let alone a final determination) even in the midst of its own elected presence.

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[9] Cf. Moltmann's insistence that the experience of the Spirit's presence with us is always 'historical' and 'eschatological', viz. shaped by the flow of time, situated (consciously rather than merely *de facto*) 'between remembered past and expected future' (MOLTMANN, Spirit of Life, 17).

[10] DALFERTH, Becoming Present, 50.

[11] For what follows see STEINER, Real Presences, esp. 39–42.

[12] STEINER, Real Presences, 40.

Paradoxically, Steiner notes, the same religiously driven impulse toward the under-determination or de-stabilizing of textual meaning also liberates the sacred text both from 'historical-geographical contingency' and from 'the threat of the past tense', acknowledging its capacity to speak in ever new times and places. 'In dispersion', he notes, 'the text is homeland'.[13] But all this, Steiner admits, has in due course borne some strange fruit, and it should come as no surprise to anyone that some of the High Priests of textual deconstruction are to be identified among the tribe of Israel. Thus, post-structuralist versions of 'reading without end' and *la différance*, endlessly adjourning the sterile fixity of definition,[14] are in their own way rooted in the selfsame theological concerns about potentially 'idolatrous' misappropriations of presence ('logocentrism'); but, far from preserving the dialectic of 'elusiveness', deconstruction posits an *aporia*, a semantic 'transcendence' so radical as in effect to explode the dialectic, leaving available only the dubious consolation of the assurances of absence. So, Steiner writes, 'Deconstruction dances in front of the ancient Ark. This dance is at once playful…and, in its subtler practitioners…instinct with sadness. For the dancers know that the Ark is empty.'[15] Although he rejects the postulates of deconstructionism, Steiner insists that, on its own terms and planes of argument, like all forms of philosophical scepticism, its challenge is a difficult one to refute. In the final analysis, he suggests, the reality of any 'presence', i.e. of something other than ourselves and meaning-full 'out there' to be reckoned with, responded to and 'made sense of', is one which remains elusive, and thus, while we may have a grasp or sense of it sufficient for our practical needs (indeed it is difficult to see how these can be sustained in the teeth of its denial), resists our desire and attempts to master and possess it completely. It can only be known at all, he suggests, on the basis of a 'wager', a willingness to trust which is wedded both structurally and ontologically to the prior wager on the reality of God's own elusive presence.[16]

2. Orientating Presence

Despite the necessity for and importance of such disclaimers, 'presence' remains fundamentally a term of orientation rather than disorientation. Specifically, it indicates our attempt in language to locate and situate ourselves – in relation to everything that is (things, persons, thoughts, events,

[13] STEINER, Real Presences, 40.
[14] STEINER, Real Presences, 122.
[15] STEINER, Real Presences, 122.
[16] STEINER, Real Presences, 3–4 et passim.

actions, facts and so on[17]) – in space and in time. Thus that which is 'present' to me[18] is that which is here and now, not there or then. That which is 'real' we typically take to be characterized by its 'thereness'[19] (it is that which 'presents itself' to me from time to time and place to place, which I apprehend with a certain 'psychical immediacy'[20] and in the face of which I am compelled to respond),[21] and by its being neither past (that which 'is' no longer) nor future (that which will or may in due course 'come to be' but 'is' not as yet).[22] Such coordinates are, to be sure, often difficult to plot precisely in the manifold of experience – we draw the line between 'here' and 'there' variously as practical circumstance demands, and the 'present moment' is notoriously subject to slippage (like our shadow it shifts whenever we seek to step back and grasp it) and never pure (always interrupted and conditioned by the flashbacks of a remembered past and the particular hopes and aspirations regarding what may yet come to be).[23] Nonetheless, what we refer to as 'presence' is, we might venture, a function of the way in which God himself situates us within his world, giving us (despite the vertigo-inducing infinity of cosmic time and space posited by modern physics, and notwithstanding the universalizing aspirations of various philosophical Idealisms to transcend the constraints of any and every par-

[17] Cf. DALFERTH, Becoming Present, 55. For a helpful discussion of the different kinds of things there are 'present' to us, and the different ways in which we are compelled (by what they are) to apprehend them, see LASH, On What Kind of Things There Are. See also BAILLIE, Presence of God, 41–59.

[18] As Dalferth observes, 'presence' is always a matter of relativity, i.e. of that which is present to (though not necessarily apprehended by) *someone* in a particular spatio-temporal situation (DALFERTH, Becoming Present, 57).

[19] MOLTMANN, Spirit of Life, 39.

[20] See FARMER, World and God, 15. Farmer borrows the term from F. R. Tennant who uses it to refer to a mode of apprehension which, while anything but positivistic (again, we must learn to trust our apprehensions and to weigh them), is nonetheless distinct from that of logical inference. Hence, where our apprehension of non-material realities is concerned, even though it is mostly mediated by (given in, with and under) our experience of material things, it is nonetheless 'immediate' in the relevant sense. According to Tennant our apprehension of the reality ('presence') of other persons (i.e. as distinct from their bodily presentation) is of precisely this sort, and Farmer duly argues for something directly parallel in the case of our apprehension of the presence of God.

[21] Dalferth notes that originally 'presence' signified 'a specific mode of co-existence, a special way of being together of one thing with another', viz. one involving the immediacy of an agent to the acts which he performs (DALFERTH, Becoming Present, 57).

[22] So, e.g., BAILLIE, Presence of God, 33. The adequacy of so-called 'presentism' (i.e. the view that the present is the only time that actually exists) is challenged by the absolute, de-centred conceptions of modern physics, but it reflects well enough the patterns of our experience of temporality from the point of view of living. See the discussion in DALFERTH, Becoming Present, 52–55. Cf. BAUCKHAM AND HART, The Shape of Time.

[23] MOLTMANN, Spirit of Life, 39.

ticular time and place) both the 'space' and the time sufficient to live the lives he calls us each to live,[24] lives which must be lived, furthermore, *coram Deo* – before the face of God himself, and thus in his presence.[25]

As theologians across the ages have reminded us time and space are themselves functions of God's creation rather than conditions of it,[26] and God's own relation to us as such is strictly speaking neither spatial nor temporal, despite the inevitable 'mythologizing' of our religious language ('he came down from heaven' etc.). God relates to creatures existing in time and space, but is not himself spatially or temporally located in or related to his creation.[27] Traditional claims concerning the ubiquity (or 'omnipresence') of God must therefore be interpreted with care lest they mislead. If God is in some important sense 'everywhere', it is not as a spatially extended backdrop which, as it were, (being 'bigger, wider and deeper' than the cosmos itself) runs over the edges of creaturely space and time so as to cover them completely with and swallow them within itself ('God…the final frontier…'), but as a personally willed presence *to* every creaturely present as it arises, more helpfully pictured, perhaps, as the intersection between two otherwise quite incommensurate planes or dimensions.[28] Thus Aquinas notes that, strictly speaking, it is no more correct to say that God 'contains' the cosmos than to suggest that the cosmos may contain God (i.e. that God may crop up as an object located 'within' it), except in that peculiar sense of the word 'contain' which means 'to hold

[24] See MOLTMANN, Spirit of Life, 148. In his helpful discussion of the notion of 'tradition' in theology, S. Holmes argues on these grounds that being situated in a particular time and place (and thus heir to a very particular past) is precisely a creaturely good rather than a constraint from which we should aspire to free ourselves. See HOLMES, Listening to the Past.

[25] DALFERTH, Becoming Present, 242. On theological construals of human life as a drama 'performed' (consciously or otherwise) in the presence of God see HART, The Sense of an Ending.

[26] Thus, for instance, T. F. Torrance appeals to the Nicene theologians in support of his own insistence upon 'the transcendence of God over all space and time for (these) were produced along with His creation'. TORRANCE, Space, Time and Incarnation, 2. Cf. also classically AUGUSTINE, Confessions XI and IDEM, City of God XI.6.

[27] See, e.g., DALFERTH, Becoming Present, 75. I do not wish here to raise questions about whether God might have his own uncreated 'space' and 'time' analogous to but utterly distinct from those which he has invested in creation. My concern is limited to the latter, and God's relation to them as the uncreated Creator. If the heavens 'cannot contain him', it is not because God is too big (though this may be a helpful way of picturing an idea which is otherwise difficult to grasp), but because God is not spatially situated relative to the cosmos at all.

[28] So, e.g., TORRANCE, Space, Time and Incarnation, 72. Cf. FARMER, World and God, 102–106.

together' ('I could hardly contain myself', etc.).[29] In the latter sense, God does indeed 'contain' all things by his continual presence to them, such presence being the very condition for their existence, power and activity; but again this, Aquinas stresses, is a matter not of mere ontology but of moral agency – God acts (and thus chooses) to be present (in Dalferth's phrase he *becomes* present to every present[30]) and thereby to hold the world in being from moment to waking moment of its creaturely existence. So, talk in the abstract of divine 'presence' may also mislead if it is taken to connote some essentially static state of affairs: for God to *be*, Dalferth reminds us, is, according to Christian theology at least, for God to be *active*, and therefore divine presence is always a matter of God's *becoming present* as the one who acts,[31] whatever the precise mode of that presence and action may be. This in turn draws our attention to a further potentially misleading abstraction: God's 'presence' is not only of a single sort, but can be identified in various modes, and sometimes in more than one at the same time. Dalferth himself identifies for us three key modes of this divine presence-in-action, and he maps these conveniently onto the Christian naming of God as Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Thus God, he suggests, is present as Father/Creator as the one who is 'time free present'[32] in the same way to every presence (as the necessary condition for every occurring event and every person in whose presence it occurs); he is present, secondly, in a wholly distinct mode as the incarnate Son/Saviour (in whom he has 'made himself *temporarily present* to us *in a specific way* in human history'[33]); and he is, in a different way again, 'multi-present' as Spirit/Perfecter, making his presence felt in a manner which will be unique to each individual circumstance, and drawing particular persons to faith as the pattern of life lived consciously in God's presence. Without following Dalferth's precise way of mapping these modes onto the *Seinsweisen* in the triune life, I shall, in the remainder of this essay, follow at least in broad terms his example of differentiating modes of God's presence along identifiably Trinitarian lines.

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[29] AQUINAS, Summa Theologiae 1a.8.1.

[30] DALFERTH, Becoming Present, 39.

[31] DALFERTH, Becoming Present, 39. Cf. Aquinas: 'God exists in everything…as an agent is present to that in which its action is taking place' (AQUINAS, Summa Theologiae 1a.8.1).

[32] For what follows see DALFERTH, Becoming Present, 152–155.

[33] Italics original.

3. Creative Absence – God Makes Room for the World

According to a familiar graffito 'Time is God's way of stopping everything from happening all at once', in which case we might surmise that space is his way of avoiding the need for everything to be in the same place at the same time, a level of co-habitation the very suggestion of which is likely to send even the agoraphobic and the extrovert into a panic attack, and puts a whole new (and paradoxical) complexion on the phrase 'You're trespassing on my space'. God the Creator makes room for his creatures to exist and to co-exist fruitfully alongside one another, however they may subsequently choose to distribute that space. Unlike embodied creatures such as ourselves, though, Aquinas suggests, 'God's presence in a place does not exclude the presence of other things'.[34] God, it seems, is the perfect co-habitee. This, we have already suggested, is precisely because God does not occupy any space ('take up any room') in the world, being related to it (except, we must now say, when he takes flesh in the economy of the Son) in an essentially non-spatial manner.

Notwithstanding this, Moltmann insists that it is important to reckon with the claim that in a more profound sense God as Creator must and has 'made room for' the world itself to exist alongside himself, though what he has in mind, of course, is not a literal but precisely a metaphorical *Lebensraum*.[35] Although we speak and think (and cannot do otherwise) of God's various *operatio ad extra*, Moltmann notes, strictly speaking there is no *extra Deum* either before creation or after it. Yet, he suggests, it may nonetheless be theologically fruitful to stretch our language and our imagining of the primordial circumstance in this direction. 'Prior to' creation (again, we cannot help borrowing from the temporal conditions to which human speech is naturally fitted) God took up, as it were, all the available space, since God was all there was. God's self-determination as Creator thus, we may suppose, necessarily involved a withdrawal or contraction of himself into himself, a divine 'shoving up' in order to make room for something genuinely other than himself to exist at all. In the first instance, this appropriation of the Jewish kabbalistic image of a divine *zimsum* (contraction) is offered as a way of imagining very concretely (albeit 'mythologically') what is entailed by the Christian doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo*, and avoiding the twin theological errors of monism and dualism. Moltmann presses further, though, playing on the image in a manner which foregrounds questions of divine presence (and divine absence) in a much more far-reaching manner.

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[34] AQUINAS, Summa Theologiae 1a.8.2.

[35] For what follows in this section see MOLTMANN, God in Creation, 72–93.

Zimsum entails divine self-withdrawal, and thus divine absence from the 'space' freed up by it. What arises as a result of this deliberate action of God *ad intra* is precisely 'Nothingness'. While Moltmann alludes to this new existent as something 'created',[36] strictly speaking for him the space concerned exists precisely as a *condition* of the creation of something other than God. (In this sense it is, we should recall, a metaphorical and 'logical' rather than a literal space.) It is, Moltmann suggests, quite literally 'God-forsaken' space, space from which God is now absent in his presence and power. It is a 'Nihil', albeit one paradoxically and necessarily enfolded within God's own otherwise omnipresent being. And it is into this same space or void that God subsequently creates, filling it not just with a cosmos, but thereby once again with his own presence, being present to it now, though, not as he is to his own being, but as the one who by an act of gracious will holds something other in being alongside himself. Yet the void remains, if only as the logical (and possible) alternative to our originated and continuing existence as contingent creatures in God's presence. It is that which, should God ever withdraw his presence again, is all we may look forward to – disintegration and the abyss of non-being. As such, for now it exists or is present (it is precisely that which 'waits over against' us – *die Gegenwart*) only as a threat, the threat of absolute death and hell which has no purchase apart from the further fact of human sin and godlessness (which is not as such yet *godforsakenness*), but for that very reason has purchase. The possibility of 'annihilating Nothingness' is precisely the threat of divine absence in which the self-isolation of the creature in sin is met by God's final turning of his face away from it, permitting the primordial chaos out of which it was created to rush in again and take its place.

What, then, are we to make of all this? Is it anything more than a colourful (and speculative) re-mythologizing of a circumstance lying beyond the range of legitimate human (even theological) concern? Well, we cannot help, perhaps, imagining some state of affairs pertaining prior to, and in

[36] IBID., 87. 'He "creates" the preconditions for the existence of his creation'. Moltmann is paraphrasing the view of Scholem here, but he does so without demurral. The scare quotes suffice to indicate the ambiguity of the term's use. Cf. SCHOLEM, Schöpfung aus Nichts. There is, of course, a long tradition of Jewish and Christian exegesis of Gen 1.2 which posits a 'two stage' creation, God first calling into being the *tohu wabohu* before displacing it with an ordered cosmos. So, e.g., Calvin: 'The world was not perfected at its very commencement, in the manner in which it is now seen, but…was created an empty chaos' (CALVIN, Commentaries on the First Book of Moses, I.70). Barth, meanwhile, interprets the *tohu wabohu* to signify imaginatively a possible state of affairs which God deliberately *excludes*, a creative option which, because it is hostile to his sovereign purpose, he does not choose, and thus does not permit to exist. See BARTH, Church Dogmatics III/1, 102–110.

and through God's primordial creative act, even if we subsequently submit our imaginings to rigorous apophatic qualification and cleansing. Even discussions about God's 'freedom' to create (or lack of it) entail some element of that. No doubt Moltmann's 'myth' has its particular theological limitations and dangers. (Spatializing the relation between God and a 'mystical primordial space' of Nothingness, for instance, tends inevitably towards an imaginative reifying of the latter [as an ontological rather than merely logical space], and, duly incorporated into an account of evil, in the direction of at least a 'soft' dualism.[37]) What, then, are its gains, if any? We might list four: (1) It encourages a consistent portrayal of God's character across the whole narrative of creation and redemption, as one who from first to last willingly undertakes a form of 'self-limitation' (*kenosis*) for the sake of the creature;[38] (2) it furnishes a theological context in which human experiences of divine 'absence' may be taken radically seriously (as authentic felt approximations to or foreshadowings of a real creaturely possibility) within an overarching theology of Creatorly ubiquity (i.e. universal presence); (3) it holds the doctrine of creation together with Moltmann's own distinctive account of the cross as a paradoxical divine sharing in the experience of 'godforsakenness'; (4) it situates creation within a trinitarian narrative of expectation in which absence (the Nihil) will itself finally be annihilated as a meaningful threat to anyone, and God will at last become truly 'all in all'.[39] To see how, we turn to reckon next with yet another mode of God's presence in the world.

[37] I.e. a circumstance in which God permits (by limiting himself) something essentially destructive (non-being or anti-being) to exist in his presence, and to threaten the survival of his creation from the first, thus arguably compromising the notion of creation as such as something essentially good, and relativizing the significance of the Fall. (It was for reasons such as these that Irenaeus, for example, rejected all suggestion that God could ever have created a 'formless void' before creating the world itself. Such, he insisted, would be wholly unfitting of God.)

[38] Thus 'God's self-humiliation does not begin merely with creation, inasmuch as God commits himself to this world; it begins beforehand, and is the presupposition that makes creation possible' (MOLTMANN, God in Creation, 88).

[39] '*Creatio ex nihilo* in the beginning is the preparation and promise of the redeeming *annihilatio nihili*, from which the eternal being of creation proceeds…So the resurrection and the kingdom of glory are the fulfillment of the promise which creation itself represents' (MOLTMANN, God in Creation, 90).

4. Incarnate Presence – God Makes Room for Himself in the World

We have seen how Moltmann puts his finger on a seeming paradox whereby both divine absence and divine presence are in some sense necessary conditions of the world's existence. It is not a genuine paradox of course, because we can recognize both presence and absence as existing in different modes (or, we might say, at different levels); and, whereas God must withdraw (be absent) in the mode in which he is otherwise present to his own being as God precisely in order to make room for the world's existence alongside himself as a genuine 'other' (i.e. rather than a further form or 'emanation' of God's own existence), in an equally fundamental sense (but at a different level of consideration) as the world's Creator God can never be absent from it, since this would involve its inevitable and immediate disintegration and death. Christian theology, though, knows of yet further comings and goings on God's part, the most radical of which, of course, lies at the heart of its own testimony to Jesus Christ as 'Immanuel', God with us. God with us now, that is to say (since in another sense God is always 'with us') in a wholly unprecedented manner, *as one of us*. As T. F. Torrance expresses it, the 'flesh' or humanity of Christ is 'a place within our created and historical existence where God has made room for Himself',[40] becoming the τόπος or *locus* in space-time where God is to be found present (and known to be so) most fully,[41] accommodating himself to the full to the conditions of creatureliness while yet remaining 'wholly present everywhere, for He became man without ceasing to be God'.[42] Fortunately, we need not trouble ourselves here with all the complexities of incarnational Christology, it sufficing to note that this quite distinct and 'new' mode of God's presence logically entails an act of self-distinction not just between two modes of presence but between two discrete 'modes of being' (*hypostases* or 'persons') within God's own life. For, as Calvin notes, 'The Son of God became man in such a manner that he had God in common with us.'[43] Moltmann glosses this (following much of the tradition including Calvin himself, but offering his own distinctive account) to observe that the incarnate Son has not just God, but *Godforsakenness* (the experience of divine absence) in common with us too.

If God's incarnate presence in the world (the preposition being used for the first time with impunity and without qualification) is something unprecedented, it is not, Moltmann notes, wholly unanticipated. Already, he

[40] TORRANCE, Space, Time and Incarnation, 78.
[41] TORRANCE, Space, Time and Incarnation, 16.
[42] TORRANCE, Space, Time and Incarnation, 13.
[43] CALVIN, Commentary on Ephesians, on 1.16–18.

insists, in the older Jewish accounts of God's Shekinah (and the attendant theologies of Tabernacle and Temple) we find a foreshadowing of and natural prelude to the logic of incarnationalism – a presence of God which is special, willed and promised, God present at a particular place and at a particular time among particular people, and in a manner distinct from God's essential omnipresence.[44] The Shekinah, Moltmann insists, is no divine attribute, but God himself as present, yet present now in an earthly, temporal and spatial mode 'at once identical with God and distinct from him'.[45] Thus, already, he argues, we have to do with a 'difference in God' between two modes of presence which logically entail two modes of being, a 'self-distinction', a 'difference in God between what distinguishes and what is distinguished, between the self-surrendering and the self-surrendered God'. For in sending his Shekinah into the world, God surrenders himself to and identifies with the conditions and the fate of his people, sharing in their exile, rejoicing in their homecoming. The Shekinah too, then, Moltmann suggests, even as a mode of divine presence, in some sense suffers from the absence of God by virtue of its solidarity with Israel: 'It is now alienated from God himself. It is grieved and hurt…It suffers in the victims and is tormented in the perpetrators. It goes with sinners on the wanderings of their estrangement' and 'with every bit of self-seeking and self-contradiction which we surrender to the will of the Creator who loves us, the Shekinah comes close to God…is united with God himself'.[46] Of course all this trespasses significantly beyond the limits of the biblical theology of God's Shekinah, but Moltmann urges that it does so in a way which is a natural extrapolation of it. Whether we judge it to be helpful or fanciful, it at least serves as a further clarification of what it might mean for God to exist not just in two modes of presence, but in two modes of being which are, as it were, 'present to one another' at the same time. Whether or not any such notion is present (or even latent) in the theology of the Shekinah I leave for others better qualified to judge; but it is certainly an important component of the incarnational Christology which Moltmann sees as the natural heir to the Shekinah and Temple traditions. Indeed, as Ingolf Dalferth notes, where God is present and active in more than one way at once, both *in Christo* and *extra Christum*, the two activities may sometimes run not in parallel but contrary to each other,[47] a difference between God and God exemplified supremely and decisively, at the point of Jesus' suffering and death on Golgotha, to consideration of which we now turn.

[44] MOLTMANN, The Spirit of Life, 48.
[45] MOLTMANN, The Spirit of Life, 48.
[46] MOLTMANN, The Spirit of Life, 50.
[47] See DALFERTH, Becoming Present, 143–144.

According to Dalferth '*what it means* for God to be present is definitively shown in the life and death of Jesus Christ'.[48] So, too, we might insist, what it means for God to be *absent*. The two belong naturally together, for, as we have already seen, the experience of divine absence is precisely a reflex or at least a reminder of the sense or apprehension of God's presence rather than its contradiction or opposite. So: 'the sense of the absence of God is tied to – at least the possibility of – God's presence just as the sense of God's presence is always contrasted to – at least the possibility of – God's absence'.[49] What we experience as God's absence cannot be absence or at least not absolute absence (since there can be nothing to experience and no one to experience anything apart from God's presence to us), but 'hidden presence',[50] a loss of the *apprehension* of God as the one who is present to us and in whose presence we live our lives. Thus the dialectic between divine presence and divine absence is best understood through consideration of the life of the community of believers, for it is only those who confess God's presence who can suffer his absence in the proper sense of the term, in the conflict between what faith believes and what experience of living so often suggests to be the case. The deeper the sense of God as a living presence is, the more constitutive it is of the very pattern and fabric of our way of being, the more acute the pain of his seeming absence is bound to be. For this very reason, we may suppose, the suffering of God's absence in the death of Jesus on the cross is paradigmatic, and must inform and shape Christian faith's experiences of absence in whatever context they may arise.

In his discussion of providence and suffering, H. H. Farmer suggests that, given the nature of our experiences in life, there is only one way in which faith in the overshadowing wisdom and love of God can truly be succoured, and that is 'for it to be able to grasp its object, or be grasped by it, out of the heart of those historical happenings which otherwise give it the lie'[51] – all the 'confusion and heartbreak and frustration of life, the sins, follies, accidents, disasters, diseases, so undiscriminating in their incidence, so ruthless in their working out',[52] all that is least patient of interpretation as a manifestation of divine meaningfulness or compatible with God's presence and activity as one who loves us. But in the cross, Farmer suggests, this is precisely what faith grasps, not directly but precisely *sub contrario*, through an occurrence 'including in itself something of almost every darkness to which human life is liable – sin, hatred, physi-

[48] DALFERTH, Becoming Present, 50.
[49] DALFERTH, Becoming Present, 51.
[50] DALFERTH, Becoming Present, 52.
[51] FARMER, World and God, 243.
[52] FARMER, World and God, 100–101.