

from Dr. Nolan: compare Cherbonnier’s [“Biblical Metaphysic and Christian Philosophy,”](#) and [“Is There A Biblical Metaphysic?”](#) with Burnett’s position – as reported in this review.

Where Is God? Divine Absence in the Hebrew Bible by Burnett, Joel S.

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Even though God is the “central and unifying figure of the Bible,” he only rarely takes center stage, according to Joel S. Burnett, Associate Professor of Religion in Old Testament/Hebrew Bible and Semitic Languages at Baylor University (vii). Theophanies and scenes of deliverance are the exception, not the rule in biblical narrative. Most of the time, “Israel waits for God to act again, wonders whether God will appear, or simply goes about life with God at an apparent distance” (vii).

Burnett’s goal is to make “relevant scholarship accessible to an educated general readership” (viii). Discussion of most technical matters or anything that tends primarily to interest specialists is relegated to fifty-eight pages of notes. While engaging the intellectual and cultural underpinnings of the absence of God in the Hebrew Bible by means of careful attention to detail in the original languages, in history, and in culture, Burnett offers his work in hopes that the discussion will go beyond the history of ancient Israel’s religion. His desire is that it will encourage further study and theological reflection (viii).

Burnett’s work strives to present an “updated approach to ancient Israel’s Near Eastern environment” that avoids what he perceives as a weakness of the biblical theology movement from half a century ago. While pursuing the “basic goals of integrating theology with history and understanding the Bible in view of what we know about Israel’s religion,” Burnett attempts both to “account for beliefs and practices in historical reconstructions” of the religion of Israel and to allow “the results of historical investigation to inform contemporary theological interpretation of the biblical text” (2–3).

Instead of plowing the same ground that scholars have been over in the past, where God’s absence is observed to be a theme in much of biblical literature, Burnett focuses on divine-human relationships associated with the presence and, more particularly, the absence of God. His focus is especially on the spatial conception of divine-human relationships (ix). In other words, “where” is God in the world? And where is he not? His presence and absence are spatial, because the God of the Hebrew Bible is sought after in life that is lived in this world (5).

Where Is God? is divided into three sections. Because divine absence is “first and foremost a relational crisis,” the first section examines “relational worlds” to understand the nature of human relationships to the divine (25). Chapter 1 explores how God is known in the Hebrew Bible. Not only is God described in anthropomorphic terms, along with the gods and goddesses of the cultures around Israel; divine relationships with humans are “personal associations” (12). God is a divine patron much like those who filled a similar role in human associations. Humankind’s relationships with deity are patterned after human social bonds. Furthermore, the relationship one has with the divine is bound up with human obligations in the household, the

clan, the tribe, and the nation. “Knowing God involves established bonds of relationship and identity at these distinct and interrelated levels of social organization” (25). These bonds are based on kinship or family; thus, they are very strong. The idea of a covenant extends the bonds to relationships based on choice. This relational world is the context that explains why the absence of God can be so threatening. The Hebrews’ relationship with God defines Israel as a “people” and brings a sense of well-being, both of which are undermined by any lack of God’s presence (26).

After a brief discussion of biblical name-giving, chapter 2 examines a small collection of biblical personal names that express the idea of God’s absence. Many personal names in the Hebrew Bible express faith in God’s attention and care for humans, sometimes even before the birth of those given such names. Burnett, however, concentrates his study on the “divine-absence names” that ask the question, “Where is the deity?” (29, 39). If God is needed to fulfill some need, such as the successful birth of a child, “these divine -absence names point to the birth and continuing life of the name bearer as a divine response to the question of despair” (42). More broadly, though, the divine-absence names reveal the problem of a lack of God’s presence in everyday life experiences.

Chapter 3 probes into the origins of divine-human relationships in the Hebrew Bible. The foundation of the relationship of Israel with God is seen as divine patrimony where God is over the household or the family of Israel. Similarly, a human’s relationship with God is parallel to David as king in the Zion tradition (46). God is king, not only of Israel, but also of the world. Burnett also examines the origins of the divine-human relationship informed by God as a national God over the children of Israel (49). Finally, the divine warrior and his people plus the exodus tradition round out the discussion. If the relationship between God and Israel is threatened in some manner, the breach is understood, in part, by these sources or origins that define the relationship. They also “provide a basis for continuing or restoring relationships disrupted ... by the perception of divine absence” (56).

Part 2 is devoted to “boundaries of divine presence and absence in the world.” The boundaries are examined in cosmic and terrestrial terms in chapter 4. Where is God in the world? How do humans and God relate to one another on the stage of this world? God’s presence can be at its height in theophanies such as the one at Sinai. God’s presence is less intense in his unseen accompanying presence or his structural presence in the world. Structural presence is a consequence of God being the creator (60). Burnett also uses Fretheim’s concept of “structural” to explain divine absence. One example in biblical teaching is the netherworld. While the realm of death is not totally beyond God’s reach, human experience in this locale is not characterized primarily by God’s presence (67). The “structural absence” of God in human life leads Burnett into a brief discussion of some aspects of theodicy and the problem of evil (74ff.).

Chapter 5 is a survey of reflections on divine absence in everyday life as portrayed in Old Testament wisdom literature. Burnett finds both optimism and skepticism in this body of documents. Proverbs reveals the sentiment that one can discern the hidden God enough to find success in life, if one follows the path of wisdom. In Job and Qoheleth, the dark side is explored. Job questions God’s justice and his “favorable presence” in the world; more pessimistic, “Qoheleth portrays an utterly elusive God” (114).

God’s presence is often sought in worship, which is the topic of chapter 6. The opposing states of celebration versus lament, of joy and mourning, highlight the differing reactions to

divine presence or absence (116–17). Burnett examines the place of the temple and Jerusalem in relation to God's presence. Psalms provides abundant material related to the absence of God, as in the laments and in references to the destruction of the temple. But in worship through ritual and psalmody the worshiper can move beyond the experience of God's absence toward a sense of God's presence (149).

Finally, part 3 focuses on Jerusalem as the "center of divine presence and absence on earth." Historical narrative makes Jerusalem central in sacred geography for God's presence, which leads to later prophetic expression of divine abandonment, as in the exile. A renewed focus on the temple as the center of God's dealings with Israel in history is found in writings such as Ezra and Nehemiah (167ff.). A concluding chapter summarizes the main themes of the work in a succinct manner. Burnett's concluding words provide an example of "theological reflection" on God and his creation: "Through the theme of divine absence, the Hebrew Bible portrays a God who freely chooses relationships with humankind, a God whom human beings are free to seek, a God who responds" (178).

Beautifully written and clearly organized, *Where Is God?* is given to us in a format that can be studied and restudied with ease by students and scholars alike. In addition to the copious notes, a reader will find abbreviations, a lengthy bibliography, and very helpful indexes of scripture, authors, and subjects. I recommend this work highly as a supplementary text for a graduate course in the theology of the Hebrew Bible or on the doctrine of God. It should also be consulted by anyone doing research on the problems of pain, suffering, and evil.