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Korpel, Marjo, and Johannes de Moor

The Silent God

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This book falls somewhere between a popular book and scholarly book: the book is easy to read, and its scholarship is on a high level. The popular aspects are felt mostly in the authors' explanations of concepts familiar to most biblical scholars. There is also a careful avoidance of overly technical terminology. The book explores the concept of God's silence from an exegetical perspective. Korpel and de Moor, two experienced biblical scholars, discuss what biblical and ancient Near Eastern authors *may have meant* when they wrote that God is silent. Given the large quantity of texts germane to the topic, the book often has the character of an overview.

The first chapter surveys the ways in which modern people, in different media, have handled the concept of God's silence. Korpel and de Moor discuss how modern writers conceptualize and portray God's silence, referring to the works (films, plays, poems, novels) of Marie Luise Kaschnitz, Jean-Paul Sartre, Samuel Beckett, Eli Wiesel, Ingmar Bergman, Endō Shūsaku, Nathalie Sarraute, Cormac McCarthy, and Patric Tavanti. Likewise, they review select theologians and philosophers who have explored either the necessity or the inability to believe in a nonspeaking deity. How can one relate to a God who is silent, yet simultaneously deny that he is not always silent? Korpel and de Moor mention the negative theology of medieval Christian mystics and Jewish philosophers

(e.g., Maimonides) that encouraged silence before God and Karl Barth's more contemporary ideas on the same topic. They also touch upon the "God is dead" movement, as well as theodicy, that is, the attempt to justify God's silence (often by holding humankind responsible for his silence).

The final part of the chapter responds to (some of) the aforementioned views. Korpel and de Moor maintain that the historical background of the relevant biblical texts must be considered in order to comprehend the biblical concept of God's silence. In particular, they stress the necessity to understand the ways in which the ancient Israelites and their neighbors envisaged divine communication. We cannot fully grasp what the biblical authors meant when they spoke of divine *silence* unless we are aware of how they understood divine *communication* to be carried out. Korpel and de Moor further emphasize that, in view of the textual evidence of the Hebrew Bible, silence is not the optimal response to a silent God. On the contrary, although silence definitely has spiritual value, our dialogue with God—as his covenant partner—cannot consist mainly of silence. Likewise, God, having entered voluntarily into a relationship with his people, can be held accountable when he fails to respond to human speech.

The second chapter sets the parameters for and provides an overview of the present book. It also contains a brief introduction to metaphors—what they do and how to understand them—as the concept of a speaking deity belongs to the domain of metaphorical religious language. Divine speech and silence form a subcategory of the major conceptual metaphor or simile that God is (like) a human being. We thus have to interpret divine discourse against the background of human discourse. Moreover, silence in itself is a communicative tool and invites interpretation. Silence can express awe, sorrow, despair, ignorance, embarrassment, indignation, and contentment. Turning to the *reading of texts*, Korpel and de Moor highlight the possible use of orthographical indicators, such as blanks between lines, extra empty space at the end of verse lines, and indentation to mark off new paragraphs, to signal a meaningful silence.

Motivated by the aforementioned assumption that divine discourse and silence were understood to reflect human behavior, chapter 3 explores the reasons behind silence between human beings in Near Eastern and biblical texts. All key texts are cited in English translation. The translations of the ancient Near Eastern texts mostly follow authoritative translations (listed in the footnotes). The translations of the biblical texts are presumably the authors' own.

The chapter falls into five parts, each devoted to a reason for silence: silence because of (1) offenses, (2) awe or fear, (3) forbearance or prudence (4) incapacity, and (5) sleep. In each subsection Korpel and de Moor discuss a representative selection of ancient Near Eastern

and biblical texts. For instance, they explore the notion of prudent silence in the Neo-Babylonian version of the Dialogue of Pessimism and Prov 10:19. Korpel and de Moor conclude that no significant difference exists between biblical and ancient Near Eastern texts.

In a similar manner, chapter 4 explores human speech to a deity. As silence presupposes speech, it is important to understand the modes in which human beings addressed a god. Korpel and de Moor distinguish between four categories of human address: in (1) song and prayers, (2) letters, (3) magic and sorcery, and (4) silence and stillness. The reasons for wishing to communicate with silence can be any of the aforementioned five categories mentioned in chapter 3. They conclude that human beings tended to convey their message to the divine through specially chosen persons such as priests or scribes. Several texts contained accusations toward the deity that she or he did not respond, yet Korpel and de Moor argue that this was a rhetorical tool aimed to compel the deity into responding.

Korpel and de Moor detect a difference between biblical and ancient Near Eastern texts. For instance, the former contain a higher ratio of laments and supplication than the latter. This may be a result of the henotheism of ancient Israel. There is also no evidence that the kings of Israel and Judah wrote letters to YHWH in the same manner as the kings of the surrounding nations wrote to their deities. Vice versa, there is little evidence from ancient Near Eastern texts that a culprit will be silent before the deity because of offenses, while the Bible contains several examples (e.g., Ps 39:1–3).

The substantial chapter 5 discusses how the people in the ancient world described their experiences of divine communication. In most cases divine speech was mediated by other humans and/or interpreted by humans. Divine speech falls into one of three categories:

1. Direct communication between deity and human: According to ancient Near Eastern texts, direct speech tended to be restricted to the king. Kings could hear a deity's voice in a dream, behind their back, or in thunder. According to the Hebrew Bible, not only kings but also other people such as prophets could hear YHWH directly. YHWH could communicate face to face (e.g., with Moses) or speak from fire or in the thunder. His voice could also be that of a human being, as in the case of Samuel, who apparently could not distinguish between YHWH's voice and that of Eli.

2. Communication through intermediaries: Deities could communicate via minor deities/angels, prophets and seers, and scribes. The situation in the ancient Near East and ancient Israel is comparable, yet ancient Israel is alone in its focus on individual prophets. Scribes

were important to all the cultures under discussion as they transformed originally oral transmission into written transmission.

3. Dreams, visions, oracles, and omnia: Both ancient Israel and the ancient Near East had technical means of discerning the will of a deity. Each method demanded the skill of trained experts, be that omen priests or dream interpreters.

Chapter 6 deals with texts expressing divine silence. Many texts give reasons for the deity's silence, akin to the reasons impeding human-to-human communication (cf. ch. 3): (1) offenses, (2) awe or fear, (3) forbearance or prudence (4) incapacity, and (5) sleep. Some reasons are mentioned relatively more frequently in the Bible than in ancient Near East texts (forbearance or prudence). Others are prevalent in ancient Near East texts while absent from the biblical material (awe, fear, and incapacity).

In addition, several ancient Near Eastern and biblical authors simply express their impression that the deity is not responding to them or that communication between them is impossible, without giving a specific reason. From these authors' perspective, the deity's silence is incomprehensible, yet they are convinced that persistent prayer (rather than silence) is the way of convincing the deity to speak. They will receive an answer, conveyed by either a mediator or a growing inner conviction.

The epilogue contains what the authors call "faith talk": they situate their academic findings regarding God's silence within the discourse of Christianity and Judaism. In view of the textual evidence from the Hebrew Bible and ancient Near Eastern texts, human beings are God's partner, and active participation in God's work is demanded of them. Without human initiative, God's ability to help human beings is limited. Moreover, humans have to serve as God's witnesses on earth. Their testimony will turn a silent God into a communicating God. Vice versa, questions about God's silence may turn into questions about the silence of his faithful ones. The question as to where God was during the Shoah "boils down to the question why so few believers protested publicly against such barbarism" (303).

This is a good and insightful book, well-presented and easily accessible. Its comparative approach provides new and important light on an age-old topic. The survey character of the book, together with its wide scope, understandably prevents the authors from providing anything akin to a thorough exegetical study of each relevant passage. For example, some of the cited texts can be read differently. For instance, it is possible but not necessary to understand the verb *דָּמָו* in Lam 2:10 as referring to human silence due to resignation. It could equally well mean "wailing." Overall, though, the textual evidence is treated fairly.

The quality of the physical book is slightly disappointing. Normally a book from Brill is a book-lover's delight. This particular edition, however, has a cheaper feel to it.