

## WHERE IS GOD IN THE MEGILLOTH?

### A DIALOGUE ON THE AMBIGUITY OF DIVINE PRESENCE AND ABSENCE<sup>1</sup>

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The Introduction begins with observation of apparent divine absence in each of the Megilloth (Ruth, Song of Songs, Ecclesiastes, Lamentations, and Esther) based on the facts that God never appears or speaks in any of these books and that there is a lack of divine mention in two. This theme spurs the question: Where is God in the Megilloth? However, answering this question is complicated by the complexity of conceptualising divine presence and absence in the Hebrew Bible.

Chapter One traces the rise of the rhetoric of divine presence and absence within biblical and theological studies and critiques its imprecision. It lays out the current debate in scholarship concerning divine presence and absence in the Hebrew Bible, delineating two major positions: either divine presence decreases throughout the story of the Hebrew Bible or there are recurrent times of divine absence/hiddenness. It focuses especially on the debate concerning whether God is present or absent in each of the Megilloth, illustrating that while much discussion has been had no consensus has been reached. Some scholars hold that God is absent from these books, while others confidently claim God is present. These divergent positions lead one to ask if it can even be determined whether God is present or absent in the Megilloth.

Chapter Two explains the literary–theological methodology of the project, which is rooted in Mikhail Bakhtin’s concept of dialogism. The adoption of intertextuality and a Bakhtinian approach from literary criticism into biblical studies is discussed before positing that a

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dialogic methodology enables a more nuanced understanding of divine presence and absence to be attained. A methodological metaphor of table conversation illustrates how the five Megilloth will be placed in dialogue with one another about various aspects of divine presence and absence.

Chapter Three examines perceived divine absence in two senses: divine literary absence and divine abandonment. In the first section I demonstrate how the literary absence of God in Esther and Song of Songs has paradoxically served for some as an indication of the crucial role of God, while others reject its theological significance. The second section shows how similar the voices in Lamentations are to the complaints of Naomi in Ruth, as they each express their experience of divine abandonment. While the literary absence of God and divine abandonment imply divine absence, traces of God's presence are unearthed as well.

Chapter Four examines perceived divine presence in two senses: through God-talk and allusions to the divine. In the first section I observe a disconnect between expressed belief about God and the experience (or lack thereof) of God's presence communicated in Lamentations, Ecclesiastes, and Ruth. In the second section temple and Edenic language is identified in Lamentations and Song of Songs, which might allude to divine presence. While these are both reasonable possibilities for finding divine presence in the Megilloth, neither of them is able to offer a definitive case that would dispel aspects of divine absence.

Chapter Five examines perceived divine providence as an alternative to fate and human action. The first section asks: What is coincidence and what is providence? This question is posed to the two books among the Megilloth that speak of chance/fate. I suggest that the likely divine involvement hinted at through the term *miqreh* ('fate') in Ruth might suggest that its use in Ecclesiastes also connotes divine involvement. The second section asks: What should be attributed to the divine hand versus human initiative in Esther and Ruth? The role of God in these books is often compared, but contrasting conclusions are reached: either God is absent and not acting or divine providence guides these stories. I determine that either reading is viable.

Chapter Six examines perceived divine silence in all the Megilloth in order to determine if it is more likely indicative of God's silent presence or evidence of divine absence. It then compares

incomprehensible divine silence in Ecclesiastes and Lamentations. It is determined that only the lack of divine response in Lamentations informs whether God is present or absent in the Megilloth.

The Conclusion reiterates the various conclusions drawn throughout the book and discusses their implications for the wider field of biblical studies. I primarily assert that it cannot be determined whether God is present or absent in the Megilloth because divine presence and absence is ambiguous in these books. It is precisely this ambiguity which challenges current conceptualisations of God's presence and absence in the Hebrew Bible. Furthermore, the theological debate surrounding each book is explained by recognising the ambiguity of divine presence and absence therein. Since apparent divine absence in the Megilloth does not preclude notions of divine presence, this exposes the fact that these categories are a false bifurcation. As a result, I offer a multi-dimensional conceptualisation of divine presence and absence which provides fertile ground for fresh readings of other biblical texts concerned with this theme.