THE GOSPEL ACCORDING TO THE OLD TESTAMENT

INCONSPICUOUS PROVIDENCE

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ESTHER

BRYAN R. GREGORY

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A series of studies on the lives of Old Testament characters, written for laypeople and pastors, and designed to encourage Christ-centered reading, teaching, and preaching of the Old Testament

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For Christy, Joshua, and Noah

CONTENTS

FOREWORD

The New Testament is in the Old concealed;
the Old Testament is in the New revealed.
—Augustine

Concerning this salvation, the prophets who prophesied about the grace that was to be yours searched and inquired carefully, inquiring what person or time the Spirit of Christ in them was indicating when he predicted the sufferings of Christ and the subsequent glories. It was revealed to them that they were serving not themselves but you, in the things that have now been announced to you through those who preached the good news to you by the Holy Spirit sent from heaven, things into which angels long to look. (1 Peter 1:10–12)

"Moreover, some women of our company amazed us. They were at the tomb early in the morning, and when they did not find his body, they came back saying that they had even seen a vision of angels, who said that he was alive. Some of those who were with us went to the tomb and found it just as the women had said, but him they did not see." And he said to them, "O foolish ones, and slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have spoken! Was it not necessary that the Christ should suffer these things and enter into his glory?" And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he interpreted to them

> in all the Scriptures the things concerning himself. (Luke 24:22–27)

The prophets searched. Angels longed to see. And the disciples didn't understand. But Moses, the Prophets, and all the Old Testament Scriptures had spoken about it—that Jesus would come, suffer, and then be glorified. God began to tell a story in the Old Testament, the ending of which the audience eagerly anticipated. But the Old Testament audience was left hanging. The plot was laid out, but the climax was delayed. The unfinished story begged for an ending. In Christ, God has provided the climax to the Old Testament story. Jesus did not arrive unannounced; his coming was declared *in advance* in the Old Testament—not just in explicit prophecies of the Messiah, but also by means of the stories of all the events, characters, and circumstances in the Old Testament. God was telling a larger, overarching, unified story. From the account of creation in Genesis to the final stories of the return from exile, God progressively unfolded his plan of salvation. And the Old Testament account of that plan always pointed in some way to Christ.

AIMS OF THIS SERIES

The Gospel According to the Old Testament series was begun by my former professors, Tremper Longman and Al Groves, to whom I owe an enormous personal debt of gratitude. I learned from them a great deal about how to recognize the gospel in the Old Testament. I share their deep conviction that the Bible, both Old and New Testaments, is a unified revelation of God and that its thematic unity is found in Christ. This series of studies will continue to pursue their initial aims:

- to lay out the pervasiveness of the revelation of Christ in the Old Testament

- to promote a Christ-centered reading of the Old Testament
- to encourage Christ-centered preaching and teaching from the Old Testament

These volumes are written primarily for pastors and laypeople, not scholars. They are designed in the first instance to serve the church, not the academy.

My hope and prayer remain the same as Tremper and Al's: that this series will continue to encourage the revival of interest in the Old Testament as a book that constantly points forward to Jesus Christ, to his sufferings and the glories that would follow.

Iain M. Duguid

CHAPTER ONE

READING ESTHER

Any religion which does not affirm that God is hidden is not true; and any religion which does not offer the reason of it is not instructive. (Blaise Pascal[1])

Within the Bible, Esther is a story unlike any other, with a charm all its own. "In Esther, unsubtle villains meet with brutal fates; proud partisans are fully vindicated; lovely heroines retain the affection of all; and stolid, dim-witted monarchs are there to be used by all."[2] But Esther is more than just a good story with literary panache; it is also a distinctively theological work, albeit in the subtlest of ways, with an often underappreciated contribution to make to the whole witness of Scripture as a testimony about Christ. Therefore, a consideration of the theological truths the book addresses and of how the book fits into the redemptive story line that culminates in the person and work of Christ provides the proper framework for reading the book profitably.

READING ESTHER THEOLOGICALLY

Through the centuries, Esther has sometimes been judged as theologically deficient, an opinion that was expressed in the mixed reception it found in the early

church. This was not so much because of what it does contain, but more because of what it does not contain. Famously, God is nowhere mentioned in the book. Nor is there any instance of a conspicuous miracle or indisputable divine intervention. Neither is there any mention of prayer, which is especially strange because there is reference to fasting, or any of the other central features of Israelite worship, such as the temple, Jerusalem, or the Torah. Furthermore, there is no mention of the essential marks of faithful living in the postexilic period, such as the observance of dietary laws and injunctions against intermarriage with non-Jews. Thus, the book of Esther appears to be merely a "secular" story of court intrigue in the Persian Empire, without any real involvement of God in the events.

Yet, ironically, it is just this aspect that provides the Christian with the perfect entry point into understanding Esther's distinctive theological contribution. The vast majority of people today will see their own experience in Esther, much more than in many other books of the Bible. Most people today have never experienced a conspicuous miracle or an indisputable divine intervention. Most people today live in a world that looks a lot like Esther's, where events and situations show no obvious or blatant action of God in the midst of them. They show nothing out of the ordinary, nothing miraculous, and nothing overtly supernatural. On the surface, it often appears as if God is absent or hidden from view. Many people look for clues and traces, but find mostly that God is very hard, if not impossible, to find.

As a result, many people, Christians included, simply default into thinking of the world in reductionist, "secular" ways and then go about their lives as if God were not really involved, even if they would never say so out loud. After all, the world really does seem to operate merely according to natural, scientific laws. Events do seem to be driven by historically explainable forces of politics,

economics, psychology, and sociology. Life does seem to be governed by human choices and natural processes. By most people's accounting, that is simply how the world works, and because it is, it is also easy to understand how many Christians end up being more or less functional deists, believing that God exists and is "up there," but going about the normal matters of daily life as if he were not really involved much at all.

Nevertheless, we sense that something is wrong with this picture. When the world is viewed mechanistically and we live like functional deists, we inevitably discover that there is a hole in the center, where meaning and life and essence are supposed to be. As Gordon McConville puts it, we live in "a modern world which has become accustomed to explaining things apart from God. We . . . are good at tracing causes and effects, but poor at understanding the meaning of reality."[3] Consequently, most Christians are left with a difficult tension. On the one hand, their world seems to operate without the intervention of God, but on the other hand they do believe that God exists. In the middle of this tension are the same questions that the reader of Esther is forced to ask: Where is God in all of this? Why does it seem as if he is absent? If he is real and present, then why is he so inconspicuous? When life becomes unbearable, when evil is advancing, when suffering becomes intolerable, why doesn't he intervene in noticeable and obvious ways?

For many, such questions have produced doubts, if not an all-out crisis of faith. A few years ago, the journal *Biblical Archaeology Review* held a roundtable discussion with four scholars about how scholarship affects faith. Of the four participants, two had kept their faith and two had lost their faith. In their discussion, one of the scholars who lost his faith put it rather bluntly: "I think that faith has to have substance. But once you start putting some substance onto that, you get into trouble. Faith in the Judeo-Christian tradition has a God who intervenes. That's what the Exodus event is, that's what the crucifixion is: it's a

God who intervenes, and when I look around this world, I don't see a God who intervenes."[4] Certainly many others have lamented the same thing—if not out loud, then at least within the private aches of their own hearts.

Even those who have not given up their faith, as this scholar did, still wrestle with the question, why does God seem so hidden so much of the time? As the philosophers Daniel Howard-Snyder and Paul K. Moser aptly put it,

> Many people are perplexed, even troubled, by the fact that God (if such there be) has not made His existence sufficiently clear. This fact—the fact of divine hiddenness—is a source of existential concern for many people. . . . For many Christians, the difficulty is exacerbated by the fact that their Lord has promised, "Seek, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened for you" (Matt. 7:7). Having sought and knocked (and knocked again and again), they still fail to find, and no one answers the door for them. . . . Trust in God then crumbles, along with any hope anchored in God's providence. Giving up the struggle to trust the hidden God often seems the only reasonable option as well as the only avenue to psychological well-being. Hence, even devout theists can face an existential crisis from divine hiddenness.[5]

However, it is precisely into this existential crisis provoked by the hiddenness of God and its related theological questions that the book of Esther can speak with a unique voice. Thankfully, God has seen fit to include within the canon of Scripture books that show a range of explicit divine involvement; Esther is on one end of this spectrum. Some parts of Scripture show that God at times works visibly and unmistakably, as in the accounts of Moses, Elijah, and Elisha. Other parts show that God sometimes works behind the scenes in ways that are subtle but perhaps still

detectable, as in the narratives of Joseph and Ruth. In still other parts, most notably in Esther, God seems completely absent and inactive.[6] All three are theologically necessary. In a book like Exodus, God assures us that he can and occasionally has intervened in dramatic and unmistakable ways. In a book like Ruth, God assures us that sometimes he works in ways that are only faintly noticeable. However, in a book like Esther, God has given us something that looks a lot like the kind of world most people inhabit: the book of Esther has nothing out of the ordinary, nothing miraculous, and nothing overtly supernatural, and the events unfold with the seeming absence of God and with no detectable trace of his intervention. He simply remains "offstage" and out of view, directing things and working in ways that we cannot see.

In that sense, the book of Esther *is* theological. It is just that the theology is not *on* the surface, but *under* the surface. On the surface, the story is one of conflict between Haman and the Jews. On a deeper level, however, it is a story that evaluates two competing theories of how the world works. On one side is the apparent callousness, injustice, and cruelty of fate, especially embodied in the casting of lots; on the other side is the wise but secret providence of God, embodied in the invisible divine hand (invisible in the events of the book and even in the narrator's portrayal of those events), which is at work even when we cannot see it, do not understand it, and sometimes even doubt it is there. Thus, Esther, perhaps more than any other Old Testament book, shows us that God must be trusted even when he cannot be seen, and that we must learn to live by faith and not by sight. On the surface, the world may look like a senseless unfolding of injustice and fate, but below the surface is the invisible but providential hand of God, orchestrating all things to accomplish his purposes.

The narrator does this through artful literary techniques that subtly hint at God's active presence, despite his apparent absence. The first technique is the use of

coincidences. If one encounters one or two coincidences, one might just chalk it up to the fact that sometimes things break in one's favor. But in Esther the sheer number of coincidences and the way in which they become increasingly frequent and incredible as the story progresses eventually begin to defy credibility and leave the reader with the unmistakable impression that something more than serendipity is going on. The story begins with the Persian queen's timely dismissal, which opens the door for Esther's ascent. When a search is begun for a new queen, it "just so happens" that Esther is brought in for the competition; it "just so happens" that she wins the favor of the eunuch in charge; it "just so happens" that Esther finds favor in the eyes of the king. After becoming the queen, it "just so happens" that Mordecai is working in the king's gate and learns of an assassination plot; it "just so happens" that his name is recorded in the king's book of memorable deeds and there is a courtly oversight to reward him properly. When Haman becomes enraged at Mordecai, it "just so happens" that the lot cast to find the best day for the destruction of the Jews falls almost a year away, giving the Jews ample time to prepare for the day. When Esther goes to plead with the king for her people, it "just so happens" that she once again finds favor with him. When she defers her request until the next day, it "just so happens" that Haman crosses paths with Mordecai again and becomes so enraged that he decides to execute him immediately, instead of waiting another eleven months. While the builders are constructing the gallows through the night, it "just so happens" that Haman decides he can't wait any longer and goes to seek the king's permission in the middle of the night. Meanwhile, it "just so happens" that the king cannot sleep, it "just so happens" that the book of memorable deeds is brought in to be read, and it "just so happens" that the reader opens to the spot where Mordecai's good deed is recorded. Immediately after the reading of the court's failure to reward Mordecai, it "just so

happens" that Haman shows up. It "just so happens" that the king omits Mordecai's name, allowing Haman to think that the king wants to honor him instead of Mordecai. After the humiliation of having to honor Mordecai, Haman comes to Esther's banquet, where she implicates Haman in the plot to kill her people. When the king leaves in anger and Haman begins to beg Esther for his life, it "just so happens" that the king returns at the exact moment when Haman's pleading looks like an assault on the queen. When the king is further enraged, it "just so happens" that a eunuch points out the presence of gallows newly built, providing the king with a ready-made way to execute Haman. Again, any one coincidence on its own might prove intriguing at best, but the cumulative effect of all the coincidences is to suggest quite strongly that someone is behind the scenes ensuring that events line up in a certain way.

The second technique, which is somewhat related to the first, is the use of peripeteia. In literary terms, peripeteia is the sudden or unexpected reversal of a situation. From beginning to end, the book of Esther is loaded with reversals, both big and small.[7] Examples include Vashti's sudden downfall, complemented by Esther's sudden rise; Esther's fear that she may perish, but finding favor from the king; Haman's joy at being invited to an exclusive banquet with the king and queen, which quickly turns into disgrace; Haman planning to destroy Mordecai, but ending up parading him with honor throughout the city; Haman falling on the queen's couch to plead for mercy being the catalyst for his immediate demise; Haman building gallows to hang Mordecai, but being hung on them instead, while Mordecai takes his position and house; and the Israelites who were doomed to slaughter instead achieving an overwhelming victory.

The third technique, which is much more subtle, is the use of the protagonist's name, which provides a hint of a divine hand that is hidden, yet active. Significantly, the first time Esther is introduced she is identified with

two names, not one. Her Hebrew name is *Hadassah*, and her Persian name is *Esther*. In Hebrew, *Hadassah* means "myrtle"; in the Persian world, the name *Esther* is likely related to either the goddess Ishtar or the Persian word for "star." Interestingly enough, Ishtar was the goddess of love and war, two matters in which Esther plays a prominent role in the story. Even more interesting, however, is that when Esther's Persian name is read as a Hebrew word, it means "I am hiding" or "I am hidden." Of course, as the story unfolds, concealment is a major theme.[8] Vashti is deposed because she insists on concealing her body. When a search for a new queen is begun, Esther conceals her Jewish identity. When her people are threatened and she invites the king to a banquet, she conceals her true intentions. She is, as her name suggests, one who hides.

However, in the Jewish rabbinic tradition, Esther's name was more than a clever wordplay revealing her role in the story; it was an indication that the story as a whole was one of hiding—divine hiding. More specifically, the rabbis related the story to the passage in Deuteronomy 31 where God says, "I will surely hide my face."[9] In its original context, the promise in Deuteronomy that God will hide his face is a sign of God's displeasure and judgment, which results in exile. However, it is also a passage that promises that though God may hide his face for a season, he will not allow his people to be destroyed completely. The resonances with the story of Esther are clear. God may hide his face, but that does not mean that he has forsaken his people. As the rabbis perceived, that grand and wonderful truth is writ large in Israel's "macro" story of exile and return. It is writ smaller in Israel's "micro" story of threat and deliverance in Esther, but it is inscribed powerfully and symbolically in the very name of the protagonist herself.

The fourth technique is the use of the third-person omniscient point of view in the narration, such that the reader is implicitly placed in the heavenly viewing room to

watch the events unfold while sitting alongside the divine orchestrator. Nowhere is this captured more vividly than in an intriguing passage in the Babylonian Talmud, which relates a rabbinic discussion about which details in the book of Esther demonstrate God's involvement in its authorship. The passage reads,

> Rabbi Eleazar says: Esther was composed under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, as it says, "And Haman said in his heart." Rabbi Akiba says: Esther was composed under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, as it says, "And Esther found favour in the eyes of all that looked upon her." Rabbi Meir says, Esther was composed under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, as it says, "And the thing became known to Mordecai." Rabbi Yose ben Durmaskith said: Esther was composed under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, as it says, "But on the spoil they laid not their hands."[10]

In other words, the ancient rabbis perceived that the narrative itself, though never mentioning God explicitly, gives all kinds of hints as it goes along that God is involved in the story. After all, how could the narrator know what was in Haman's heart or the private information about which Mordecai became aware or that no one in the entire empire laid his hands on the spoil? Clearly, the Holy Spirit must have been at work, inspiring the recording of the events. From there, it is a reasonable inference that if God's Spirit was present for, and knowledgeable of, all these events, he must have been involved in them as well.

Finally, the book as a whole is written in a way that alludes to an earlier biblical account in Israel's history, which serves to shape the reader's expectation that God is in fact involved in the events of Esther, even if he is nowhere mentioned. As many have noticed, the events in Esther bear a striking similarity to the events in the

Joseph story.[11] Both are set in the court of a foreign ruler, in which they maintain some level of secrecy. In both, the hero rises to prominence inside the court, but then suffers a precipitous decline. In both, the heroes overcome their misfortune, and their resulting rise leads to the deliverance of their people. In both, the turning point comes through the king's disturbed sleep, when he remembers the Israelite. In both, the heroes are rewarded by the bestowal of royal power upon them. In both, there is a royal banquet in which the invited guests (Joseph's brothers, Haman) do not know the true identity of the host/hostess, but which serves as a crucial turning point in the salvation of the people. More incidentally, both stories include two eunuchs who act against the king, both stories contain actions misunderstood as sexual assaults, and both stories involve punishment by hanging.

At times, the correspondence between the two stories comes even closer than similar plot developments. Several passages in Esther are linguistically close to parallel passages in the Joseph story:[12]

Genesis 39:10	*Esther 3:4*
And as she spoke to Joseph day after day, he would not listen to her . . .	And when they spoke to him day after day and he would not listen to them . . .
Genesis 41:34–37	*Esther 2:3–4*
Let Pharaoh proceed to appoint overseers over the land . . . and let them gather all the food of these good years. . . . This proposal pleased Pharaoh and all his servants.	And let the king appoint officers in all the provinces of his kingdom to gather all the beautiful young virgins. . . . This pleased the king, and he did so.

Genesis 41:42–43	*Esther 6:11*
Then Pharaoh took his signet ring from his hand and put it on Joseph's hand, and clothed him in garments of fine linen and put a gold chain about his neck. And he made him ride in his second chariot. And they called out before him, "Bow the knee!" Thus he set him over all the land of Egypt.	So Haman took the robes and the horse, and he dressed Mordecai and led him through the square of the city, proclaiming before him, "Thus shall it be done to the man whom the king delights to honor."
Genesis 44:34	*Esther 8:6*
For how can I go back to my father if the boy is not with me? I fear to see the evil that would find my father.	For how can I bear to see the calamity that is coming to my people? Or how can I bear to see the destruction of my kindred?

There may also be some similarities in phrasing, if not quite as strong, between Genesis 40:20 and Esther 1:3; 2:18; Genesis 44:24 and Esther 8:6; Genesis 43:31; 45:1 and Esther 5:10; and Genesis 50:3 and Esther 2:12. The point, however, is that the attentive reader will naturally pick up a series of echoes from the Joseph story that will serve to frame the Esther story in a similar light. In the Joseph story, God's role was made explicit: "As for you, you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good, to bring it about that many people should be kept alive, as they are today" (Gen. 50:20). Given all the similarities between the two stories, the reader naturally expects the role of God to be the same in Esther, only implicit instead of explicit.

Taken together, the use of a whole range of literary techniques—coincidences, peripeteia, naming, point of view, and allusion—skillfully marks the book of Esther as a story of God's "absent presence" and his "hidden involvement." On the surface, he appears to be absent and uninvolved; in reality, however, under the surface, he is providentially at work to accomplish his purposes and to deliver his people. Theologically, that is the distinctive contribution of the book of Esther. As Barry Webb writes,

> How does the "absence" of God colour the theme of deliverance in the book of Esther and contribute to its distinctive theology? . . . [It shows that] God is present even when he is most absent; when there are no miracles, dreams, or visions, no charismatic leaders, no prophets to interpret what is happening, and not even any explicit God-talk. And he is present as deliverer. Those whom he saved by signs and wonders at the exodus he continues to save through his hidden, providential control of their history. His people are never at the mercy of blind fate or of malign powers, whether human or supernatural.[13]

It needs to be emphasized that this providential mercy is true for the Jews in Esther not simply because they are the fortunate beneficiaries of a generic providence. It is true for them because—and only because—God refuses to allow the destruction of his special covenant people. Of course, God's providence involves and touches all people and all nations, for good or for ill. But the powerful testimony of Esther is that God works out his providential designs for the benefit of his chosen people, for the simple reason that they are *his chosen covenant people*. In that sense, the testimony of God's hidden providence in Esther is an extended Old Testament example of Paul's famous line,

"We know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose" (Rom. 8:28).

One consequence of this realization is that the message of Esther and the larger theological problem of divine hiddenness can be understood only as they are related to God's covenant promises and commitments; and that, of course, is simply another way of saying that they can be understood fully only in light of the person and work of Christ, who is the climax of God's covenant and the fulfillment of all his promises.

READING ESTHER CHRISTOLOGICALLY

To understand how Christ relates to the book of Esther and the theological questions to which it speaks, the reader needs to appreciate how Christ is the simultaneous fulfillment of two different trajectories.

First, *Christ is the ultimate revelation of God's hidden presence in the world*. In the Old Testament, God is both present and absent. For instance, God is present in a powerful and personal way with Abraham. When Moses is tending his flocks in Midian, God speaks to him from within the burning bush. After delivering Israel from Egypt and bringing the people to Mount Sinai, God speaks directly to Moses from the mountain. When Joshua is preparing to lead the people into the Promised Land, God assures him, "Just as I was with Moses, so I will be with you. I will not leave you or forsake you" (Josh. 1:5).

Yet, at the same time, God also hides himself. To Moses he says,

> I will forsake them and hide my face from them, and they will be devoured. . . . And I will surely hide my face in that day because of all the evil that they have done. (Deut. 31:17–18; see also Deut. 32:20)

Later in Israel's history, the prophet Isaiah confesses during the Assyrian crisis,

> I will wait for the LORD, who is hiding his face from
> the house of Jacob, and I will hope in him. (Isa. 8:17)

In the Psalms, others make similar statements, though with more lament than hope:

> Why, O LORD, do you stand far away?
> Why do you hide yourself in times of trouble?
> (Ps. 10:1)

> How long, O LORD? Will you forget me forever?
> How long will you hide your face from me? (Ps. 13:1)

> My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?
> Why are you so far from saving me, from the
> words of my groaning? (Ps. 22:1)

> Why do you hide your face?
> Why do you forget our affliction and oppression?
> (Ps. 44:24)

> But I, O LORD, cry to you;
> in the morning my prayer comes before you.
> O LORD, why do you cast my soul away?
> Why do you hide your face from me?
> Afflicted and close to death from my youth up,
> I suffer your terrors; I am helpless. (Ps. 88:13–15)

These cries could perhaps be dismissed as merely the exclamations of souls in pain or the natural experience of judgment for sin, yet elsewhere divine hiddenness is actually said to be part of the very nature and essence of who God is: "Truly, you are a God who hides himself, O God of Israel" (Isa. 45:15).

Even more intriguingly, as the Old Testament unfolds, there is a gradual shift from presence to absence. It is as if God slowly disappears and recedes from perceptible involvement as history progresses.[14] As the Bible opens its story, God is intimately involved and accessible to the first human beings. He walks in the garden of Eden, and the first couple can hear and understand his voice. Even after they sin, God comes looking for them and they are able to have an actual conversation with him. In subsequent events, as when Noah builds the ark or the builders construct the Tower of Babel, God is still involved and easily discernible, though a little less so than with Adam and Eve. By the time we come to Abraham, a new expression emerges. For the first time, God is said to "appear," meaning "is seen." His appearance comes through a fire in the midst of a dream, which is a slightly more remote engagement than before.

For the generation of the exodus, God is clearly present, with divinely powerful manifestations. At Sinai, they hear the divine voice and see the divine fire, and they become utterly paralyzed with fear. In fact, they beg Moses not to let God speak with them directly, lest they die; instead, they want him to relay to them what he says. From this point on, prophets will be intermediaries for communication with God. From then on, God will speak to the people through his prophets, not directly. And so, in the subsequent generations, God's presence slowly begins to withdraw—no pillar of cloud and fire, no more manna, no fantastic visible manifestations of glory, only some sporadic miracles.

But miracles become fewer and farther between as well. At the beginning of 1 Samuel there are a few miracles, but there are hardly any by the end of the book and almost none at all in 2 Samuel. From there, God's presence continues to recede, step by step. Samuel is the last person to whom God is said to have been revealed. Solomon is the last person to whom God is said to have appeared. Elijah is the last person through whom God does a public miracle,

bringing down the fire on the altar at Mount Carmel. In the next chapter, a major shift occurs. God declares that he will no longer be found in dramatic manifestations like wind, earthquakes, and fire, but will be heard only in "the sound of a low whisper" (1 Kings 19:12), the still small voice, or even better, in the sound of silence. As it turns out, this is the last time in the Old Testament story that the text says that "the LORD said" anything to anyone. About a century later, Hezekiah asks for the shadow on the steps to back up, and that is the last miracle in the Old Testament narrative. The last instance of an angel acting upon the earth occurs shortly thereafter, when an angel routs the Assyrian troops overnight in order to deliver Jerusalem. The only appearance of angels from then on is in dreams or visions. All that is left of God's presence is in the temple, and when that is destroyed by the Babylonians, there is one last mention of fire. Ironically, it is not the fire of God's presence anymore, but the fire of his judgment. Ezekiel notes that his glory departs, and that is the end of that.

In the postexilic period, the narrative has a decidedly different tone. In books like Ezra and Nehemiah, there are no miracles or angels or divine manifestations. There is no record that God spoke directly to anyone. The book of Esther stands at the end of the narrative, and in Esther God is not even mentioned at all. By this point, God has completely receded from view. Everything would seem to indicate that people are on their own, left to their own resources to make their way through the world.

As a result, there is a kind of tension that has developed between the reality of God's seeming absence and the belief in God's abiding presence. What was able to hold these two things together was faith in the promises of God. As Samuel Terrien nicely summarizes it,

> Faded presence became a memory and a hope, but it burnt into an alloy of inward certitude, which was . . . "faith." When God no longer overwhelmed

> the senses of perception and concealed himself behind the adversity of historical existence, those who accepted the promise were still aware of God's nearness in the very veil of his seeming absence. For them, the center of life was a *Deus absconditus atque praesens* [God hidden but present].[15]

Jesus, however, is the resolution of the tension, and he resolves the tension not by explaining the mystery of simultaneous presence and absence but by embodying both of them at the same time. In Jesus, paradoxically, the hidden God is revealed *and* the revealed God is hidden.

On the one hand, the hidden God is revealed. In Jesus, God is made manifest in the flesh. Angels announce his coming. Miracles punctuate his ministry. God speaks through him and in him, for he is quite literally the Word made flesh. In him, God is with us in the most radical and demonstrative way, for he is Immanuel, "God with us." Thus, Jesus is the final and greatest revelation of God, the one in whom the hidden God has been made manifest. That is, he represents God's presence to us.

Yet, on the other hand, in Jesus the revealed God is hidden. In one sense, this is because in Jesus, God is in the world but frequently goes unrecognized. People dismiss him as insane or even evil (Mark 3:20–22), failing to recognize (or acknowledge) who he truly is. God is in their midst, and yet they cannot (or will not) see it.

But, in another sense, and even more profoundly, Jesus enters into our experience and thus experiences the absence of God himself. That is, just as he represents God's presence *to* us, he also experiences God's absence *for* us. When Jesus dies on the cross, he takes upon his own lips the cry of the psalmist, that agonizing and terrifying reality that God has receded and hidden his face: "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" (Matt. 27:46; Mark 15:34).

That God would take on human flesh and, even more scandalously, that God would die in the flesh puts him completely out of reach of our rational human thinking.[16] Divine incarnation and divine crucifixion are the boldest expressions of God's own statement, "For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways, declares the LORD. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts" (Isa. 55:8). Thus, in taking on human flesh in the womb of Mary and in dying on the cross, God not only reveals himself but, in a very real sense, conceals himself. That is, by revealing himself in such a shocking, unexpected, and scandalous way, God shrouds himself from anyone who will not seek to understand him through faith. As one New Testament scholar puts it, in summarizing Martin Luther's view,

> The suffering, failure, and abandonment exhibited at Calvary is [*sic*] the quintessential instance of a revelation wherein God is most magnificently unveiled while remaining utterly hidden. God is hidden in the cross, not because the crucifixion falsifies or obscures any part of his character, but because the truth revealed in a crucified Savior is inaccessible to anyone who will not look through the eyes of faith. Faith alone is able to perceive the truth lodged in this apparent contradiction, not because it believes the irrational but because it is willing to yield before the unexpected, to surrender to the unacceptable.[17]

Thus, in Jesus the tension is resolved, and it is resolved because it is embodied. He embodies it in a way in which the *Deus absconditus atque praesens* becomes a reality—not an abstract reality or a philosophical reality, but a *personal* reality. That is profoundly significant because a personal reality is not a philosophical solution to a philosophical

problem (how can God be God and yet be so hidden?), but a person to be trusted. Since Jesus is the personal embodiment of God's presence made real within the world and at the same time the embodiment of our experience of God's seeming absence within the world, then it is through him—and only through him—that we are able to begin to understand God's ways in the world and with us.

So, in the end, we are back not only to the analogous experience of those in the Old Testament who struggled and grappled with the hiddenness of God, but also to the means by which they navigated the struggle: faith in what has already been revealed and faith in the promises that have been made. In short, the only way to make sense of a world in which God seems so absent so much of the time is to look to Christ in faith. This means to look at the mystery of the incarnation and the shock of the crucifixion and to see the world through the lens of the one who is the presence of God to us and who, in solidarity with us, has entered into the seeming absence of God for us, all at the same time.

Moreover, what is true for the broad theological issue of divine hiddenness is also true more particularly for the book of Esther, which is the narrative example *par excellence* of that very issue in the Bible. Thus, Christ is not only the ultimate revelation of God's hidden presence in the world, but Christ is also *the ultimate embodiment of God's particular pattern of deliverance in Esther.* Sadly, this has not always been appreciated. Early on in church history, the hanging of Haman was frequently identified with the crucifixion of Christ, particularly by Jews trying to emphasize the scandal of the cross.[18] A few church fathers picked up on the suggestion as part of their polemics, but the proposed identification between Christ and Haman seems to have "spoiled the typological well" for many, so that the correspondences between Esther and Christ were overlooked.

But this is unfortunate, because the narrative shape of God's salvation through Esther bears a striking correspondence to the shape of God's salvation through Jesus. In the book of Esther, a royal figure takes upon herself the plight of her people, faces a life-threatening peril on their behalf, and because of her faithfulness brings about the salvation of her people. As a result, the people are filled with joy and celebrate their victory over evil and death with great feasting. The very same pattern is seen in Jesus. He is a royal figure who takes upon himself the plight of his people. He too faces a life-threatening (indeed, a life-ending) peril on their behalf. He too brings about the salvation of his people through his faithfulness. And, as a result, his people too are filled with joy and celebrate their victory over evil and death with great feasting.

Not only the narrative shapes of the two correspond to each other, but also the way in which both Esther and Christ act as representatives for their people. Just as all the Jews faced death because of the act of one man, so in a similar way all humanity faces death because of the act of one man (Rom. 5:12, 15, 19). But, just as all God's people were saved through the faithful act of Esther, so all God's people are saved through the faithful act of Christ (Rom. 5:15, 18–19).

Once one enters into the details of the story, even more typological connections reveal themselves. Many of these will be developed in the following chapters, but already it is clear that Esther serves as a typological figure who points us ahead to the person and work of Christ on behalf of his people.

Thus, Esther is a story that cannot merely be brushed aside as a secular story of intrigue within the Persian court; it is so much more than that. It is a glorious story of God's providential and redemptive work in the world despite his apparent absence (at times), a work that comes to its fullest embodiment and expression in the glorious story of Jesus. As such, the book of Esther has a rightful

place in the canon of Scripture, in the whole counsel of God, and in the theological reflections of the Christian on divine hiddenness. For all three, its contribution is both indispensible and invaluable.

FOR FURTHER REFLECTION

1. In what ways have you struggled personally and spiritually with God's seeming absence in your life?
2. How have you sought to make sense of it?
3. How does Jesus help us to make sense of divine hiddenness in our own lives? What might a Christ-focused response look like when God seems to be absent?

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BRYAN R. GREGORY is Senior Pastor of Brookdale Presbyterian Church in St. Joseph, Missouri. He has previously served in youth, campus, and pastoral ministries and is the author of *Longing for God in an Age of Discouragement: The Gospel According to Zechariah*. He and his wife, Christy, have two sons.

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