

Rethinking Divine Hiddenness in the Hebrew Bible: The Hidden God as the Hostile God in Psalm 88

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■ Abstract

Divine hiddenness in the Hebrew Bible is widely construed as the conceptual equivalent to divine absence. This article challenges this influential account in light of Psalm 88—where the hidden God is hostilely present, not absent—and reevaluates divine hiddenness. Divine hiddenness is not conterminous with divine absence. Rather, with its roots in the ancient Near Eastern idea of the royal and cultic audience, the meaning of “hide the face” (סתר + פנים) may be construed as a refusal of an audience with the divine king YHWH. Building on this insight, I argue that divine hiddenness possesses a petitionary logic and develop a distinction between the experiential and petitionary inaccessibility of salvific divine presence. Divine absence and hostile divine presence denote the former, while divine hiddenness the latter. I probe the relationships between divine hiddenness, divine absence, and hostile divine presence, concluding that the absent or hostilely present God is not ipso facto hidden.

■ Keywords

divine hiddenness, divine presence, divine absence, hostile divine presence, wrath, Psalm 88, Hebrew Bible

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■ Introduction

What does it mean for God to hide his face in the Hebrew Bible?¹ In modern scholarly interpretations, the haunting expression “hide the face,” the collocation of the verb סָתַר (hide) and the noun פָּנִים (face), is widely thought to give voice to the experience of divine absence.² Such a view finds its arguably most influential expression in Samuel E. Balentine’s seminal work on the hiding of God’s face.³ Balentine succinctly describes the phrase as “one of the critical metaphors of divine absence in the Hebrew Bible.”⁴ Similar scholarly perspectives appear with surprising regularity. One finds a comparable view, for example, in the work of Richard Elliott Friedman on what he terms the “disappearance” of God,⁵ and in Joel S. Burnett’s important 2010 monograph on divine absence in the Hebrew Bible.⁶ For Friedman, “In every occurrence the phrase [“the hiding of the face”] reflects a condition in which the deity is understood to exist but to be unavailable to humans, giving no visible signs of presence, leaving a human community to face their troubles on their

¹ The focus of this essay is on the theme of divine hiddenness in the Hebrew Bible—specifically, the expression “hide the face.” To be sure, the hiddenness of God is also the subject of long-running and wide-ranging conversations in philosophy and theology, but those lie outside the scope of this study. As it pertains to the biblical theme of divine hiddenness, key contributions include Samuel E. Balentine, *The Hidden God: The Hiding of the Face of God in the Old Testament* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983); Samuel L. Terrien, *The Elusive Presence: Toward a New Biblical Theology* (Religious Perspectives 26; San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1978); Lothar Perlt, “Die Verborgenheit Gottes,” in *Probleme biblischer Theologie. Gerhard von Rad zum 70. Geburtstag* (ed. Hans Walter Wolff; Munich: Christian Kaiser Verlag, 1971) 367–82; Joel S. Burnett, *Where Is God? Divine Absence in the Hebrew Bible* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2010); Terence E. Fretheim, *The Suffering of God: An Old Testament Perspective* (OBT 14; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984); Thomas W. Mann, *Divine Presence and Guidance in Israelite Traditions: The Typology of Exaltation* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1977). Beyond the confines of biblical studies, most germane to the present discussion is the notion of *hester panim* in modern Jewish thought. For a useful survey, see David Wolpe, “Hester Panim in Modern Jewish Thought,” *Modern Judaism—A Journal of Jewish Ideas and Experience* 17 (1997) 25–56. On divine hiddenness in Christian theology, see Michael C. Rea’s perceptive comment: “When theologians talk about divine hiddenness, most often what they have in mind is the attribute of transcendence, or incomprehensibility—the ‘darkness’ of God” (*The Hiddenness of God* [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018] 13).

² With reference to God, it occurs 26 times in the Hebrew Bible, with the highest concentration found in poetry, namely, the Psalms (12x) and the Prophets (9x).

³ Balentine, *The Hidden God*.

⁴ The revealing quote comes from Samuel E. Balentine, *The Torah’s Vision of Worship* (OBT; Minneapolis: Fortress, 1999) 221. The same assumption that divine hiddenness and divine absence function as broadly equivalent notions pervades Balentine’s otherwise incisive study of God’s hiddenness, to the extent that he occasionally uses the terms virtually interchangeably (*The Hidden God*, 156, 162, 166, 172, 175, 176). See also Samuel E. Balentine, “Isaiah 45: God’s ‘I Am,’ Israel’s ‘You Are,’” *HBT* 16 (1994) 103–20, esp. 115; and Samuel E. Balentine, *Prayer in the Hebrew Bible: The Drama of Divine-Human Dialogue* (OBT; Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993) 174.

⁵ Richard Elliott Friedman, *The Disappearance of God: A Divine Mystery* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1995) 69–76.

⁶ Burnett, *Where Is God?*

own.”⁷ The expression, Friedman claims, stands for “the gradually diminishing apparent presence of the deity”; from his standpoint, the hidden divine face is the Hebrew Bible’s image of choice to encapsulate divine absence.⁸ In the opinion of Burnett, the poignant question “why have you hidden your face from me?” functions as “a frequent motif for divine absence in the book of Psalms and elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible.”⁹ Thus, according to this well-established interpretive tradition, the hidden God, the enigmatic *Deus absconditus*, is, in some sense, not fully present.

The following study challenges this widespread perception in the light of Psalm 88. Labeled the “gloomiest psalm found in the Scriptures”¹⁰ and “an embarrassment to conventional faith,”¹¹ Psalm 88 is a uniquely challenging text. As we traverse its desolate landscape, I will marshal the evidence that it depicts a situation of hostile divine presence as opposed to divine absence. Thus, contrary to the common expectations of prior scholarship, God’s hidden face cannot be an image of unmitigated absence, failed or diminished presence, or distance. After all, the hidden God can sometimes be the hostile God—a very present, active, and menacing figure. How, then, are we to construe divine hiddenness?

The task of the present essay is to articulate an alternative by redescribing divine hiddenness and reexamining its relationship to divine absence and hostile divine presence.¹² Divine hiddenness, I suggest, is a phenomenon in its own right—a breach in divine-human relations that is not conterminous with divine absence. With its background in the ancient Near Eastern idea of the royal and cultic audience, the phrase “hide the face” in the Hebrew Bible expresses a refusal of an audience with the divine king YHWH.¹³ By harnessing the interpretive potential of this insight, I contend that divine hiddenness, unlike divine absence, envelops within its imagery a petitionary logic; the hidden divine face signals refusal of appeal. Insofar as the audience represents a means of securing benevolent, protective, and delivering—“salvific”—divine presence, divine hiddenness emerges more specifically as refusal of appeal for salvific divine presence. To capture such petitionary dynamics of divine hiddenness, I develop a distinction between the experiential and petitionary inaccessibility of salvific divine presence.

Divine absence and hostile divine presence denote the experiential inaccessibility of salvific divine presence. They describe divine involvement in the everyday human

⁷ Friedman, *The Disappearance of God*, 72.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 69–70.

⁹ Burnett, *Where Is God?*, 62.

¹⁰ Herbert C. Leupold, *Exposition of the Psalms* (London: Evangelical, 1972) 626.

¹¹ Walter Brueggemann, *The Message of the Psalms: A Theological Commentary* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1984) 78.

¹² My argument focuses on divine hiddenness as it is expressed in the language of “the hiding of the face.” To be sure, the Hebrew Bible uses other language and metaphors to describe divine hiddenness. For a fuller discussion, see Brian L. Webster, “Divine Abandonment in the Hebrew Bible” (PhD diss., Hebrew Union College–Jewish Institute of Religion, 2000).

¹³ Friedhelm Hartenstein, *Das Angesicht JHWHs. Studien zu seinem höfischen und kultischen Bedeutungshintergrund in den Psalmen und in Exodus 32–34* (FAT 55; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2008).

affairs, suggesting that God's salvific presence is not accessible in the experiences of human life.¹⁴ In divine absence and hostile divine presence, salvific divine presence is absent, gone, withdrawn, lost, not experienced—that is, experientially inaccessible. By contrast, my claim is that divine hiddenness is best understood as the petitionary inaccessibility of salvific divine presence. In other words, God's salvific presence cannot be obtained by petition. In divine hiddenness, salvific divine presence is refused, withheld, not given, not granted—that is, inaccessible by way of petition. Such a redefinition of divine hiddenness, I suggest, opens the door to fresh exegetical and theological possibilities. With this wider agenda in mind, I conclude by probing the ways in which God's hiddenness functions in scenarios of divine absence and hostile divine presence. Moreover, my analysis demonstrates that the absent or hostilely present God is not ipso facto hidden.

■ Divine Hiddenness and Divine Absence

According to the dominant scholarly perspective, the notion of divine hiddenness in the Hebrew Bible is closely tethered to that of divine absence. Complicating matters considerably, however, is the fact that scholars tend to construe the nature and modes of divine absence itself in markedly different ways.¹⁵ Divine absence is neither a monolithic nor self-evident category. Therefore, while the hiddenness of God is overwhelmingly equated with divine absence, what undergirds such language of absence conceptually varies greatly, and is not always readily apparent. Insofar as they bear upon the present discussion of God's hiddenness, two key interpretive lines may be fruitfully distinguished.

The first, and arguably most significant, interpretive strand sees divine hiddenness variously as an image of full-fledged absence, failed presence, diminished presence, or disappearance of presence—in other words, as varying forms and degrees of withdrawal, occasionally to the point of full extinction, of divine presence in general. Scholars such as Balentine,¹⁶ Burnett,¹⁷ and Friedman¹⁸ are among the prime

¹⁴ To speak of “experiential inaccessibility” is not to suggest that these texts necessarily mirror putative historical, empirical realities and circumstances “behind the text.” We are dealing, in the first instance, with a literary construct.

¹⁵ Complicating matters is the lack of a robust terminological discussion of such diverse and complex categories as divine absence, divine elusiveness, divine silence, divine abandonment, divine passivity, divine hiddenness, hostile divine presence, divine negligence, and so forth, in the context of the Hebrew Bible. The difficulties and complexities, of course, run far deeper than the issues of terminology. Among more recent treatments of the various conceptual models employed to describe divine presence and absence in the Hebrew Bible, see especially *Divine Presence and Absence in Exilic and Post-Exilic Judaism* (ed. Nathan MacDonald and Izaak J. de Hulster; vol. 2 of *Studies of the Sofja Kovalevskaja Research Group on Early Jewish Monotheism*; FAT 2/61; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2013) and Brittany Melton, *Where Is God in the Megilloth? A Dialogue on the Ambiguity of Divine Presence and Absence* (OTS 73; Leiden: Brill, 2018).

¹⁶ Balentine, *The Hidden God*, 162.

¹⁷ Burnett, *Where Is God?*, 60–68.

¹⁸ Friedman, *The Disappearance of God*, 72.

exponents of this position. Balentine insists starkly in this vein, “In the Psalms, and to a lesser extent in the prophets as well, the hiddenness of God was felt to be a *real absence*.”¹⁹ Likewise Burnett, disagreeing explicitly with the conception of divine presence as a constant in creation, claims that a variety of biblical texts “attest to the experience of *unmitigated divine absence*.”²⁰ Friedman’s study, for its part, characterizes divine absence vividly as nothing short of the disappearance of God.²¹ On this assessment, the hidden God emerges fundamentally as a God who is not present, whether partially or fully.²²

This perspective, as I will demonstrate in the rest of this article, demands a comprehensive rethinking in the light of Psalm 88. In this psalm, God is at once hidden and present—in a hostile manner. Insofar as the understanding of divine hiddenness as the absence of divine presence in general is hard to reconcile with the hostile divine presence of the hidden God in Psalm 88, this family of interpretations, I will argue, leads to a fundamentally flawed conception of divine hiddenness. To provide a satisfactory account of divine hiddenness, we must reckon with a mode of divine presence that has been routinely overlooked and neglected in critical treatments of this subject: hostile divine presence. Divine hiddenness, then, does not constitute divine absence in the sense of the absence of divine presence in general.

The second interpretive stream, by contrast, conceives of divine hiddenness more narrowly, namely, in terms of the absence of salvific divine presence—as a withdrawal of God’s protective, benevolent, and saving presence.²³ For example, Ingvar Fløysvik observes illuminatingly, in reference to divine absence, that “what is absent is God as a loving and caring savior.”²⁴ That is to say, it is, strictly speaking, an absence of only a particular kind of divine presence. Confusingly, it is not always possible to disentangle this second perspective fully from the first in many scholarly presentations. Thus Balentine, after describing divine hiddenness “as a real absence,” proceeds to refer to the hidden God as “a God not present, a God not involved, a God not acting on behalf of his people.”²⁵ The meaning of

¹⁹ Balentine, *The Hidden God*, 162 (italics added).

²⁰ Burnett, *Where Is God?*, 63 (italics added).

²¹ Friedman, *The Disappearance of God*, 7–29, 30.

²² The notion of what I have termed “partial” divine absence is sometimes tied to the claim that God is ultimately always present in the Hebrew Bible, as in, to wit, Fretheim’s schema. Although Fretheim seems to allow for “diminished” divine presence, he rules out “structural” divine absence (*The Suffering of God*, 60–78, esp. 65). Terrien’s “concealed” presence is not too dissimilar: “The presence which conceals itself is not an absence” (*The Elusive Presence*, 251).

²³ So, e.g., en passant, Alec Basson, *Divine Metaphors in Selected Hebrew Psalms of Lamentation* (FAT 2/15; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2006) 128–29. Hartenstein’s treatment of the divine פנים may also be regarded as falling broadly into this category (*Das Angesicht JHWHs*, 71–72, 221).

²⁴ Ingvar Fløysvik, *When God Becomes My Enemy: The Theology of the Complaint Psalms* (St. Louis: Concordia, 1997) 151. Fløysvik assigns the phrase “hide the face” to the language of divine absence and indifference (146–49).

²⁵ Balentine, *The Hidden God*, 162. Such ambiguities obtain also in, e.g., Fløysvik, *When God Becomes My Enemy*, 151–52; James L. Crenshaw, *A Whirlpool of Torment: Israelite Traditions of God as an Oppressive Presence* (OBT 12; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984) 62–64.

the latter images, which highlight the deity's failure to deliver his people, would appear to be edging closer to the absence of salvific presence, diverging from the preceding emphasis on "a God not present." Since scholars typically do not consistently entertain the possibility of any mode of divine presence other than salvific—to wit, hostile divine presence—the absence of salvific presence is, by these lights, the same as the absence of divine presence in general. Therefore, by failing to take seriously the phenomenon of hostile divine presence, such approaches frequently prove indistinguishable from the first view in practice.²⁶ Nevertheless, they represent a distinct interpretive strand, not conceptually equivalent to the first.

At first blush, the construal of divine hiddenness as the absence of salvific presence does not run into the same kind of problems as the first approach discussed above.²⁷ But as the investigation unfolds, we will encounter a range of biblical sources that evince the possibility that the hostilely present—and even, for that matter, absent—God does not invariably and inevitably hide his face.²⁸ Accordingly, divine hiddenness would appear to be a distinct phenomenon, not isomorphic with the absence of salvific presence.²⁹ In short, I submit that divine hiddenness does not equal divine absence under either definition on offer. To begin our search for an alternative, we turn our attention to Psalm 88—a text that illustrates well the key difficulties with the standard paradigm. It does so, above all, by bringing into sharper relief the phenomenon of hostile divine presence. We encounter God's hidden face not only in situations of divine absence, but also of hostile presence.

■ Divine Hiddenness and Hostile Divine Presence

Although the singularly grim contents and peculiar literary features of Psalm 88 have attracted much attention, the precise nature of the darkness that suffuses the poem has proved elusive.³⁰ What is it that makes Psalm 88 so bleak? The psalm itself

²⁶ For the sake of brevity, in the rest of this essay I reserve the term "divine absence" specifically for the absence of divine presence in general. I will refer to the absence of God's saving presence as the "absence of salvific presence."

²⁷ To the extent that the absence of salvific presence expresses the loss of only a particular kind of presence, it is not inherently incompatible with a situation of hostile divine presence. As will become apparent, when it comes to Ps 88, we might legitimately say that God's salvific presence has indeed departed, but arriving in its place is his hostile presence.

²⁸ Thus, the account of divine hiddenness as the absence of salvific presence makes no allowance for divine absence or hostile divine presence that is not accompanied by divine hiddenness. If God's hiddenness stands for nothing more than the absence of his salvific presence, then it logically follows that God is always and necessarily hidden when he is absent as well as always and necessarily hidden when he is present in a hostile manner. After all, if God himself is absent, so must be his salvific presence. Likewise, it would seem logical that hostile divine presence must involve the loss of God's salvific presence for the duration of hostilities.

²⁹ To push this line of questioning further, what does it mean for the hostilely present or absent God to be also hidden, and how does such a configuration differ substantively from the hostilely present or absent God who does not hide his face?

³⁰ On the many peculiarities of this psalm, see especially Karl-Johan Illman, "Psalm 88—A Lamentation without Answer," *SJOT* 5 (1991) 112–20; Carleen Mandolfo, "Psalm 88 and the

seems determined to keep its secrets safe, highlighting the hiding of God's face as the focal point of the distress in the poem (תסתיר פניך ממני; v. 15b), but otherwise choosing to encase the answer in a barrage of striking imagery. The hapless psalmist is confronted, first and foremost, with the *hidden* God. Of course, such an explanation only pushes the problem one step back: what is the nature of divine hiddenness in Psalm 88? In the balance of this section, my task is to demonstrate that the answer "divine absence" is implausible, for this text depicts the deity as being hostilely present. This argument unfolds in three moves. My first concern is to disambiguate the notion of "hostile divine presence." This preliminary step will be followed by a close analysis of the psalm. Finally, I will evaluate potential counterarguments to this assessment.

A. Hostile Divine Presence

Expositions of the central problem in Psalm 88—the "evils" that assail the psalmist (רעות; v. 4)—have often been as puzzling as the psalm itself. If the standard scholarly accounts of divine hiddenness are to be believed, we should expect divine absence to loom large in the poem. And, indeed, Psalm 88 has been analyzed in precisely such terms. Thus, in the opinion of some exegetes, lying at the heart of the psalmist's suffering is divine absence, with the callously silent and absent God of the poem exposed as the main culprit.³¹ The overall picture emerging from modern scholarship on the psalm, however, turns out to be more complex in that there has been a steady chorus of commentators suggesting that the locus of affliction within it is to be found in active divine hostility, with the bellicose deity orchestrating the sufferings of the psalmist.³²

It is significant that those interpretations that regard the God of Psalm 88 as the active enemy of the psalmist have tended to lean primarily on the images of divine hostility and aggression, as opposed to hostile divine presence as such.³³ In fact,

Holocaust: Lament in Search of a Divine Response," *BibInt* 15 (2007) 151–70; Juliane Schlegel, *Psalm 88 als Prüfstein der Exegese. Zu Sinn und Bedeutung eines beispiellosen Psalms* (Biblich-Theologische Studien 72; Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 2005).

³¹ So Fredrik Lindström, *Suffering and Sin: Interpretations of Illness in the Individual Complaint Psalms* (trans. Michael McLamb; ConBOT 37; Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiksell, 1994) 197; Balentine, *The Hidden God*, 60–61; Burnett, *Where Is God?*, 62; Leonard P. Maré, "Facing the Deepest Darkness of Despair and Abandonment: Psalm 88 and the Life of Faith," *OTE* 27 (2014) 177–88. According to Daniel J. Harrington (who, for his part, does perceive some kind of divine presence in the psalm), Ps 88 is popularly presented as "a dialogue with an absent God" (*Why Do We Suffer? A Scriptural Approach to the Human Condition* [Franklin, WI: Sheed & Ward, 2000] 10).

³² So Craig C. Broyles, *The Conflict of Faith and Experience in the Psalms: A Form-Critical and Theological Study* (JSOTSup 52; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1989) 76–77, 206–9; Bernd Janowski, *Arguing with God: A Theological Anthropology of the Psalms* (trans. Armin Siedlecki; Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2013) 222, 226–28. Surprisingly, the perceptive insight that Ps 88 depicts a situation of divine hostility has remained, to an overwhelming degree, detached from the wider discussion surrounding the nature of divine hiddenness.

³³ In his analysis, Broyles draws on the language of divine hostility (*The Conflict of Faith and Experience*, 206–9). Janowski explicates the situation in the psalm with the emphasis on the "God

many scholars customarily employ the terminology of divine hostility and hostile divine presence more or less interchangeably.³⁴ But as I see it, the category of “divine hostility” does not amount to a sufficient explanation for the predicament that we encounter in Psalm 88. In this text, not only is God hostile, but he is also decidedly and personally present. After all, the absent God, it may be argued, can easily be as hostile and ill-disposed as the God who is present as the enemy (Ps 44). In fact, God could conceivably express his hostility by being absent, present in a hostile way, or indeed present but not intervening. With respect to his disposition, God in Psalm 88 is no doubt hostile. But he is also present. It is thus the hostile presence of God that this article seeks to bring out, with the emphasis falling on “presence” as much as on “hostility.”³⁵ The following analysis of Psalm 88 must be viewed as a broader case for sequestering “hostile divine presence” into a separate, albeit not unrelated, category to “divine wrath.”

Therefore, in what follows, I set out a comprehensive case for hostile divine presence, not absence, as the key motif in Psalm 88 that gives the whole poem the deepest hues of despair. But before we set sail, the notion of “hostile divine presence” requires comment. In this article, I draw on a fine distinction developed by Craig C. Broyles. According to Broyles, the language of God’s involvement in the varied misfortunes one encounters in the Psalms tends to fall into two broad categories: divine intervention and nonintervention.³⁶ Although in both cases God stands accused of causing the suffering, the specific mode of causality—whether active or passive—differs. While Broyles does not frame his distinction in terms of divine presence and absence, his valuable insight proves heuristically fruitful for our purposes.³⁷ Divine *inaction*—noninvolvement, nonintervention, passivity—appears to be logically more consonant with divine absence. On the other hand, it is natural

as the supplicant’s enemy” theme (*Arguing with God*, 226).

³⁴ Along these lines, both Fretheim (*The Suffering of God*, 65–67) and Fløysvik (*When God Becomes My Enemy*, 149–52) seem to have in view something approaching “hostile divine presence,” but this is not always clear. For instance, Fløysvik perceives in Ps 44 the motif of God as “actively hostile” on the basis of its detailed description of military defeat brought about by God (149–50). This would appear to be true insofar as God is depicted as causing Israel’s misfortune, but does it necessarily mean that God is also present in wrath (158)? From my perspective, the notions of divine disposition (e.g., wrath) and divine presence (e.g., hostile divine presence) are ultimately different, though, of course, related. Thus, in Ps 44, it is more likely that God is absent (v. 24) but at the same time hostile and wrathful. By leaving in wrath, he handed Israel over to her enemies (vv. 11–12, 14–15, 17).

³⁵ To date, we lack a full-length treatment of divine hostility in the Hebrew Bible. Particularly perceptive, though brief, discussions of divine hostility include, e.g., Crenshaw, *A Whirlpool of Torment*; Fløysvik, *When God Becomes My Enemy*, 149–52; Amy C. Cottrill, *Language, Power, and Identity in the Lament Psalms of the Individual* (LHBOTS 493; London: T&T Clark, 2008) 132–37; Fretheim, *The Suffering of God*, 65–67; Lindström, *Suffering and Sin*, 211–13; Broyles, *The Conflict of Faith and Experience*, 61–80.

³⁶ Broyles, *The Conflict of Faith and Experience*, 76–80.

³⁷ To be sure, we cannot discard yet another alternative, namely, that God is, in fact, present but veils the signs of his presence so that the psalmist experiences the deity as absent. It is difficult to see, however, how we could account for such a scenario.

to expect divine action—involvement, intervention, activity—to predominate in situations of hostile divine presence. Stated otherwise, hostile divine presence may be recognized by an active and hostile divine intervention in the affairs of the human agent(s). In the same vein, salvific divine presence stands for the opposite phenomenon—that is, salvific divine intervention. In fact, inasmuch as the secondary literature on divine hiddenness already construes, whether implicitly or explicitly, divine presence and absence in terms of divine involvement and noninvolvement in human affairs, such an approach naturally suggests itself.³⁸

B. Hostile Divine Presence in Psalm 88

We come now to the evidence for hostile divine presence in Psalm 88. Such evidence is nothing if not abundant. To begin with, conspicuous by their absence are the enemies.³⁹ In Psalm 88, as all third parties fade out of view, the divine-human relationship, unobscured by any human or demonic agents, or even the forces of nature, comes to the fore. The psalm points an accusing finger exclusively at the hostile activity of God himself—the only enemy worth mentioning as far as the author is concerned. From v. 6b, when the second-person address to God appears first in the psalm—from the very moment it becomes a formal prayer⁴⁰—it is the deity that is accused of being directly responsible for the psalmist's suffering. Paradoxically, the psalm becomes a tense blend of a lament to God the deliverer (v. 2) and an accusation against God the enemy (v. 7)—a drama in which the only two actors are God and the psalmist. The enemy triumvirate in the psalm is comprised of divine wrath (הַרְוִיחַ; v. 17a), divine terrors (אֲמִיד; 16b), and divine assaults (בַּעֲוֹתֶיךָ; 17b). More striking still is the way in which the pronominal suffixes on each of the three divine “horrors” join together in a menacing refrain to reveal, in effect, none other than YHWH himself. Carefully crafted, this portrayal may be intentionally breaking ranks with traditional imagery to emphasize the hostile activity of God.

In what may be regarded as a deliberate inversion of a similar motif in Ps 18:5,⁴¹ the “dreadful assaults” of v. 17 (בַּעֲוֹתֶיךָ) are used to describe YHWH's aggression toward the supplicant rather than the actions of an enemy chaotic power. The waves of v. 8 (מִשְׁבְּרֵיךָ), too, are portrayed as the instrument under YHWH's jurisdiction, in contrast to the various “torrents of destruction” (Ps 18:5–6) and the assorted “deep waters” (Ps 69:2–3, 15–16) in other psalms, where these destructive forces

³⁸ Balentine, *The Hidden God*, 57, 117; Burnett, *Where Is God?*, vii, 1; Friedman, *The Disappearance of God*, 7; Fretheim, *The Suffering of God*, 104–6.

³⁹ On the surprising absence of “the enemies” from Ps 88, see especially Janowski, *Arguing with God*, 227; Illman, “Psalm 88,” 117. Regarding the depiction of enemies in the Psalter, see T. R. Hobbs and P. K. Jackson, “The Enemy in the Psalms,” *BTB* 21 (1991) 22–29.

⁴⁰ Erhard S. Gerstenberger, *Psalms, Part 2, and Lamentations* (FOTL 15; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001) 143.

⁴¹ Alison R. Gray, *Psalm 18 in Words and Pictures: A Reading through Metaphor* (BiblInt 127; Leiden: Brill, 2014) 73.

are experienced as an antagonistic third party, as something from which God can deliver.⁴² In short, Psalm 88 depicts YHWH as being the only antagonist of the psalmist.

In addition to being unmediated, the agency of God in the affairs of the author is decidedly active.⁴³ In Psalm 88, the roll call of accusations is relentless. YHWH stands accused of setting the psalmist in the depths of the pit (שְׁתַּנִּי בְּבוֹר תַּחְתִּית; v. 7a) and charging waves to afflict him (וְכָל מִשְׁבְּרִיד עֲנִית; v. 8b), of driving away the psalmist's companions (הִרְחַקת מִיַּדַּעִי מִמְּנִי; v. 9a) and turning him into an abomination to them (שְׁתַּנִּי תוֹעֵבוֹת לְמוֹ; v. 9b).⁴⁴ In all this drama, YHWH's wrath emerges as an active—to the point of being almost independent—force in the psalm—a force that lies heavily upon and overwhelms the supplicant (עָלִי סִמְכָה חֲמַתְךָ; v. 8a).⁴⁵ This active nature of YHWH's involvement similarly points in the direction of hostile divine presence.

That the focus of the psalm is firmly on the motif of hostile divine presence may be further seen in the paucity of a robust imagery of distance. According to Balentine, in the Hebrew Bible, the theme of God's remoteness is most clearly expressed by the term רַחֵק, especially in the negative sense, אַל תִּרְחַק.⁴⁶ Notably, Psalm 88 is devoid of such language.⁴⁷ Nor does the psalm contain the opposite imagery, such as requests of God to come near (קָרְבָה; e.g., Ps 69:19) or to arise (קוּמָה; e.g., Ps 3:8). This serves as further confirmation that it is hostile divine presence rather than divine absence that is in view in Psalm 88. In Ps 44, to take but one example, the motif of rejection (44:10, 24; cf. 88:15) and hiddenness (44:25; cf. 88:15) is accompanied by requests of God to awake (עוֹרָה; 44:24) and rouse himself (הִקִּיצָה; 44:24). By contrast, in Psalm 88, rejection and hiddenness appear to be enlisted in the depiction of hostile presence as opposed to absence.

Famously, Psalm 88 staunchly refuses to express, at least explicitly, the assurance of being heard or to move into a vow of praise or any kind of thanksgiving—a

⁴² Rebecca S. Watson, *Chaos Uncreated: A Reassessment of the Theme of Chaos in the Hebrew Bible* (BZAW 341; Berlin: de Gruyter, 2005) 93–94.

⁴³ It is particularly coupled with the previous observation about the absence of the enemies in Ps 88 that the active nature of divine agency in Ps 88 may be seen to augment the case for hostile divine presence. Consider, by contrast, the case of Ps 44, where the author charges God with causing suffering (vv. 12–14, 20), while most likely depicting a situation of divine absence, to the point of accusing God of sleeping (v. 24). To make sense of this, we may first note the telling allegation in v. 10b—that YHWH has failed to go out with the armies of his people (וְלֹא תֵצֵא בְּצְבָאוֹתֶיךָ)—which tips the scales in favor of a picture of divine noninvolvement in Ps 44. Furthermore, upon closer examination, it becomes obvious that Ps 44, unlike Ps 88, has in view a vast array of enemies, to whom YHWH has effectively handed over his people (vv. 11, 12, 14–15, 17).

⁴⁴ In this article, I use masculine pronouns to refer to the author of our psalm as well as the implied speaker within it to recognize and lament that, due to cultural constraints, it is unlikely to have been a woman. Further, the superscription associates Psalm 88 with “Heman the Ezrahite,” and my use of masculine language follows this imagined literary scenario.

⁴⁵ Broyles, *The Conflict of Faith and Experience*, 77.

⁴⁶ Balentine, *The Hidden God*, 155.

⁴⁷ Cf. v. 9, where the companions are driven away by YHWH.

sprinkling of hope common elsewhere in the Psalms.⁴⁸ Rather, the author contents himself only with a muted request for his prayer to be heard (v. 3). This literary oddity can doubtless be interpreted in multiple ways.⁴⁹ However, to my mind, hostile divine presence is surely, at a minimum, more consistent with it than is divine absence. Does the psalmist perhaps sense that the problem is not so much that the absent God has not heard the prayer yet, but that the hostile God has heard, considered, and summarily rejected the plea? The absent God may yet return, hear, and respond, whereas the present and hostile God has already reached his verdict and is set on his course. As steadfast and persevering as the psalmist is, he may be beginning to waver.

Finally, the motif of hostile divine presence reaches its arguably clearest articulation in the looming dispatch to the pit (בֹּרַר; v. 7) at the hands of God. Here and elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible, the pit, vividly elaborated as “the deepest” pit (בֹּרַר תַּחְתִּית), the “dark places” (מְהַשְׁכִּים), and the “depths” (מְצִלוֹת), evokes associations with Sheol (vv. 4–7).⁵⁰ But in Psalm 88, the problem is not simply that the psalmist is counted among those who are going down to the pit (v. 5); the problem, more precisely, and uniquely in the Psalter, is that propelling the supplicant into the pit is the hostile deity himself (v. 7).⁵¹ In other words, the active involvement of God and the trope of death merge together to reveal the supreme act of divine hostility in Psalm 88—to all intents and purposes, the psalmist accuses God of an act of attempted murder, deliberate and calculated.

In my judgment, the lines of evidence presented above converge to expose a picture of affliction at the center of Psalm 88 that cannot be adequately explained as a situation of divine absence, but is more congruent with hostile divine presence. Nor can it be construed as concealed presence, in the sense of being invisible or obscured. The “terrors” of the deity, after all, are cataloged graphically and dramatically by the psalmist (vv. 16–19). We can thus sum up the hostile divine presence in the psalm in the following way: it is severe in the extreme (the psalmist is about to die); it is, from all accounts, unmotivated (there is no obvious explanation for the divine aggression);⁵² and it is wholly personal (in the absence of any mention of the enemies).

⁴⁸ Mandolfo, “Psalm 88 and the Holocaust,” 154–55.

⁴⁹ So peculiar is the psalm’s ending that some scholars (e.g., Rashi, Wellhausen) have speculated that a more positive concluding section, with an expression of trust and thanksgiving, must have gone missing in the transmission process. There is, however, no evidence to support this theory. On this, see Watson, *Chaos Uncreated*, 100.

⁵⁰ Othmar Keel, *The Symbolism of the Biblical World: Ancient Near Eastern Iconography and The Book of Psalms* (trans. Timothy J. Hallett; London: SPCK, 1978) 70.

⁵¹ Out of the 9 occurrences of the word בֹּרַר in the Psalms, it is only in Ps 88 that this accusation appears.

⁵² On God’s hiddenness as inexplicable, see Balentine, *The Hidden God*, 164–66.

C. Hostile Divine Presence or Divine Absence?

The rudimentary, but helpful, notion of a relational crisis in a covenantal setting may serve as one of the ways of conceptualizing this experience of hostile divine presence in Psalm 88.⁵³ In his study, Burnett suggests that the experience of divine absence undercuts covenantal bonds, alongside the structures of identity and well-being they embody: at its heart, divine absence is a relational breakdown.⁵⁴ The divine-human relationship in Psalm 88 may likewise be viewed against the broadly relational and covenantal conceptual background. The opening address frames the entire psalm around a personal relationship with the deity (vv. 2–3),⁵⁵ and the possible covenantal language adds flesh to the emerging picture of divine-human bonds (יהוה in vv. 2, 10, 14; חסד in v. 12).⁵⁶ If Psalm 88 does, as argued above, depict a situation of hostile divine presence, then it, too, can be considered a relational crisis. Just as the absent God forgets (Ps 10:11), rejects (Ps 44:10, 24), hides his face (Ps 44:25), and stays silent (Ps 22:3), so too does the hostile God of Psalm 88 (Ps 88:2–3, 6, 15).⁵⁷ Like divine absence, hostile divine presence is characterized by separation, estrangement, and abandonment.⁵⁸ But relational expectations are not met for different reasons: in the case of divine absence, because God is absent and indifferent, whereas in the case of hostile divine presence, because God is present and hostile. In sum, the psalmist's affliction in Psalm 88 fundamentally differs from divine absence, although it undeniably bears certain similarities to it. The difference lies in the nature of divine involvement.

At this stage, a potential objection comes into view. There is a distinct possibility, one might argue, that Psalm 88 lacks a single, unified perspective and instead fluctuates between a situation consistent with hostile divine presence and a situation consistent with divine absence. As a matter of fact, to go by first impressions, the category of divine absence may be said to capture some of the dynamics of Psalm 88 reasonably well. The text casts the psalmist's experience in terms of separation

⁵³ The word "experience" is used advisedly in this context. As Burnett helpfully clarifies, the notions of divine remoteness, silence, absence, hiddenness, etc., in the end express only "a human *perception* and *description* of God in relationship" (Joel S. Burnett, "Divine Silence or Divine Absence? Converging Metaphors in Family Religion in Ancient Israel and the Levant," in *Reflections on the Silence of God: A Discussion with Marjo Korpel and Johannes de Moor* [ed. Bob E. J. H. Becking; OTS 62; Leiden: Brill, 2013] 29–70, at 29 [italics in original]).

⁵⁴ Burnett, *Where Is God?*, 25.

⁵⁵ Burnett, "Divine Silence or Divine Absence?," 33.

⁵⁶ Thomas D. Hanks, *The Theology of Divine Anger in the Psalms of Lament* (ThD diss., Concordia Seminary, 1972) 348–49.

⁵⁷ On this account, I am not persuaded that we can always classify all language as referring either to divine absence or to hostile presence. The image of God's hidden face, as a case in point, certainly cannot serve as a reliable marker of divine absence. Pace Cottrill, "The major categories of ambivalence images fall into two categories: language of God's unavailability, and, in contrast, language of God's threatening presence" (*Language, Power, and Identity*, 132). In Cottrill's analysis, unavailability refers to absence (*ibid.*, 134).

⁵⁸ As analyzed by Balentine, these are some of the key features of divine absence (*The Hidden God*, 68, 162, 167).

from the silent and unresponsive deity, as evidenced by the petition that God “incline his ear” to the psalmist’s prayer (הִטָּה אוֹזְנֵךְ לִרְנָתִי; v. 3b).⁵⁹ Amplifying the vertical dimension of this abandonment is what seems to be its natural corollary: horizontal alienation and distance from the community (vv. 9, 19).⁶⁰ Perhaps most revealingly, the motif of divine absence appears to press to the surface in the extensive death-related imagery that populates the psalm (vv. 4–8, 11–13, 16–17).⁶¹ In his exploration of divine absence, Burnett has recently advanced the notion of “structural divine absence” in the cosmos.⁶² In line with the common ancient Near Eastern belief in a three-tiered universe, with the realm of the dead at a remove from terrestrial and heavenly planes of existence, the Hebrew Bible understands death’s domain as lying outside the usual realm of God’s presence.⁶³ The same worldview may be seen to undergird Psalm 88. The center of the psalm, vv. 11–13, is clearly preoccupied with divine absence, or, more specifically, the absence of YHWH’s praiseworthy qualities, such as his steadfast love (הַסֶּדֶק), his faithfulness (אֱמוּנָתְךָ), his wonders (פְּלִאָה), and his righteousness (צְדִיקוֹתֶיךָ), from the domain of the dead. From the standpoint of Psalm 88, Sheol is thus the realm of divine absence par excellence, and it is precisely to the shadowy abode of the dead that our author compares his present troubles.⁶⁴

Against this and similar objections, I offer the following observations. First, although these motifs of divine absence in Psalm 88 are without doubt potent, they do not, in the end, amount to a compelling case for a situation of divine absence as the central affliction in the psalm. Most obviously, that the deity is silent does not prove that he is absent, nor does the “horizontal” aloneness of the psalmist (vv. 9, 19) require the verdict of divine absence. It is arguably only the psalm’s all-consuming trope of death that is potentially evocative of a situation of divine absence. But what is crucial for grasping the particular shape of Sheol in Psalm 88 is that the psalmist has yet to transition fully into the sphere of death, the place where God is decisively absent (vv. 11–13). It is especially the emphatic וְאֲנִי (v. 14), resuming in full force the earlier prayer (vv. 2–3), that indicates that the psalmist is not entirely like the dead yet. In the meantime, he must reckon with a deity that is very much present and very much hostile.

Consider also the tripartite structure of the psalm, with two graphic accounts of the present distress (vv. 4–10a; 15–19) as the bookends of the poem as well as the appeal to YHWH in the middle (vv. 11–13).⁶⁵ The two lengthy accounts of the current affliction, where divine hiddenness appears (v. 15), paint an unmistakable picture of hostile divine presence. The psalm is, in fact, dominated by a concern

⁵⁹ Ibid., 57.

⁶⁰ Ibid., 61–62.

⁶¹ Ibid., 60–61.

⁶² Burnett, *Where Is God?*, 176.

⁶³ Ibid.

⁶⁴ Balentine, *The Hidden God*, 60–61.

⁶⁵ Janowski, *Arguing with God*, 220.

not so much about impending divine absence in Sheol as about ongoing hostile divine presence among the living. The description of Sheol as the domain of divine absence, for its part, is confined to the middle part (vv. 11–13). Notably, this part would appear to belong to the future horizon, as the very aim of the appeal is to forestall the confinement to the realm of the dead—the ultimate act of divine aggression, and one that has yet to succeed. Of course, one could still conceivably claim that it is not impossible for the psalm’s perspective to shift unexpectedly to divine absence in the language of divine hiddenness (v. 15), but that, without any corroborating evidence (e.g., structural considerations), begs the question entirely.

This brings me to the second, and closely related to the previous, point. It is indeed the premise of my argument that divine absence and hostile divine presence present themselves as mutually exclusive alternatives. Attempts, however, have been made to suggest that assertions of divine absence and hostile divine presence, though they may seem logically contradictory, are nevertheless found side by side in the biblical texts, with the same situation being depicted in terms of divine absence and hostile divine presence.⁶⁶ In response, it is worth noting that the present case against equating divine hiddenness with divine absence does not rest exclusively upon the incongruity of God being both absent (assuming hiddenness equals absence) and present in Psalm 88, but can also be arrived at on other grounds, such as the background of the phrase “hide the face” in the domain of the petitionary inquiry. As a result, multiple lines of evidence end up reinforcing each other.

Also instructive, in this connection, is the fact that the very claim that God can be at once absent and hostilely present would seem to be based, in some cases, upon the a priori assumption that divine hiddenness stands for divine absence in the biblical texts. Thus, James L. Crenshaw, writing in his magisterial treatment of oppressive divine presence in the Hebrew Bible, isolates “two irreconcilable themes” in Job 13:24: “a God who cannot be found and one who is much too close for comfort.”⁶⁷ This judgment, it will be recognized, depends upon the perceived interchangeability of divine absence and divine hiddenness. In addition, what is sometimes described as “divine absence” is arguably better thought of as “the absence of salvific presence,” and thus not in any way fundamentally incompatible with hostile divine presence (e.g., Lam 2:3a).⁶⁸ To be sure, a full consideration of the complexities and tensions that inhere in the biblical traditions about divine presence ultimately demands far more space than is possible here. Instead, my more limited proposal in this focused raid is that there exists a more excellent way of handling

⁶⁶ See the insightful discussion of the scholarly opinion in Melton, *Where Is God in the Megilloth?*, 100–102. Melton concludes that “one can claim both at the same time—God is present and absent”; however, her own understanding of absence is relational and closer to “a sense of divine abandonment.” Note also Floysvik’s suggestion that the motifs of divine absence and divine hostility are always inextricably intertwined (*When God Becomes My Enemy*, 151–52).

⁶⁷ Crenshaw, *A Whirlpool of Torment*, 63, also 60.

⁶⁸ Pace Burnett, *Where Is God?*, 62.

specifically divine hiddenness—an approach to God’s hiding that obviates many of these difficulties.

Finally, to claim that there exist two discreet categories is not to imply that the task of classifying any given biblical portrayal is straightforward. Along with a handful of clear-cut cases of divine absence (e.g., Deut 31:17–18; Ps 22; 44) and hostile divine presence (e.g., Jer 33:5; Ps 88; Job 13:24), we find numerous ambiguous texts. The drama of Ezek 39:23 furnishes us with an example of such complexities. The hidden God, in his wrath, hands the people over to their enemies (וַיִּתֵּן בְּיַד צָרֵיהֶם), and leaves them to perish by the sword (וַיִּפְּלוּ בַחֶרֶב כָּלָם). Is the text suggesting that God did not intervene when the enemies attacked (i.e., divine absence) or intervened hostilely and fought against Israel (i.e., hostile divine presence)? Or consider the laconic statement in Isa 8:17 that offers such a stripped-down account of the situation that only divine hiddenness remains standing front and center. To deal with such ambiguities, I would suggest a working category of nonsalvific divine (non)intervention, which leaves open the question of whether the text reflects specifically divine absence (nonintervention) or hostile divine presence (hostile intervention).

Therefore, I would submit that divine absence falls well short of accounting for the situation in Psalm 88, and even seemingly suggestive signs of the absent God are, in the end, best accounted for within a broader scenario of hostile divine presence. Imbuing this poem with a palpable sense of dread and horror is the hostile and present God.

■ Divine Hiddenness Reconsidered

By systematically examining hostile divine presence in Psalm 88, I have so far demonstrated that the common view of divine hiddenness as divine absence is untenable. So, what is divine hiddenness? This section sets out to chart a fresh course. The crucial piece of evidence, I suggest, is the petitionary logic of divine hiddenness. On this basis, I propose that divine hiddenness is best understood as the petitionary inaccessibility of salvific divine presence.

A. Petitionary Logic

The word פָּנִים commonly serves as a metonym for presence, of the human and divine varieties alike.⁶⁹ It is possible, furthermore, to see the פָּנִים in the expression פָּנֵי הַסֹּהֵר פָּנִים as more specifically a gracious and benign kind of divine presence. Consider, for instance, the luxuriant picture of the benevolent divine presence emerging from Ps 27.⁷⁰ In it, the face of YHWH, which the psalmist earnestly seeks (אֲבַקֵּשׁ; v. 8), is associated with divine beauty (יָפֶה; v. 4) as well as goodness

⁶⁹ Horacio Simian-Yofre, “pānīm,” in *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament* (ed. G. Johannes Botterweck, Helmer Ringgren, and Heinz-Josef Fabry; trans. David E. Green; vol. 11; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001) 589–615.

⁷⁰ For an insightful analysis of this psalm, see Hartenstein, *Das Angesicht JHWHs*, 65–209.

(טוב; v. 13). The psalm, moreover, goes on to identify the opposite of such divine favor expressly as divine hiddenness (v. 9). According to Friedhelm Hartenstein's wide-ranging probe into the background of the language of the divine פנים in the Hebrew Bible, such imagery has its background in the cultic realm, especially the idea of an audience. Divine hiddenness, argues Hartenstein, may be construed as a refusal of an audience with the divine king YHWH.⁷¹

With this observation as a point of departure, it seems warranted to conclude that divine hiddenness, at the simplest level, denotes the refusal of that divine presence that is found *in the audience itself*. That is to say, the audience *itself* may be regarded as a distinct mode of divine presence, as well as the object of human seeking (בקש) and divine hiding (סתר). This would appear to be the key operative concern that informs Ps 27, where divine presence in the audience is sought, in no small part, for its own sake rather than as a means to further ends. Thus, in this longed-for rendezvous with the deity, the psalmist desires to dwell in the house of YHWH (שבתי בבית יהוה; v. 4), behold the beauty of YHWH (להזות בנעם יהוה; v. 4), and inquire in his temple (ולבקר בהיכלו; v. 4). In other words, when God hides his face, God refuses, in the first instance, to let the human agent(s) into his presence in the throne room (vv. 5, 9).

Yet, considered from the broader contextual perspective, the audience emerges as a means to an end as opposed to an end unto itself. The audience, I would venture, serves as something of a port of entry into salvific divine presence. By its very nature as an encounter with the divine king YHWH, an agent deemed empowered to alleviate suffering, the audience becomes a way of engaging the deity's delivering power and of securing his salvific divine presence. I would suggest, therefore, that lying at the heart of the language of divine hiddenness is not the narrow concern about the refusal of the audience as such. That is hardly the main difficulty at hand. Rather, divine hiddenness is suggestive of far more: the refusal of not merely God's presence in the audience, but also of God's salvific divine presence more broadly. By hiding his face, God refuses to intervene salvifically on behalf of the supplicant(s)—in other words, to confer his salvific divine presence upon them.

This suggestion accords well with the biblical evidence. One text that makes this explicit is Deut 31:17. When God hides his face, he refuses to be among his people, to fight as a champion on their behalf (אין אלהי בקרבי). Likewise, from the rhetoric of Isa 59:1–2, we can infer that the hidden God refuses to save (ישע). Conversely, in those situations when the deity does not hide his face but takes heed of the unfolding anguish, he may be seen to intervene on behalf of, or bestow his salvific divine presence upon, the afflicted, thereby resolving matters to the supplicant's satisfaction (Ps 22:25). What these texts show is that the significance of the audience lies primarily in the opportunity it affords to secure salvific divine presence. In fact, even in Ps 27, the audience functions as a way of enlisting divine help and protection in the day of trouble (ביום רעה; vv. 5, 9). In short, what is actually

⁷¹ Ibid., 221.

at stake in divine hiddenness is salvific divine presence in general, although it goes without saying that the more basic notion of divine presence in the audience forms its necessary conceptual backdrop.

There is another key dimension to divine hiddenness. Since the audience functions as a system of divine-human communication, divine hiddenness would seem to entail a grave breach in the normal mechanisms of interfacing with God.⁷² Pertinent here are the many instances in the biblical data where divine hiddenness appears in the same terminological and conceptual nexus as various and sundry communicative difficulties. One salient case is Mic 3:4. The text announces in no uncertain terms that in the aftermath of God's hiding, the cries for help (זעק) will not receive an answer (ענה). So deeply ingrained is the sense of divine hiddenness among the people in Isa 64:6 that no one takes the trouble of calling (קרא) on the divine name in the first place. In Isa 59:2, we find a striking claim that the key implication of divine hiddenness is that the deity does not hear (שמע). Such divine deafness stands in stark contrast to Ps 22:25, where God, instead of hiding his face, hears (שמע) the cries for help (שוע). Communicative challenges come to the fore in other texts as well (Ps 10:11; 69:18; 102:3; 143:7). Fascinatingly, in Ps 51:11, a communicative breach would seem to be the desired outcome, as an act of divine mercy, presumably so that the supplicant's sins and iniquities do not reach YHWH. Finally, the communicative aspect of the imagery of divine hiddenness receives another clear expression in the imagery of seeking (בקש) the divine face (פנים)—i.e., seeking an audience—which acts as a parallel to the language of divine hiddenness.⁷³

Taken together, the evidence rather strongly suggests that the operative imagery of divine hiddenness is lodged in the realm of the petitionary inquiry with the deity—an attempt to secure salvific divine presence—and its logic is closely tied to pleas, appeals, cries for help, petitions, requests for salvific divine intervention, and the like. To be more precise, divine hiddenness signals the failure of the petitionary system; “hiding the face” is a negative response (e.g., in hostile divine presence), or a nonresponse (e.g., in divine absence) to cries for help. That is not to say that divine hiddenness necessarily presupposes a plea for help, for God may well hide his face preemptively, by adopting a general posture of refusal (e.g., Jer 33:5). Nevertheless, divine hiddenness is ideationally bound up with the petitionary process. We might say that divine hiddenness is, at its core, refusal of appeal for salvific divine presence. To switch metaphors, divine hiddenness may be described as an act of snubbing—an act of rebuffing or ignoring a plea for salvific divine

⁷² Broyles goes so far as to make communicative difficulties *the* focal point of divine hiddenness, when he defines it as “a gesture of unwillingness to perceive or respond, thus conveying a sense of estrangement” (*The Conflict of Faith and Experience*, 75). In effect, he folds divine hiddenness into divine silence. In my judgment, divine hiddenness is not identical to, nor is it interchangeable with, divine silence; it constitutes a distinct, though related, phenomenon. At issue in divine hiddenness is not simply a loss of communication but a refusal of perceivable and positive presence.

⁷³ Hartenstein, *Das Angesicht JHWHs*, 99–141.

presence. In hiding his face, God closes off the petitionary road to salvific divine presence. The drawbridge, we might say, is raised.

In sum, any proposed definition of divine hiddenness must do justice to the full conceptual and contextual cargo of the hidden divine face as outlined above: the idea of a refusal of an audience, whose end goal, moreover, is the securing of salvific divine presence, as well as the wider petitionary dynamics inherent in divine hiddenness.

B. Petitionary Inaccessibility of Salvific Divine Presence

Rooted in the above observations, my proposal is that divine hiddenness, as expressed by the language of “the hiding of the face,” is neither divine absence nor the absence of salvific divine presence but the petitionary inaccessibility of salvific divine presence. To throw this subtle shift into bolder relief, consider that what is commonly operative in the standard approaches to divine hiddenness is the idea of the experiential inaccessibility—withdrawal, disappearance, loss, diminishment, leaving, departure—of divine presence, either in general or only of the salvific variety, to the human agent(s). Divine absence and hostile divine presence indicate the absence of salvific divine presence from Israel’s experience. In the case of divine absence, we might say that God withdraws his presence in general so that he is nowhere to be found (e.g., Ps 44). The absent God is not intervening, not getting involved, failing to act. On the other hand, in hostile divine presence, when the salvific divine presence retreats, it is replaced by a mode of presence that would appear to be just as intense and real, albeit essentially opposite in its intentions and actions (e.g., Ps 88).⁷⁴ The hostilely present God is involved, but in the capacity of the enemy.

But the operative imagery of divine hiddenness, in contrast to both divine absence and hostile divine presence, resides in the petitionary realm. The hidden God refuses to intervene salvifically, summarily rejecting the human appeal for deliverance. In the case of divine hiddenness, salvific divine presence is a potentiality that never becomes an actuality; God’s hiding of his face portends a failure to secure salvific divine presence via an audience. The proposed definition, therefore, contravenes the standard critical account of divine hiddenness in two key aspects. Divine hiddenness concerns the petitionary inaccessibility, not the absence, of divine presence, and it is specifically salvific divine presence that God refuses, rather than his presence in general. On the other hand, I would reserve the notion of experiential inaccessibility for divine absence and, *mutatis mutandis*, hostile divine presence. Of course, divine hiddenness itself, as a fracture in divine-human relations, constitutes part

⁷⁴ In this connection, consider Fretheim’s observation: “The absence of God would appear never to mean more than the loss of one intensification of presence or another” (*The Suffering of God*, 65). This proposal seems to hold true for situations of hostile divine presence—one mode of divine presence is replaced by another—but his approach, in my opinion, does not pay sufficient heed to other texts, such as, e.g., Pss 22 and 44, where the loss of divine presence is not followed by the arrival of hostile divine presence.

of Israel's experience. By highlighting its petitionary logic, what I wish to argue is that divine hiddenness describes the fact that salvific divine presence cannot be attained through appeal to YHWH.

What is more, we are now in a position to appreciate how the construal of divine hiddenness along these lines successfully avoids the pitfalls associated with the two traditional interpretive avenues discussed above—namely, divine hiddenness as the absence of divine presence in general and as the absence of salvific divine presence.

Unlike the first definition, divine hiddenness, understood as the petitionary inaccessibility of salvific divine presence, proves readily capable of functioning in contexts of divine absence and hostile divine presence alike. What is desired in both situations, and what is withheld, is salvific divine presence. In the former, the petitionary inaccessibility is to be more properly conceptualized along the lines of a failure to grant salvific presence (as the deity is absent), while in the latter, it suggests something closer to an active refusal to do so.

Unlike the second definition, the proposed alteration in the understanding of divine hiddenness fits in well with those biblical texts—as we will see shortly—where the absent or hostilely present God does not appear as hidden. In hostile divine presence, salvific divine presence—while, by definition, experientially inaccessible to the human agent—may well be potentially obtainable from a deity by desperate plea and petition. With his face open to those who seek it, the hostilely present deity may well be amenable to restoring his salvific presence, provided certain conditions are met.

■ The Elements of Divine Hiddenness

Upon closer inspection, it has become apparent that further consideration should be given to the conception(s) of divine hiddenness in the Hebrew Bible. To be sure, a full examination of the relevant biblical data lies beyond the scope of the present article. Nevertheless, it seems necessary at this point to fill in this rather general account by bringing into play more biblical materials. If we are to understand divine hiddenness correctly, it is, in particular, its relationship to divine absence as well as to hostile divine presence that demands disciplined redescription. By way of summary, based on the preceding, we may say that divine absence and hostile divine presence describe divine intervention, or lack thereof, in the human experience. While divine absence is best understood as nonintervention, hostile divine presence refers to hostile intervention. With its logic in the realm of petition, divine hiddenness, for its part, is a refusal to intervene salvifically.

The literary evidence bears this out. In the Hebrew Bible, God's hiding of his face is depicted as a separate phenomenon—a particular and distinguishable divine action, not equivalent to either divine absence or hostile divine presence. In practice, however, it is closely associated with them. In fact, we would expect God's refusal to intervene salvifically to lead to either nonintervention (divine absence) or hostile intervention (hostile divine presence). This comes through, for instance, in Deut

31:17, where God's hiding of his face would seem to bring in its wake divine absence. As soon as God hides his face, the people are devoured (והיה לאכל) as a multitude of evils and troubles descend upon them (ומצאהו רעות רבות וצרות). While divine hiddenness and divine absence are not one and the same in this text, they are intricately connected. The hidden God, then, is also absent or hostilely present. The salient point for our purposes is that the reverse is not true. Divine hiddenness does not always accompany divine absence or hostile divine presence. To put it another way, it is possible for God to be hostilely present, intervening hostilely, or absent, nonintervening, without hiding his face—without adopting a posture of refusal to intervene salvifically that his hidden face signifies. We may, therefore, have to envision four different scenarios: divine absence or hostile divine presence with divine hiddenness as well as without. In order to illustrate these somewhat abstract observations, we now turn to test this alternative model of divine hiddenness by exploring several concrete examples of how it operates alongside divine absence and hostile divine presence.

A. Divine Hiddenness with Hostile Divine Presence

To return to our main text, Psalm 88, I have already made the case in the above that, far from being absent, the hidden God in this transgressive psalm is present—oppressively and crushingly near to the doomed psalmist, whose sufferings he appears to have both masterminded and executed. But how does divine hiddenness fit into this situation of hostile divine presence? Recall that the bulk of the psalm is devoted to a graphic description of hostile divine presence (vv. 4–10a; 16–19). But that is not what divine hiddenness in v. 15 denotes. Rather, by inquiring about the reasons for God's hiding, the psalmist protests against a different affliction. The deity, we are to understand, has not only set in motion hostilities against the psalmist (hostile divine presence) but is also withholding his salvific presence, staunchly refusing appeals against the bleak status quo (divine hiddenness). Observe how in v. 14, the psalmist renews his petition (cf. vv. 2–3). His focus in v. 15, I would submit, is on the failure of the petition. Addressed to YHWH as a God of salvation (vv. 2–3, 11–13), the psalm as a whole may be regarded as a cry for salvation.⁷⁵ In the protest against divine hiddenness, the psalmist laments the lack of success his desperate efforts to secure salvific divine presence have seen. Faced with the hostilely present God, the psalmist draws ever closer to death. Faced with the hidden God, he is condemned to suffer in the inferno of hostile divine presence indefinitely.

It is not only in Psalm 88 that the hidden God is present as the enemy rather than absent. In addition to the case of Psalm 88, hostile divine presence looms large in Job 13:24. In a particularly revealing move that makes explicit what Psalm 88 prefers to shroud in elliptical imagery, Job goes so far as to wonder why the hidden God treats him as his enemy (למה פניך תסתיר ותחשבני לאויב לך; Job 13:24). Elsewhere, comparing himself to a prisoner, Job complains of suffering from

⁷⁵ Or, to use the terminology of the present study, for salvific divine presence.

crushing confinement and being under close watch (v. 27), with YHWH emerging unequivocally as the author of this bitter affliction (v. 26). According to Job, it is the oppressively and threateningly near God that wreaks havoc in his life. The accusation of divine hiddenness in v. 24 throws light on another dimension of Job's suffering. Simply put, Job complains that he has failed to obtain God's salvific presence by appeal. Not only is he confronted with the divine enemy (v. 24b), but there is also no obvious avenue for mending this relational rift (v. 24a).

Another parade example of hostile divine presence coupled with divine hiddenness is Jer 33:5. We can surmise that the text portrays a situation of hostile divine presence from God's threat to smite the Jerusalemites in his anger and wrath (הכיתי באפי ובהמתי). The deity may also be seen to take the step of hiding his face, thereby thwarting any attempts to seek the cessation of hostilities and ensuring that the punishment will run its full course (הסתרתי פני מהעיר הזאת על כל רעתם). In this and similar texts, the phrase "hide the face" does the work of indicating that the appeal to the deity to re-confer his salvific divine presence will not succeed, at least as long as God's face remains hidden. Salvific divine presence is not accessible experientially, nor can it be attained by petition.

It should be obvious by now that at a purely conceptual level, no inherent contradiction obtains between God being hostilely present and being not hidden. The hostile and present deity does not necessarily withhold his salvific presence in the way just described but may remain available for an audience, ready to cease the hostilities under certain conditions. If I may be permitted the modern analogy, the divine *modus operandi* would in some circumstances seem to involve keeping an embassy running during the time of war. In fact, it seems to me that the very notion of repentance presupposes the possibility of an audience with YHWH despite the otherwise broken divine-human relationship.

Turning now to the relevant biblical data, how might we identify, without falling into an argument from silence, a scenario where God is decidedly hostile and present, but not hidden? One course of action is to look for biblical texts that attest the possibility of successfully seeking the face (בקש + פנים) of the hostilely present YHWH—the opposite of divine hiddenness. One remarkable example that warrants our attention is 2 Chr 7:13–14. In this passage, the deity is manifestly present and hostile. He shuts up the heavens so that there is no rain (אעצר השמים), he directs the locust to devour the land (אצוה על הגב לאכול הארץ), he unleashes pestilence among his people (אשלח דבר בעמי). Yet he is not hidden. Rather, God invites his people to seek his face (יבקשו פני) and promises to hear their cry for help (אני אשמע) and heal their land (וארפא את ארצם). The offer, to be sure, is not unconditional, yet YHWH's face is not hidden. More interesting still is the infamous golden calf episode in Exodus 32. Moses is able to hold a semisuccessful audience with God to avert a complete destruction of the people (ויחל משה את פני; יהוה אלהיו; Exod 32:11; cf. 33:7, 11). Hostile divine presence, nonetheless, inflicts some devastation (ויגף יהוה את העם; 32:35).

B. Divine Hiddenness with Divine Absence

While divine hiddenness is not simply interchangeable with divine absence, certain biblical materials present the two themes as closely intertwined. In order to flesh out how divine hiddenness operates amid divine absence, let us briefly consider Psalm 44.

On the one hand, it depicts a situation generally consistent with divine absence. God is portrayed as being asleep, presumably to suggest that no discernible signs of his presence are available (v. 24), and as failing to go out with the armies of Israel (v. 10). As a result, the people end up exposed to the whole gamut of destructive enemy forces, from which the salvific presence of God normally shields them (vv. 2–4). God has withdrawn his presence and absented himself. I would suggest that whereas v. 24 has within its sights divine absence, v. 25 introduces a somewhat different train of thought rather than simply continuing the prior trajectories. In taking aim at divine hiddenness, it accuses God, after recalling his salvations past (vv. 2–4), of refusing to engage his salvific powers again. Not only is God experientially inaccessible (vv. 10, 24), but the usual route to appeal to the deity and bring the request to his attention is also down (v. 25). We witness two different fractures in the divine-human relationship, and two different afflictions: lack of divine intervention (divine absence, v. 24) and, with the anguished pleas falling on deaf divine ears, no means of restoration (divine hiddenness, v. 25). Experiential and petitionary inaccessibility combine to form a comprehensive picture of divine absence.

Is it possible for the absent God not to be hidden? Logically, if God is fully absent, then the answer must be no. Some biblical materials, however, envision an intriguing scenario whereby the deity is, to all intents and purposes, absent and withdrawn, *except for his audience room*. Admittedly, this configuration would fall into the category of the diminishment, rather than full extinction, of divine presence. We are to imagine that there remains a small pocket of divine presence in the throne room. Consider the chain of events in Hos 5:14–15. First, the deity would appear to be hostilely present, fighting like a lion against Ephraim and Judah (אני אני אטרה; v. 14). Afterward, as the hostile divine presence abates, it is replaced by divine absence (אלך אשובה אל מקומי; v. 15). Akin to a lion, YHWH remains ensconced in his lair, waiting for his people to repent and seek his face (v. 15). Such may also be the case with Psalm 22. In the poem, the psalmist experiences the deity as generally absent (תרחק ממני; v. 12).⁷⁶ Yet God was not hidden (v. 25). Thus, in the case of divine absence, while we may generally expect the deity to be also hidden—insofar as he is simply not present to respond and bestow his salvific presence—the scenario, as we have discovered, is not fully exempt of complexities. The upshot is that the absent God cannot be automatically presumed hidden either.

⁷⁶ So also Balentine, *The Hidden God*, 156. This conclusion is, in particular, predicated upon the assumption that רחוק points toward a situation of divine absence.

■ Conclusion

Divine hiddenness was an integral, quotidian part of the ancient Israelite religion.⁷⁷ The present foray into its depths sheds new light on ancient conceptions and perceptions of divine-human relationships, as well as their sharp vicissitudes. It has been my central argument that the conventional view of divine hiddenness as being equivalent to divine absence cannot be maintained. The hidden divine face, instead, indicates a different phenomenon. My proposal is that divine hiddenness in the Hebrew Bible can be productively understood as the petitionary inaccessibility of God's salvific presence, with its operative imagery rooted in the domain of appeal.

What is more, according to the ancient author who penned Isa 45:15, divine hiddenness derives from—and ultimately reveals a dimension of—the nature of God himself. The findings of this article, thus, require further investigation and verification by means of a more extensive reengagement with the motif of God's hiddenness, along with interconnected biblical conceptualizations of divine presence and absence, than is feasible within the limited compass of the present essay. In addition, two further areas for future scholarly endeavor suggest themselves. First, there is, in my opinion, a need for a robust full-length study developing a broader framework of hostile divine presence, in the Psalms and elsewhere in biblical literature, with due attention paid to the terminological and conceptual rigor in the sprawling vocabulary of divine presence and absence. One of the primary tasks for a fuller treatment of hostile divine presence in the Hebrew Bible would be to formulate a series of criteria to identify hostile divine presence, perhaps including, among other things, wrathful divine disposition, active causality, and personal, unmediated action. Second, the echoes of Psalm 88, we might say, have the potential to reverberate more widely, beyond the discipline of biblical studies. Since the conclusions of this article impinge on ongoing debates in the fields of theology and philosophy, a rigorous theological rethinking of divine hiddenness as a divine attribute, together with the many related notions, such as those of divine freedom, mercy, sovereignty, silence, and causality, is an urgent desideratum. These and many other scholarly conversations stand to benefit from being attentive to the subtleties of the psalmist's cry of despair ringing down the ages.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 172.