

*The Silent God* by M. C. A. Korpel and J. C. de Moor. Brill, 2011. 390pp., Hb. €137.00/\$177.00. ISBN-13: 9789004203907.

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### Keywords

God's silence, in Bible and now, human dumbness and deafness

Why is God silent? When the verbs and nouns of the bible that denote God's speech vastly outnumber those relating to God's silence (98.5 % to 1.5 %, according to page 35 of this book; cf 75), why does modernity frequently perceive God as silent? The authors of this book, two Dutch biblical scholars, long-established in collaboration (Marjo Korpel, associate professor of Old Testament at Utrecht University, and Johannes de Moor, emeritus professor of Semitic languages at the Theological University, Kampen), attempt to shed light on this question through analysis of the bible (particularly the Old Testament) and other texts of the ancient Near East (including Greece [56]). Their result is at once well-conceived, and slightly curious; impressive, and slightly lacking.

The book is well-conceived because it recognises (chapter 2) that there are different kinds of silence, only some of which are problematic; that an apprehension of God's problematic silence presupposes the possibility that God can speak (it is not a book on the absence of God, but on God's presence-but-silence [55]); and that an investigation of God's silence in antiquity is therefore dependent on an understanding (developed in chapter 5 of the book) of how, in that particular period, God is considered to speak. It also acknowledges the analogical nature of theological language, and so examines (chapters 3 and 4) the various reasons in ancient texts for the silence of human beings (offences, awe or fear, forbearance or prudence, incapacity, and sleep), before showing (chapter 6) that some of these same reasons apply to the God of the bible—as well as, on occasion, no discernible reason at all for God's silence.

The book is impressive for its wide-ranging coverage (in an opening chapter) of the silence of God in modern literature, film and theology, which establishes that modernity has an issue with God being silent; and it is impressive for the considerable depth of its references and bibliography, which are very up-to-date and in a range of languages. There are occasional indications that the authors are writing in a second language (as well as over a dozen typographical errors; and I am not sure that one

can entirely get away these days with a prefatory note (xii) that “man” and “mankind” are intended inclusively), but French and German quotations are helpfully translated for English readers.

The book is curious because of a sense of dislocation: the analysis of ancient texts does not seem fully integrated with the epilogue (chapter 7). There are tell-tale signs (for instance in distinguishing between true and false prophets, and in cases where prophetic accuracy is debated) that discerning the will of God in biblical times was just as difficult as it is now; but the modern philosophical difficulties are not as fully and systematically set out as is the biblical analysis, so there is a disconnection between the two; also how far, in principle, one can be used to address the other is never really examined.

Hence the book lacks in-depth philosophical analysis. It observes that divine speech is always mediated (281); that the distinction between (God’s) Spirit and (the human) spirit is not easy to identify (295); and that if God seems silent, then it is up to us to speak for God (282–283). “To state that God is silent amounts to saying that his messengers, angelic or human, are unable to speak in his name” (303). So the silence of God is linked to human dumbness. The silence of God in the Shoah, for instance, reflects our own shameful silence in not protesting and acting against it. This principal message of the epilogue—an indictment on the church—is fair enough, and makes for a moving meditation on the importance of witnessing; but is not an overriding theme that emerges from the book’s core. It also raises its own philosophical questions: how, for example, is such an understanding of divine immanence reconciled with traditional conceptions of divine omnipotence?

Or to take deafness alongside dumbness: if modernity differs from the biblical period by conceiving of God less anthropomorphically, and by regarding God (including God’s communicativeness) as less changeable, then either God’s “natural” stance is silence (as a casual remark on page 292 seems to imply), or else God speaks consistently, but modernity fails to hear. However the deafness of humanity is not among the reasons for divine “silence” that receives much exploration here.

This book is a deliberate and laudable attempt to augment philosophical or theological studies of the silence of God with a biblical perspective (xi). Its front cover features a startling picture by Zoran Music, in which a bloodied man cries out of darkness at the silence of the heavens, and the book ends (305) with Cornelis Saftleven’s relaxed portrait of shepherds’ diverse reactions to the angels’ annunciation of Christ’s birth. This transi-

tion seems significant, for the book's philosophical discussion should have more rigorously shaped its ancient textual analysis, if its biblical studies were in turn to have brightly illuminated the theological questions agonisingly expressed by modernity.